

When Banquets Were Dangerous for the Soul: Church Opposition to Wedding Feasts in Early Medieval Times

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Banqueting was anything but an optional practice when two people decided to get married in the Middle Ages. It was not a merely popular custom, but rather a socially required ‘ritual of passage’ (van Gennep 2014, pp. 116 ff.), which marked the line between the betrothal promise and the fully legitimate union on a public level (Maraschi 2014; Hughes 1994; Mason 2002). The present paper is aimed at highlighting the continued efforts of the Christian Church to exert control over such customary *convivia* during the early medieval times, for they were characterized by overeating, profane music, pranks, and sex-related jokes. They represented dangerous occasions of lust and triviality and clashed against Christian tenets which prescribed decorum and dignity. At the same time, banquets satisfied the most important condition of wedding celebrations: publicity (Ritzer 1970, pp. 319–320; Maraschi 2014, pp. 43–58; Vogel 1977). While comfortably seated at the table, people came together, celebrated, witnessed and legitimized the marriage (Althoff 1996; Weiss 1998): so, as priests usually attended wedding banquets, the Church needed to set specific rules concerning their participation and involvement.

This contribution is structured as follows: firstly, the position of banquets within the universe of wedding rituals will be briefly introduced, with the intention of emphasizing their role as unsung protagonists of the celebration. Then, attention will be focused on complementary matters which integrate our main sources from both a temporal and a typological perspective: late-medieval sumptuary laws from Italy will cast light on the excess characterizing *nuptialia convivia* from the viewpoint of secular authorities; afterward, examples from early-medieval monastic rules and Christian writings will highlight one of the fundamental problems linked with banqueting: laughter, a proper danger for the soul of good Christians. Finally, the central topic of this paper will be addressed by analysing late-antique and early-medieval council canons, with attention to the reasons why the Christian Church wanted to reinforce its control over the institution of marriage and over its main public expression: the banquet.

The Unsung Protagonists of Medieval Marriage

Scattered traces of the role of ritual meals in the celebration and ratification of marriage have remained embedded, almost unseen, both the written and the spoken language. In Old Icelandic, one of the most commonly used expressions of the verb ‘to marry’ was *drekka brúðlaup*, which literally means ‘to drink the marriage’. The modern

English ‘bridal’, though seemingly formed by a root (bride-) and a suffix (-al) as many other adjectives are, comes in fact from the Old English word *brydealo*, literally ‘bride ale’. According to Verrius Flaccus and Festus, the term *sponsus/a* (‘betrothed’) derived from the Greek *σπονδή*, meaning ‘ritual libation’ (*De verborum significatu*, p. 440; Maraschi 2014, p. 196). These, and many other clues suggest that eating together had higher purposes than simply that of celebrating the wedding (Carreras 2001, *passim*).

Yet, unlike other officially required practices, of which we consistently find evidence in historical sources throughout the whole of medieval times, authorities seemed to have been almost totally unconcerned about banqueting. As previously noted, the most important characteristic of a marriage was publicity, the public expression of *consensus* (d’Avray 2005). As early as the fifth century, in his epistle to the bishop of Narbona Rusticus, Pope Leo Magnus stated that a concubine was validly married when she was given a dowry and was married in a public wedding, but such conditions were fundamental in absolute terms (*Epistola CLXVII*, p. 1205). In the seventh century, the Visigothic King Ervig (680–687) called for the written evidence of *dos* (‘dowry’), without which there was no evidence of the marriage (even though the union was still valid; Mazo Karras 2012, p. 220, fn. 48). At the Council of Verneuil of 755, it was straightforwardly stated that all laymen should marry with public nuptials, whether noble or baseborn (‘*Ut omnes homines laici publicas nuptias faciant, tam nobiles quam innobiles*’; *Sacrorum Conciliorum nova et amplissima collectio*, XII, col. 583, c. 15). The Church, in particular, was trying to achieve two main goals: 1) to promote the role of priests in marriage ceremonies (e.g., to bless the spouses, as suggested by Pope Hormisdas in the early sixth century; *Concilia Magnae Britanniae et Hiberniae*, I, p. 478; Reynolds and Witte 2007, p. 383); and 2) to prevent incestuous and clandestine marriages by means of public weddings, as stated by Pope Leo IV (847–855) (*Homilia*, col. 682, xliii).

In his epistle to the newly-converted King of Bulgaria in 866 (Nicolaus papa, *Epist.* 99, pp. 570–571), Pope Nicholas I described Western marriage procedure: this included the exchange of the ring to symbolize the promise, the donation of the *dos* (‘dowry’) by the betrothed man to the bride, the document containing the agreement; then, on the day of the wedding, the blessing of the couple by a priest and the *velatio* (a veil was held over the heads of the spouses) (Dujčev 1968; Stevenson 1982). He also specified that, if all of these steps did not occur in a marriage agreement, the consent alone of the bride and the groom

was to be considered enough, in accordance with classical Roman tradition (Treggiari 1993; Toubert 1998; Hersch 2010): in fact, this juridical principle would remain a cornerstone up until approximately the thirteenth century (Bolgiani 1972; Molin and Mutembe 1974; Brooke 1980 and 1991; Kadzioch 1997).

Nicholas did not bother to mention banquets, but this reticence should not be taken as a sign that *convivia* did not play any role in the process. Records of wedding banquets feature in chronicles and in a very limited number of other documents, where they nonetheless appear to be always and universally practised (unlike the rituals that were mentioned by Pope Nicholas, which could be too solemn and formal for a section of society). If everybody could not afford a notary to write and sign the contract, or did not feel the need to call for a priest to bless the couple, everybody would be sure to arrange one or more banquets for the occasion. After all, *convivia* were the most efficient way to round up all the people that were involved in the deal, to get the community acquainted with it, and to celebrate the happy event.

Wedding Banquets and Sumptuary Laws

Wedding banquets seem to have attracted the attention of authorities only in two cases. The first is sumptuary laws, that is laws regulating public displays of luxury or ‘consumption’ (Killerby 1994, 2002). They were enacted in medieval Europe around the thirteenth century, but are a fundamental resource to better contextualize the second case, namely the attitude of the Christian Church towards wedding banquets in early medieval times. Sumptuary laws addressed, among other things, the number of guests the spouses were allowed to invite to the wedding, and the number of courses that could be served: for instance, the statute of Bologna of 1288 set a limit of ten guests each for the families of the bride and of the groom, and a maximum of three courses (Muzzarelli 2002, pp. 50–51; Maraschi 2014, p. 75; Redon 2001). In Pistoia, the statute of the year 1332 limited the number of courses to three, in addition to a pie to accompany roasted meat, and in addition to fruits and comfits (*Statuti sumtuarj ricordati da Giovanni Villani*, p. xiii, n. xv). The same statute also devoted careful attention to sharing the food of the wedding banquet before, during and after the celebration itself, in order to moderate the behaviour of individuals: from four days before the wedding to eight days after, no one could give away any dish that was destined for the wedding table, whether cooked or raw, except in cases where the groom decided to arrange the wedding banquet in a different place rather than at his house (*ibidem*, n. xvi). This is not the place to discuss these and the myriad of other examples of sumptuary laws from medieval Europe (see, among others, Muzzarelli and Campanini 2003), but it is important to underline the fact that, even in late medieval times, wedding banquets were identified as lavish displays of

wealth that were to be disciplined by the secular authorities. Interestingly, in the 1559 ‘Prammatica’ of Parma, it was stated that such laws were due to the ‘increasing lavishness not only in clothing but in banqueting as well, so much so that such a superfluity of foods harms the soul and the body and the temporal goods’ (Muzzarelli 2002, pp. 463–464). This elucidation about the inherent danger of wedding banquets is of key importance, given our aims. Public displays of opulence were a concern for the authorities because of their social and moral implications (Kirtio 2011; Freedman 2007, p. 14; Maraschi 2015); but this was only a part of the problem.

The Church Against Laughter, Fun, and Excess

The second case in which medieval authorities addressed wedding banquets is ecclesiastical texts and laws. Already in early Christian times, intellectuals expressed their concerns regarding such popular rituals for, in their opinion, they were characterized by excess and fun just as Pagan feasts were. In the third century, in his treatise on the behaviours and practices virgins should avoid, the bishop of Carthage Cyprian wrote (*Liber de habitu virginum*, col. 460):

Nuptiarum festa improba et convivia lasciva vitentur, quorum periculosa contagio est. (Let the shameless feasts and lascivious banquets of marriages be avoided, the contagion of which is dangerous.)

Attendance at wedding banquets is regarded as inadvisable as the practice of applying make-up or overdressing, from Cyprian’s viewpoint (Kaatz 2013, p. 134). But, most importantly, a peculiar expression emerges among the others: *periculosa contagio*. What led Cyprian to compare *nuptiarum convivia* to a moral disease? What happened during wedding banquets that could actually threaten a good Christian’s integrity?

A preliminary answer is offered in the fourth and fifth centuries by intellectuals such as Augustine, Jerome, the bishop of Brescia Gaudentius or the bishop of Ravenna Peter Chrysologus, who deplored the habit of accompanying any convivial meal with music because profane songs were a fast track to sin and wrongness (Maraschi 2014, p. 267; Bonaria 1983, p. 145). The problem did not merely lie there. Wedding banquets were targeted by the Church for a whole series of reasons. Despite the fact that the Church had been trying to achieve complete control over marriage for the entire early Middle Ages (Daudet 1933 and 1941; Charland 1966; Helmholtz 2007, p. 4), for the most part wedding feasts included little if any religious component, and were dangerously similar to heathen festivals (Gaudemet 1970 and 1987; Ritzer 1970). If Cyprian held that meals were to be accompanied by hymns and psalms (Maraschi 2014, p. 265), wedding banquets were usually characterized by pranks, indecent

entertainments, obscene language and quips: in other words, all that was necessary to thrust open the gates of lust and depravity. The behaviour of laymen on the occasion of wedding banquets was straightforwardly addressed in the mid-/late fourth century at the Council of Laodicea (*Sacrorum Conciliorum nova et amplissima collectio*, II, col. 582 B, c. 53):

Quod non oporteat christianos euntes ad nuptias plaudere vel saltare, sed venerabiliter cenare vel prandere, sicut decet christianos. (It does not befit Christians, when invited to a wedding, to clap their hands or dance, but they should dine or lunch soberly, as becomes Christians.)

In this sense, the notions of fun and laughter as the principle of all evil that recurs so frequently in Umberto Eco's *The Name of the Rose* may well come to mind (Morreall 2016). On the other hand, when laughter is attributed to God in the Bible, it is rarely a good sign: if Ecclesiastes 3:4 states that there is *tempus flendi et tempus plangendi* ('a time to weep and a time to laugh'), the psalmist depicts God as laughing at the wicked (Ps 37:13–14), 'for He knows their day is coming', and the same applies to the Prophets (in 1 Kings 18:21–27, for instance, Elijah mocks the prophets of Baal as these were unable to prove the power of their false god, and then had them killed).

In the same fourth century, predictably enough, the founder of Christian coenobitic monasticism, Pachomius of Egypt, forbade his monks to joke and laugh at prayer and meal-times, (*Regula*, col. 68; Adkin 1985). Not many years later, the Archbishop of Constantinople John Chrysostom (d. 407) was claiming that laughter could generate a disastrous series of events, from apparently harmless to obnoxious actions (Schaff 1889, p. 442): namely, foul discourse, railing, insult, blows, wounds, slaughter and, eventually, murder (hence, it was highly advisable not to laugh at all). Saint Benedict himself, whose rule was arguably one of the most influential in the Middle Ages, was also rather straightforward in condemning laughter (Gilhus 1997, p. 65), and to do so he made reference to Eccl. 21:23: *stultus in risu exaltat vocem suam* ('The fool lifts up his voice in laughter'; *Regula Benedicti*, 7.59; see Coxon 2008, p. 20). It is not surprising that the bad reputation of laughter was emphasized by monastic rules, especially by those that were notoriously strict. Among these, the *Regula* of the Irish monk Columban (which dated to the end of the sixth century; Resnick 1987), prescribed six blows for monks who smiled at the synaxis (*Sancti Columbani Opera*, IV).

The condemnation of laughter was not a prerogative of the early Middle Ages. Plato had already underlined its negative attributes many centuries earlier, and more than anything else its potential to overcome man's self-control (Plato, *Republic*, 388e). Aristotle, for his part, seems to have had a more moderate opinion about laughter, since he held that enjoying oneself was as legitimate a part of life as

staying active, even though he specified: 'Most people enjoy amusement and jesting more than they should [...]' (*Nicomachean Ethics*, 4, 8; Morreall 2016). This approach would be partly shared by Thomas Aquinas in the thirteenth century, who thought that amusement could provide rest for the soul and could be socially useful (*Summa Theologiae* 2a2ae, Q. 168; Cohen 1999). But, in fact, a number of admonitions against laughter and fun were insistently addressed to the clergy throughout the whole early Middle Ages, and not only with respect to wedding banquets: moral bans on music, dance, on the arrangement of banquets inside churches, on hosting banquets together with Jews, heretics or laypeople, and so forth. Clearly, the control of the Church over the flock's souls was at stake, and wedding banquets in particular soon became the stage on which the fight was to take place. The reason lay in their great social importance as collective gatherings which constituted the core of the marriage process: whoever wanted to expand their authority over marriage, therefore had to control wedding banquets.

As previously noted, on the occasion of the Council of Laodicea, all Christians were warned to behave soberly when invited to wedding feasts. About a century later, the Council of Vannes (465) more specifically urged the clergy to avoid them at all costs (*Sacrorum Conciliorum nova et amplissima collectio*, VII, col. 954 C, c. 11):

Presbyteri, Diaconi atque Subdiaconi, vel deinceps quibus ducendi uxores licentia non est, etiam alienarum nuptiarum evitent convivia, nec iis cantibus admisceantur, ubi amatoriam cantantur. (Presbyters, deacons and subdeacons, and thereafter those who are not allowed to marry, should also avoid partaking in other people's wedding banquets, and getting involved in the singing of erotic songs.)

By definition, rules, admonitions or bans of this kind responded to popular habits which, at some point, became so widespread that the invested authority decided to restrict or even forbid them. In this specific case, however unlikely it might sound, the reason behind such warnings was very simple: churchmen were to not get *infected* by erotic chants, as these would stimulate triviality, lust, and sin in general (Barcellona 2013, p. 207). On the basis of similar warnings, we may assume that wedding banquets were usually characterized by such entertainments, which indeed represented a major concern for the Christian Church for centuries. They also suggest that clergymen themselves used to join wedding feasts rather often, and that they partook fully thanks to the celebration's frivolous and infectious vibe.

Other fourth-century canons from the Councils of Neocaesarea, Nicea and Laodicea targeted dances and entertainments which were typical of wedding banquets: they forbade the clergy from getting involved in the shows and dances that were given at weddings (*Breuiatio*

canonum, p. 296: 'Ut diaconi vel clerici spectaculis quae in nuptiis exhibentur non intersint'), or even required all Christians to avoid 'ballare vel cantare' ('dancing and singing') during such feasts (ibidem: 'Ut nullus christianus ballare vel cantare in nuptiis audeat'). Evidently, music represented a highly dangerous means of corruption for the soul, since it would often lead to dirty jokes and obscene dances. The Church needed to keep Christians away from lascivious entertainments of this kind, for the fear of God could not reside in the same place where lust and laughter reigned (Maraschi 2014, p. 271).

The severe attitude that Christian morality had towards such matters remained astonishingly consistent over time. In the second half of the sixth century, the *Regula Tarnatensis* (written for a monastery in southern Gaul) forbade monks to attend wedding banquets, because otherwise they would fall prey to temptation and dissoluteness. Contagion was just around the corner (*Regula monasterii Tarnatensis*, col. 982):

Ad convivium nuptiale nullus accedat: ne per lasciviam saecularium quae sunt saeculi recognoscat; et, quod absit, ad mundi hujus vitam, etsi non corpore, animo revocetur, sicut dixit beatissimus Cyprianus: Adulterium dum videtur, et discitur. (It is ordered that no one attend wedding banquets, so as to not experience the lust of the secular world; and, God forbid, may they be revoked to the life of this world, even though not with the body, but with the soul, as the most blessed Cyprian said: Adultery was learned by seeing it acted.)

Contact with the secular world, and especially on the occasion of social events which implied excess in behaviour, dress, food, drink, and laughter by definition, was then soon identified as a major threat for good Christians, and even more so for monks and other churchmen. The reference of the *Regula Tarnatensis* in Cyprian's letter to Donatus recalls the former's above-quoted statement that virgins should avoid the *periculosa contagio* of wedding banquets, for these were receptacles of sin, and could only generate further sin.

So, although technically not required, our ritual of passage seems to have attracted much attention. Still in 742, in the well-known *Regula* which he introduced for his diocese (Bertram 2005), the bishop of Metz Chrodegang was warning presbyters, deacons and subdeacons against the 'amatoria et turpia cantica' ('erotic and foul chants') that usually took place during wedding banquets (*Regula canonicorum secundum Dacherii recensionem*, col. 1088). This specific section, entitled 'Ut clerici nuptialia convivia vitent', suggests that in the eighth century the clergy continued to attend weddings, despite the fact that the moral judgment on them had not changed since the time of the first Ecumenic Councils. No matter if said rules were technically three- or even four-centuries old: customs and sensibilities seem to have defied time. The very same

concern emerges a century later in Louis II (also known as the German's *Capitularia*). In the year 851, the King of East Francia decreed (*Hludowici II Capitularia*, p. 415, 23):

Quod non oporteat sacerdotes aut clericos quibuscumque spectaculis in coenis aut in nuptiis interesse, sed antequam thimelici ingrediantur, exurgere eos convenit atque inde descendere. (It does not befit priests or clerics to partake in any entertainment during banquets or weddings but, before the musicians be let in, it would be suitable for them to stand up and walk away from the hall.)

Louis restated that the clergy should avoid attending festive meals with laypersons, which was exactly the case of wedding banquets. However, this time it was specified that, if for any reason they must do so, they should at least have the good sense to step away from the table before the 'dangerous' music began. As happened in the previous cases, the King was referring to older rules, and here, specifically, to the canon 54 of the aforementioned Council of Laodicea: this shows once again the resistance of traditional widespread practices to warnings coming from the upper tiers of society's pyramid. Interestingly, in the tenth century the bishop of Vercelli Atto would still discourage church ministers from getting involved in wedding banquets due to the presence of *thimalici*, 'musicians' (Ziolkowski 1998, p. 249). His *capitulum* reads as follows (*Capitula*, p. 280, xlii):

Non oportet ministros altaris vel quoslibet clericos spectaculis aliquibus, quae aut in nuptiis aut in coenis exhibentur, interesse; sed antequam musici thimalici ingrediantur, surgere eos de convivio et abire debere. (It does not befit ministers of the altar or any other cleric to be involved in any sort of entertainment that is given on the occasion of a wedding or a banquet; but, before the musicians enter (the all), they must excuse themselves from the table and leave.)

By stating 'surgere eos de convivio [...] debere', Atto indirectly unveils the fact that he associates weddings with the practice of banqueting, in a way which is even more specific than the above-quoted excerpts taken from Louis' *capitularia* and from his source, the Council of Laodicea, where the lexicon is slightly less precise with regards to our purposes ('exurgere eos convenit'). Yet, laughter, fun, excess and music were not the sole preoccupations of the Church: the presence of priests at wedding banquets, in fact, represented a sign of assent from the whole spiritual authority, and therefore had to be strictly controlled.

Eating Together: A Form of Legitimation

Atto of Vercelli also addressed another fundamental matter: second marriages, which the Church classified as *adulterium* or *fornicatio* on the occasion of the Councils of Nicea, Laodicea and Neocaesarea (Gies 1987, p. 64). Unsurprisingly,

priests were warned not to attend wedding banquets on the occasion of *secundae nuptiae*, as stated in Chapter 7 of the Council of Neocaesarea (*Capitula*, p. 284, liiii):

Presbiterum in nuptiis bigami prandere non convenit, quia, cum penitentia bigamus egeat, quis erit presbiter, qui propter convivium talibus nuptiis possit praebere consensum? (It does not befit presbyters to dine at the wedding of digamists for, being the digamists worthy of penance, what kind of a presbyter shall he be who, by being present at the feast, sanctioned the marriage?)

The same equation wrong marriage = wrong banquet emerges again in 563 at the Council of Braga (*Concilium Bracarense secundum*, cols. 580–581):

Presbyterem ad secundas nuptias convivam ire non oportet pro eo quod hi qui ad secundas nuptias veniunt poenitentiam postulent. Quomodo potest presbyter ille esse, qui propter convivium interest tali coniugio? (It does not befit a presbyter to attend a banquet for a second marriage, for those who contract a second marriage need penitence. What kind of a presbyter can he be who, by being present at the wedding banquet, gets involved in such a union?)

Clearly, the presbyter plays the role of witness, seated at the table alongside the couple and the guests. His very presence at the banquet signalled his acquiescence, a particularly critical position with regards to second marriages. Wedding banquets were *wrong* (*i.e.*, to be avoided) if the union itself was not considered just, and churchmen should not show any public manifestation of consent. This concept recalls the words of the Greek biographer Plutarch (46–120), who famously stated that ‘we do not sit at the table to eat, but to eat together’ (*Dispute conviviali*, II, 10). The action of *prandere* along with the spouses was not aimed at ‘eating’ (Althoff 1996): on the contrary, a priest who ‘ate together’ with the bride and the groom implied his own approval of the union itself, since the act of banqueting with other tablemates has the inherent power of identifying a group of people, of sharing decisions within its members, of celebrating the successful outcome of negotiations, and of publicly manifesting it (Maraschi 2014, pp. 207–209).

There is little doubt, then, that wedding banquets had an unquestionable social relevance (both negative and positive) in early medieval times, which they have essentially lost more recently. Even if they did not figure among the officially required acts to perform in order to celebrate a solemn marriage (Reynolds 1994; Reynolds and Witte 2007), banquets were unsung, silent protagonists of the union, for they symbolized the approval of both the spouses and of their respective families. Also, and most importantly, they represented the place and the time in which authorities would manifest their consent or their refusal of consent to the union. From the perspective of

Christian morals, attending a wedding banquet was a dangerous and execrable custom, and the insistence of rules and warnings during the early Middle Ages speaks for itself. But if the question is whether such banquets were forbidden in all cases, an answer comes from the biography of the Blessed Dorothy of Montau (d. 1394), written by her confessor John Marienwerder. Hagiographic *Vitae* are never to be blindly trusted as for what concerns certain aspects of their contents, given their rhetorical purposes, but they can be useful as historical sources with regards to attitudes (Maraschi 2011 and 2013). The example of Dorothy is particularly intriguing, as it shows that even pious Christians could attend wedding banquets if they were able to compensate by means of penitence. John Marienwerder offers a certain perspective on this sort of moral and corporal compromise: he writes that the German hermitess was fond of going to weddings but, knowing that such amusements would corrupt her soul, the only way to keep it pure was to (*Vita prima B. Dorotheae*, p. 496)

pedes suos acu pupugit, acum mittens in profundum carnis, [...] ut in conviviis aut choreis aut mundi pompis et spectaculis amaritudinem dominicae passionis recogitaret et ne etiam mundi solatia eam delectarent. (sting her feet with a needle by making it penetrate deeply in the flesh, [...] in order to bring to her mind the pain of the Lord’s passion during the banquets and the dances and the pomp of such celebrations, and so as to not let worldly amusements seduce her.)

She would still look merry and lovable, despite the fact that she would hide extremely painful wounds under the table. Whether or not we are prone to believe Dorothy’s biographer, this passage can be taken as a brief summary of the present contribution: it shows that banqueting was considered the core of the act of marriage in the collective consciousness; it emphasizes the fact that wedding banquets were both amusing social events and festive occasions fraught with all the negative attributes of worldly living. Finally, and most interestingly, it suggests that they represented a means of control for the Church over the Christian flock, for Christians who joined them were expected to do penance to offset such a sin. Because food is power.

About the author

Andrea Maraschi holds a BA degree in Modern Humanities (2008) and an MA degree in Medieval History (2010) from the University of Bologna. He earned his Ph.D. from the University of Bologna (2013), and his doctoral thesis on wedding banquets in the early Middle Ages was published in 2014 (*Un banchetto per sposarsi. Matrimonio e rituali alimentari nell’Occidente altomedievale*, Spoleto: Cisam). He won a postdoctoral fellowship at the University of Iceland from October 2014 to October 2017, and his research project focused on the

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Note

Biblical quotations are from: *Biblia Sacra Vulgata*. Editio Quinta, ed. R. Weber and R. Gryson. Stuttgart: Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft, 2007 (electronic version retrieved from The Scholarly Bible Portal of the German Bible Society, available online at <http://www.academic-bible.com/en/online-bibles/vulgate/>).

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