



A Theology of the Table

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Abstract

This paper explores the meal scenes in Mark's gospel and examines the theme of Divine Hospitality in the Old Testament. In doing so, a connection is made between the table fellowship of Jesus and the Kingdom of God. The article concludes by reflecting upon ecclesiological practices of the Eucharist in light of the inclusivity of table fellowship. The argument is that by attending to the meal scenes in the gospel of Mark, an understanding of the Kingdom of God manifests and should shape the way the Church practices hospitality.

Keywords

Table fellowship, hospitality, Eucharist, Mark, Kingdom

In the Gospels, Jesus frequently describes what the kingdom of God is like in his parables. But is there ever a place in the Gospels where Jesus not only talks about what the kingdom is like, but actually embodies it? This paper seeks to examine the meal scenes in Mark's gospel and in so doing show how they are not simply used as a literary motif by the author, but are rather a central point in Jesus' ministry.¹ His ministry was always about inclusion, and the event of the meal in the gospels provides Jesus with the occasion to demonstrate that inclusion through what I will call "table fellowship." I would assert that a closer look at the meal scenes in Mark's gospel can provide us with an understanding of the kingdom of God based on this table fellowship which can, and should, shape our own interactions with the world to reflect that inclusive spirit. We will begin by looking at these texts in Mark.

In Mark's brief account of Jesus' ministry, there is a significant place given to the role of food or eating.² There are two indicators

¹ S.S. Barty, "Table Fellowship," in the *Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospels*, eds. Joel B. Green, Scot McKnight (Downers Grove: IVP Press, 1992) p. 796.

² See Chart in Dietmar Neufeld, "Eating, Ecstasy, and Exorcism (Mark 3:21)," in *Biblical Theology Bulletin* Vol. 26, (1996) p. 158. 3.

of this.³ First, *esthio* appears twenty-seven times in the sixteen chapters of Mark. Second, all of the occurrences revolve around conflict regarding meal customs which, in each case, function as the catalyst for the major point or teaching of the section. What follows is a survey of the more prominent meal scenes.

In chapters six and eight of Mark, we encounter two mass meals: the first to an audience of at least 5,000 Jews and the other to an audience of at least 4,000 which included Gentiles. In each instance, the meals occur in a remote place where food is not readily available. Also in each of these scenes it is Jesus who provides food in the wilderness. Both of these roles, host and provider, draw on themes of “divine hospitality” that are found in the Old Testament.

Robert C. Stallman, in his work *Divine Hospitality in the Pentateuch: A Metaphorical Perspective on God as Host*, has shown that the motif of divine hospitality is one that is embedded throughout the Pentateuch. In Genesis at the Garden of Eden, in Exodus when Israel is wandering in the wilderness, and in Israel’s diet prescribed in Leviticus, “God is depicted in terms of a host who provides food for guests.”⁴ By providing food for His people, God teaches them what it means to rely on Him for their sustenance each day. In and through these meals, God invites His people to join Him in an intimate fellowship, by which I mean partaking of a meal where He is both host and provider.

In Mark’s gospel, at these mass meals, Jesus’ ministry is made intelligible within this long tradition of table fellowship. Here Jesus takes up a place at the head of the table where previously, only the-God-who-fed-Israel-in-the-desert could preside. Seeing these meal scenes in light of the Old Testament is important for seeing the roots of table fellowship because something more than mere eating is taking place in the scene. In Jesus’ table fellowship the kingdom of God is given shape and through this an offense is brought on by the act of radical inclusion.

³ *esthio* 27x in Mark 1:6 (Baptist asceticism); 2:16 (Jesus & disciples contrasted to John), 26; 3:20 (not eating); 5:43 (ordered the girl something to eat); 6:31, 36, 37, 42, 44 (feeding of the 5,000); 7:2–5 (not following custom), 28 (Jesus’ response to Syrophenician Woman); 8:1–2, 8; 11:14; 14:12, 14 (feeding of 4,000), 18 (eating with the betrayer), 22. Alongside these simple meanings, the verb can be translated to reflect its social element as have a meal, dine; See also Balz and Schneider, *Exegetical Dictionary of the New Testament* Vol 2 (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993) pp. 58–60.

⁴ Robert C. Stallman, *Divine Hospitality in the Pentateuch: A Metaphorical Perspective on God as Host*, PhD Dissertation (Westminster Theological Seminary, 1999) p. 271. Cf. Stallman, “Divine Hospitality and Wisdom’s Banquet in Proverbs 9:1–6,” in *The Way of Wisdom: Essays in Honor of Bruce K. Waltke*, ed. J.I. Packer & Sven Soderlund, pp. 117–133 (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2000); See also, Christine D. Pohl, *Making Room: Recovering Hospitality as a Christian Tradition* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999) pp. 27–29.

Through not recognizing the role of the meal scenes, this radical inclusion has often been misunderstood. Early on in Mark's gospel he depicts several conflicts between Jesus and the Pharisees which all revolve around food or eating. The first, and most revealing of these, concerns his eating with sinners. Scholars have traditionally argued that these conflicts arise because of the way the Pharisees maintained a state of ritual purity among their eating companions. Representative of this, Scott Bartchy explicitly says that the Pharisees treat "their tables at home as surrogates of the Lord's altar in the Temple in Jerusalem."⁵ While there seems to be something right about what Bartchy is saying, Jerome Neyrey identifies the wider issue at hand, which is that Jesus is being criticized by the teachers of the Law because sharing a table with sinners "implies that Jesus shares their world, not God's world of holiness."⁶ While for scholars like Bartchy, the tension at hand is between ritual purity and impurity, however there seems to me to be a better way that captures the impact of such meals. E.P. Sanders has argued a stronger claim. His argument is that the conflict came about because Jesus was "associating with, and offering the kingdom to those who *by the normal standards of Judaism were wicked*."⁷ Sanders goes on to explain that "everyone, except the priests, often lived in a state of ritual impurity, which was removed only for entry to the temple or (in the case of the menstruant) for intercourse."⁸ If Sanders is right, as I think he is, then the offense of Jesus' table fellowship comes, not in breaking ritual purity code but comes instead, in the wicked—those people who have sinned according to the Decalogue — being fully accepted at the table of Jesus. To summarize where we've been thus far, we have seen that these meal scenes are important because the kingdom of God is being represented in table fellowship and that there's something radically inclusive about what is being represented. I now want to turn to one last meal scene in Mark's gospel which I think discloses another important feature about another, stronger, connection between table fellowship and the kingdom of God.

In chapter fourteen, Mark records Jesus' last meal during the Passover. In this meal scene he is aware of what is about to take

⁵ Bartchy, p. 796. This view is prevalent also in Bruce D. Chilton, *A Feast of Meanings: Eucharistic Theologies from Jesus Through Johannine Circles* (Brill Academic Publishers, 1997) pp. 13–74.

⁶ Jerome H. Neyrey, "Ceremonies in Luke-Acts: The Case of Meals and Table Fellowship," in *The Social World of Luke-Acts: Models for Interpretation* (Peabody: Hendrickson, 1991) p. 364. See also Jack Dean Kingsbury *Conflict in Mark: Jesus, Authorities, Disciples* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1989) pp. 11–21.

⁷ E.P. Sanders, *Jesus and Judaism* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1985) p. 187. Contra Jeremias' claim that "all Pharisees were *haberim* and all *haberim* Pharisees."

⁸ Sanders, p. 210. The *haberim* handled and ate food in ritual purity, but they did not think that the failure to do so was a *sin*.

place as he offers himself in fellowship to those who will reject and abandon him in a matter of hours (v. 18). In the course of the meal, Jesus shares the bread and the wine and reveals another level of meaning to their fellowship. Jesus takes the cup and says it is his blood that he pours out for the many. It is through this that Jesus understands the meal to be connected to his death and to the kingdom of God (v. 24). It was this meal that would later become the centerpiece of the early church in the Eucharist.

The importance of the table fellowship of the Eucharist to the early church cannot be overstated. The history of the church is the history of the understanding and practice of the Eucharist. And historically, the long debate over transubstantiation and the theology of the Eucharist, the importance of excommunication as a tool of the church, indeed the very shape and accouterments of the church all serve to reveal that the church has understood that table fellowship is *nothing less than* the embodiment of the kingdom of God. This being the case, I would still contend that the mistake of the church has been to think that the Eucharist is the *only* table fellowship, which is the embodiment of the kingdom of God. To conflate our understanding of table fellowship and Eucharist makes the Church out to be a container and dispenser of table fellowship. This then, violates those people found on the outside of Christendom. However, if our survey of the meal scenes in Mark's gospel has demonstrated anything, it is that they are to be read against a long tradition of God at table fellowship with His people. Therefore, we can better understand *all* table fellowship to be an embodiment of the kingdom of God. Put differently, the church is not the container of the kingdom of God, but rather the kingdom of God is embodied in what I have been describing as table fellowship. Strictly speaking, Jesus' table fellowship opens up an encounter and life that is neither "church" nor "world" but is the kingdom of God. In this view then, the Eucharist is absorbed into table fellowship and serves its ends, not vice versa. It is not actually the Eucharist which constitutes table fellowship, but rather it is this radical event of God's Kingdom—that is table fellowship—which makes the Eucharist what it is. Table fellowship, then, is an ongoing event which continues to call people into fellowship with God and with one another.

In order to support the claim that the Church has erred in treating the Eucharist as the only form of table fellowship which embodies the kingdom of God, we can point to an event in the book of Acts which reveals a connection between the kingdom of God and table fellowship, outside of the Eucharist. In chapter 10, Peter has a vision of a large sheet being let down out of heaven containing all kinds of 'unclean' animals (10:11–12). The voice tells him to "kill and eat" (v 13). Here in this scene, Peter has this vision three times, which emphasizes his role with Cornelius as embodying the

kingdom of God through a meal outside of a Eucharistic setting. Peter interpreted his vision as God showing him how the kingdom spreads out beyond Jewish tables on into the rest of the world (v 28). A dialogue soon takes place and Peter recounts his own journey to this Centurion's doorstep as connected to his being a witness "who ate and drank with," the risen Christ (v 41). The Church must recognize the importance of God's broader ministry of table fellowship.

So if it is the Church's duty to carry on with the whole ministry of table fellowship as practiced by Jesus, then what exactly is it that we would be carrying on? Some concluding remarks will be aimed at answering this question.

Significantly, in Mark, indeed in the gospels, Jesus is not alone when he eats but rather is always throwing himself fully into the meal. It is at these meals that we see the being-for-others so characteristic of Jesus' ministry. What I have been trying to show with this paper is that this ministry reveals that the kingdom of God is present in table fellowship. What might this understanding of the kingdom of God look like? Well, we can see that at these meals Jesus demonstrates that people can be reconciled to one another and that communion with God is possible; joined together in this way we have a picture of the fulfillment of what it means to be human. To be clear, I am not asserting that this new understanding of the kingdom represents a significant change in how God relates to His people. Certainly, the reconciliation of people to one another and their communion with Him have long been part of God's desire for His kingdom. Rather, it's both the *means* for understanding the kingdom and the *embodiment* of that very kingdom that take on a decidedly personal and relational shape in the table fellowship of Jesus' ministry, the likes of which was only seen afar in the Old Testament. It is the personal and relational aspects which not only make the kingdom of God accessible to our understanding but which also make its inception so desirable and which ultimately draws us into its service.

In conclusion, table fellowship is not an instrument that determines which people are brought into the kingdom or made to stand outside of it. Instead, table fellowship is the event or process whereby people are being in and for the kingdom. Put differently, table fellowship is how we are being freely and fully ourselves. It should also be said that table fellowship is not an exclusive membership where only some are invited. Rather, it is a radically inclusive process that changes our behavior towards being for other people and opens up dialog between persons. Finally, as I have said, this table fellowship is not only a representation of the kingdom of God but also an embodiment of it. When Jesus said to his disciples at his last meal, "Do this in remembrance of me," it was not a command to institute merely a

religious ritual, but rather an instruction to the Church to continue embodying the kingdom of God through table fellowship which is open for all the world.⁹

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⁹ Thank you to Jeffrey T. Byrnes for his rigorous editing, Nathan Kerr, and one anonymous reader who provided helpful feedback on an earlier draft of this essay; I am grateful to each.