



“The Son of Man came eating and drinking”

How Luke’s meal scenes depict Jesus’s kingdom and ministry

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1. Introduction

“Behold this man — a glutton and drunkard! A friend of tax collectors and sinners!”

(Luke 7:34)¹

On the one hand, these accusations against Jesus of Nazareth, recorded in Luke’s Gospel, carry some weight. The self-designated Son of Man indeed spends much time in the company of tax collectors and sinners. A brief glance through the Gospel account reveals a total of 10 meal scenes: eight explicit (5:29–39, 7:36–50, 9:10–22, 11:37–54, 14:1–24, 22:14–30, 24:28–35, 24:36–43) and two implied (10:38–42, 19:1–10). Harris concludes: “In Luke’s Gospel, Jesus is either going to a meal, at a meal, or coming from a meal.”² Chester is more frank: “[Jesus] was a party animal...”³

To be sure, there is no evidence that Jesus overate or drank to excess. But the broader questions remain: why is the Third Gospel so replete with meal scenes? What purpose do they serve in the Lukan narrative? In this paper, we will survey these meal scenes as they appear in the final canonical form of Luke’s Gospel.⁴ As

¹ Unless otherwise noted, all translations are my own, from *The Greek New Testament, Produced at Tyndale House, Cambridge* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2017).

² Robert J. Karris, *Eating Your Way Through Luke’s Gospel* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2006), 14.

³ Timothy Chester, *A Meal With Jesus: Discovering Grace, Community and Mission Around the Table* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2011), Kindle edition, Introduction (Location 111).

⁴ This is not to dismiss some of the helpful insights of redaction criticism by seeking the *Sitz im Leben* and mind of the original author. I will consult other Synoptic Gospels as required, but will not be actively looking for any purported “original” form or tradition behind these gastronomic accounts. For a discussion of these topics, see D.A. Black and D.S. Dockery (eds.), *New Testament Criticism and Interpretation* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1991).

we do so, we will ask how the passage advances the reader (or listener)’s unfolding portrait of Jesus’s ministry and His kingdom.

Two preliminary comments are worth making. Firstly, our study will be restricted to actual meal scenes (recorded and implied) in the Lukan narrative. While meals feature elsewhere in Jesus’s teachings (e.g. the Lost Sons in 15:1–32, and the rich man and Lazarus in 16:19–31), and though Luke’s introductory narrative (1:1–4:44) includes the theme of eating and drinking to “[whet] the audience’s appetite for the subsequent meal scenes”⁵, space limits us from discussing these in any detail.

Secondly, I assume that the meal scenes are recorded in Scripture for us as divine “speech acts”, intended by God not only as information but also to persuade readers towards action and change.⁶ I will therefore discuss both theology and praxis, as appropriate.

⁵ John Paul Heil, *The Meal Scenes in Luke-Acts: An Audience-Oriented Approach* (SBL Monograph Series: 52; Atlanta, GA: Society of Biblical Literature, 1999), 307. See 13–19 for a detailed survey of these chapters.

⁶ In speech-act theory parlance, the text has an illocutionary effect. For more on Scripture as divine speech act, see Sam Chan and Graham A. Cole, *Preaching as the Word of God: Answering an Old Question with Speech-Act Theory* (Eugene, OR: Pickwick Publications, an imprint of Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2016). For speech-act readings of NT passages, see J. E. Botha, *Jesus and the Samaritan Woman: A Speech Act Reading of John 4:1–42* (NovTSup 65; Leiden: Brill, 1991) and

2. Initial survey of meal scenes and categories

A key literary device in Luke’s Gospel is the use of “table talk” - where Jesus teaches at a meal.⁷ A survey of the book yields the following meal scenes, explicit and implied:⁸

| Order / Passage | Hosted by | Summary |
|------------------------|----------------------|---|
| 1. Luke 5:27–39 | Levi | Jesus eats with tax collectors and sinners |
| 2. Luke 7:36–50 | Simon the Pharisee | Jesus accepts a sinful woman’s hospitality and chides Simon the Pharisee for failing to offer it |
| 3. Luke 9:10–22 | Jesus | Jesus miraculously feeds the five thousand “reclined” for a meal, then reveals He is the Messiah |
| 4. Luke 10:38–42* | Martha | Jesus is served in Martha’s home, where Mary chooses the “best portion” |
| 5. Luke 11:37–54 | A Pharisee | Jesus condemns the Pharisees and teachers of the law and their legalistic practices at a meal |
| 6. Luke 14:1–24 | Hosted by a Pharisee | Jesus heals on the Sabbath and urges people to invite the poor, not just their friends, to the meal |
| 7. Luke 19:1–10* | Zacchaeus | Jesus invites himself to dinner with Zacchaeus |
| 8. Luke 22:7–30 | Jesus | Jesus remembers Passover with His disciples by declaring a new covenant in His blood |
| 9. Luke 24:28–35 | Cleopas | The risen Jesus breaks bread with the Emmaus travellers |
| 10. Luke 24:36–43 | Disciples of Jesus | The risen Jesus eats fish with his disciples in Jerusalem and opens the Scriptures |

⁷ Dennis E. Smith, “Table Fellowship as a Literary Motif in the Gospel of Luke,” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 106 (1987): 613–638.

⁸ Implied meals are marked with an asterisk.

If we categorise these passages according to who serves as host, we have three distinct types of meal scenes in Luke’s Gospel: meals hosted by His disciples, meals hosted by His opponents, and meals hosted by Jesus Himself.⁹ We will proceed to study the meal scenes under these groups to better discern Jesus’s ministry and kingdom from a Lukan perspective.

3. Meals with disciples: portraits of grace and community

“Why do you eat and drink with tax collectors and sinners?” (Luke 5:30)

From the very first meal hosted by a disciple of Jesus, readers of Luke’s account are faced with a confronting scenario: Matthew Levi, turncoat tax collector and enemy of God’s people, is sharing a meal with the Son of Man! Readers of Theophilus’s “most excellent” standing (1:3) may have inwardly chafed at the thought of this man — a member of a “notoriously dishonest and corrupt” group¹⁰ — dining with Jesus (5:29). The Pharisees, who previously objected to Jesus’s offer of divine forgiveness to a paralytic (5:21), now grumble at the scandalous inclusion of God’s enemies (τῶν τελωνῶν καὶ ἁμαρτωλῶν) at the

⁹ Other divisions are also helpful: for example, Chester, *A Meal with Jesus*, considers the meal scenes as enacted grace (Luke 5:27–32), community (Luke 7:36–50), hope (9:10–22), mission (14:1–24), salvation (22:14–30) and promise (24:28–43). In addition, as most of the meals scenes include multiple teachings, pictures and allusions, our divisions here will be somewhat reductionistic.

¹⁰ On tax collectors in general, see Joseph Fitzmyer, *Luke I–IX* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1995) 469–70. For “τελώνης”, see BDAG, 998.

dinner table.¹¹ Yet Jesus himself provides the hermeneutical key: “I have not come (οὐκ ἐλήλυθα) to invite the righteous but sinners unto repentance.”¹² (5:32) Here then is a vivid picture of grace: God’s enemies, though undeserving, are now welcome to share table fellowship with Christ the King.¹³ Readers are invited, like Levi, to trust Jesus’s powerful command to follow him (5:27) — forsaking their sinfulness and joining in the family meal.¹⁴

Meals hosted by Jesus’s disciples also serve as windows into the kinds of people who will share in God’s Kingdom. It is not only wealthy officials like Levi and Zacchaeus (19:1–10) who have the privilege of hosting the Messiah, but also peasant women like Martha and Mary:

“Now in their travelling, [Jesus] went into a certain village. Then a certain woman named Martha received him (ὑπεδέξατο αὐτὸν) into [her] house.” (10:38)

In contrast to the Samaritan villagers who earlier do not receive Him (οὐκ ἐδέξαντο αὐτὸν; 9:53), Luke illustrates for us that the community of believers in God’s kingdom will transcend socioeconomic classes, profession, gender and other boundaries. Heil states what seems obvious to us, but perhaps not to original readers: “Martha and Mary demonstrate to the audience that women as well as

¹¹ To better appreciate the importance of table fellowship in Mediterranean cultures, see M. A. Powell, “Table Fellowship”, in *Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospels*, ed. Joel B. Green *et al.* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2013), 925–931.

¹² Heil, 26, notes the perfect tense of the Greek verb signifies that Jesus’s call here has a continuing effect.

¹³ We also see this theme in Luke 7:36–50 when the sinful woman shows “hospitality” to Jesus in the presence of Simon the Pharisee.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 27.

men can become disciples and members of Jesus’s family.”¹⁵ However, it is not sufficient for Christ’s followers to play the host: they must also learn how to receive from Jesus as “the good portion (τὴν ἀγαθὴν μερίδα; 10:42)”. Luke thus portrays the ideal of disciples in a gospel community who host meals not just out of anxiety, but who also receive His Word with grateful attentiveness (10:39).

Disciples must learn to host, but also receive.

Luke’s final account of disciples hosting Jesus in table fellowship are found in two post-resurrection narratives: first with two travellers en-route to Emmaus (24:28–35), then with Simon Peter and those gathered in Jerusalem (vv36–43).¹⁶ Here, too, readers catch a glimpse of grace and community in the kingdom of God. The Emmaus encounter (unique to Luke’s Gospel), recounts for readers two disciples’ impressions of walking with Jesus. Cleopas and his companion have already been chided by the risen Messiah for being “foolish ones and slow-hearted to believe everything that the prophets spoke of” (v25). Undeterred, they invite Jesus to dine together in Emmaus (v29), and it is precisely “when he reclines at table with them” (v30) and breaks bread that their eyes are opened to recognise the One who has truly redeemed Israel (v31). This is not a fluke discovery, however: Luke states that this revelation has come about through God’s gracious provision of the Scriptures taught in such a way that the disciples understand all the things concerning Jesus

¹⁵ Ibid., 79.

¹⁶ More post-resurrection accounts of table fellowship are found in Luke’s subsequent volume (Acts 1:4).

(v27, vv44–48).¹⁷ Just Jr. concludes: “In this way, table fellowship is *revelatory*, and the meal at Emmaus is the first revelation.”¹⁸ Similarly, as the risen Christ munches on broiled fish and opens the Scriptures among the disciples in Jerusalem,¹⁹ readers begin to glimpse in part what true community will look like in God’s Kingdom — followers united to the risen Lord Jesus in table fellowship, devoted to Jesus’s teaching, and who rejoice when God’s presence is made known in the “breaking of the bread” (ἐν τῇ κλάσει τοῦ ἄρτου; Lk 24:35, Acts 2:42).²⁰

Whether it is notorious tax collectors, humble villagers, curious travellers or despondent disciples who host Jesus for meals, similar themes emerge. In Luke’s meal scenes, readers glimpse a portrait of undeserved grace and a counter-cultural community. In Christ, there is room at the table no matter one’s sinfulness, shared with people from all backgrounds who remember His Word and “break bread” in anticipation of a greater banquet to come. In an age when people hunger for grace and long for authentic community, followers of Christ today do well to model their discipleship and evangelism after these portraits of table fellowship.

¹⁷ Peter Adam makes this same observation in *Hearing God’s Words: Exploring Biblical Spirituality* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2004), 85–86: “...the basis for faith is not the empty tomb, an experience of the risen Christ, or the breaking of bread, but the trustworthiness of both the Old Testament and Jesus’ teaching.”

¹⁸ Arthur A. Just Jr., *The Ongoing Feast: Table Fellowship and Eschatology at Emmaus* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1993), 239–240. As opposed to prior meals, here Jesus is recognised — for the first time — as the crucified and risen Messiah.

¹⁹ By this time, rather late at night!

²⁰ So Fitzmeyer, *Luke X-XXIV*, 1569, concludes: “What is above all important is that the disciples report that they knew him “in the breaking of the bread” (v.35) and not by seeing him.”

4. Meals with Pharisees: portraits of reversal and rebuke

Luke records three instances where Jesus is hosted for dinner by a Pharisee: Simon (7:36–50) and two who are unnamed (11:37–54, 14:1–24). At each meal scene, readers are presented with striking pictures of reversal, and strong words of rebuke.

In the Lukan chronology of events, the Pharisees²¹ have already voiced their disapproval at Jesus for forgiving sins with God’s authority (5:21), eating with tax collectors and sinners (5:30), and breaking the Sabbath (6:2). Crucially, they have also levelled their charge of Jesus behaving like a “glutton and a drunkard” (7:34). Therefore, it might surprise the reader that Luke proceeds to recall the instance when Simon the Pharisee invites Jesus the glutton (φάγος; v34) to eat (φάγη; v36) with him.

Luke’s presentation of Simon’s banquet reflects a typical Greco-Roman *symposium*, where a meal is held around three sides of a low table that dinner guests “recline” at with their legs pointed out behind them.²² With the dramatic καὶ ἰδοὺ (“And behold!”; v37), Luke introduces a “woman of the city” known as a sinner, who boldly intrudes the symposium to “stand behind him at his feet” (v38), and extends lavish, extraordinary and intimate hospitality:

²¹ For background about the Pharisees, see Mark Harding, “Second Temple Judaism”, in *The Content and Setting of the Gospel Tradition*, ed. M. Harding and Alanna Nobbs (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2010), 145–146.

²² Chester, *Meal*, Kindle ed., Ch. 2 (Location 460). On the distinctives of a Greco-Roman *symposium*, see Roman Garrison, *The Graeco-Roman Context of Early Christian Literature* (London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 1997), 42–48.

“Weeping, she began to to wet his feet with her tears, and wiped them with the hair from her head, and affectionately kissed²³ his feet, and anointed them with ointment.” (7:38)

These actions spark this *symposium*'s topic of debate: Simon inwardly chastises Jesus for permitting such scandalous touching from a well-known sinner (v39). In response, the Teacher tells a parable of a creditor who forgives two debtors (v41–42). Simon's recognition that the debtor owed more will love his creditor more (v43) opens the way for Jesus to charge him with a startling reversal: this uninvited woman has served as the better host. Whereas Simon summarily failed to show love and hospitality to Jesus, the woman has washed, kissed and anointed her Lord's feet (v44–46),²⁴ surpassing the Pharisee in fulfilling the duties of a host.

The Pharisee treats the woman like an infectious disease, yet Jesus reverses expectations by welcoming her at the table and even “forgiving her sins” (v48). Instead of rebutting earlier accusations that He is a friend of sinners (v34), Jesus demonstrates the truth of these claims. Time and time again, Luke introduces us to social pariahs who grasp true faith in Christ, juxtaposed against religious leaders aloof to the true nature of Jesus's ministry and the kingdom He seeks to inaugurate.

²³ The compound verb *κατεφίλει* (as opposed to *φιλέω*) is used here, perhaps intensively. See Zerwick and Grosvenor, *Grammatical Analysis* (3rd rev ed.), 1.202–3, “covered with kisses”.

²⁴ This is emphasised by Luke fronting the accusative object in the three contrasts: v44–46 literally read, “water for my feet you did not give me... a kiss to me you did not give... oil on my head you did not anoint...” See Thompson, *EGGNT: Luke*, 125.

In his second and third accounts of meals hosted by one of the Pharisees, Luke portrays an intensification of Jesus's rebuke towards them. To the host who was amazed (ἐθαύμασεν) that Jesus did not adhere to ritual washing before the meal (v38),²⁵ the Lord replies with the stinging charge that they are "full of greed and wickedness" and "fools" for their obsession with external appearances (v39–40). As the litany of "woes" continue from Jesus, the audience is left without doubt as to which group is soundly condemned for neglecting to demonstrate "justice and God's love" for their neighbour (v42).

Unlike the clueless (and increasingly hostile) Pharisees and lawyers, readers must instead recognise, welcome, and heed those who speak God's word to them.²⁶ This challenge is restated in Jesus's third meal with a Pharisee (14:1–24), where the Messiah punctuates His rebukes with reversals. Instead of seeking places of honour at banquets, one should first humbly take the lowest places (v7–11). Instead of welcoming only guests who offer an advantage in social standing (v12), one should extend hospitality to the poor, disabled, and those unable to repay us in this life (v13–14). The use of the plural you (ὁμῖν)²⁷ in the banquet parable's final sentence (v24) invites everyone listening to consider the final reversal: none who have rejected God's invitation to the great eschatological banquet (promised in

²⁵ Heil, 83, notes the ceremonial cleansing was thought to remove impurity and prepared the person to share food as a gift from God.

²⁶ Ibid., 93.

²⁷ Ibid., 111 fn33: "...on the level of the Lukan narrative the implied audience hears Jesus address them directly with the plural "you."

Isaiah 25:6–9) will be included in the final reckoning.²⁸ This, perhaps, is the ultimate reversal and rebuke.

5. Meals with Jesus: portraits of provision and salvation

Two remaining meal scenes flesh out Luke’s depictions of Jesus’s ministry and the kingdom He ushers in. Both see the Lord Himself serve as host: one at an overabundant feeding of five thousand in Bethsaida (9:10–17), and the other at a radically reimagined Passover meal the night before His crucifixion (22:7–38).

The Bethsaida scene occurs following a pertinent question from Herod the Tetrarch: “Who then is this about whom I hear such things?” (9:7) This question is repeated following the miraculous feeding when Jesus asks his disciples: “Who do the crowds say that I am?” (9:18) Luke therefore intends for this meal scene to address the riddle.²⁹ However, Jesus responds not with a one-sentence answer, but proceeds to enact a startling act of hospitality replete with Old Testament allusions. Firstly, the twelve disciples assume mass-scale hospitality is impossible given their “desolate (ἐρήμω) place” (v12), much as the grumbling Israelites doubted God’s ability to provide in the Sinai wilderness (also ἔρημον, LXX Exodus 16:3).

²⁸ For those uncomfortable with the finality of this judgement, Kenneth Bailey, *Jesus Through Middle Eastern Eyes* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2008), 320, reminds readers that this judgement is “self-imposed”, and that “those who refuse the invitation... choose not to taste the banquet.”

²⁹ Or as Chester, *Meal*, Kindle ed., Ch. 3 (Location 739), states: “What makes the difference between Herod’s unanswered question and Jesus’s answered question is this party in the wilderness.”

Secondly, Jesus's subsequent instructions to feed them echoes the prophet Elisha's command to "give to the people and let them eat, for thus says the LORD, "They shall eat and have some left"" (2 Kings 4:42). Heil even suggests that Luke's use of the term *λαός* ("people") to refer to the crowds is a clear allusion to God's people throughout salvation history.³⁰ A third resonance is found in comparing this overabundant feeding to the prophet Isaiah's visions of a future Messianic banquet: a feast for all peoples where Yahweh will swallow up death (Isaiah 25:6–9), and where God's people can delight in sumptuous food "without money and without price" (Isaiah 55:1–2). As the promised Son of Man, Jesus wields divine power to assuage both their physical and spiritual hunger.³¹ With Jesus as centre and provider, our shared meals too can serve as an echo of an eternal banquet where all of God's people will be satisfied — physically and spiritually.³²

Even more Old Testament resonances feature in the second meal Jesus hosts. Noteworthy is the fact that Luke states five times how this meal is the Passover (22:7, 8, 11, 13, 15). The repetition draws readers in to the importance of this scene, which sits at a pivotal point of salvation history: it looks back to Israel's past deliverance (Exodus 12), and looks forwards to a future deliverance that enables God's people to join the Messianic banquet, promised by Isaiah 25 and foreseen in Revelation 19:6–9. All the meal scenes prior to this have advanced the idea that

³⁰ Heil, 59.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 65.

³² Chester, *Meal*, Kindle ed., Ch. 3 (Location 817).

meals with Jesus anticipate the great eschatological banquet.³³ As host of this Passover meal, the Lord expounds on this longing unequivocally: “For I tell you I will not eat it until it is fulfilled in the kingdom of God.” (Luke 22:16) It would have been difficult for readers to ignore the connection between the meal’s symbolism — bread given, wine poured out — and the events of the next day. On the cross, Jesus enacts the same Passover drama of body and blood, given and poured out for all who follow Him. Bock rightly observes: “This meal becomes an occasion to recall and reflect on Jesus’s death and the inauguration of a new covenant.”³⁴

Ultimately, there is a strong literary connection between both meals hosted by Jesus: “Taking, thanking, breaking, giving — [these are] the same words in the same order (Luke 9:16, 22:19). Luke is making a connection. Jesus is the Messiah who provides for God’s people... ultimately he provides by dying...”³⁵ Whatever else these two meals teach, both serve as portraits of God’s provision displayed in Christ’s abundant banquet, and God’s salvation enacted in Christ’s sacrificial death.

³³ Heil, 196.

³⁴ Darrell Bock, *Luke 9:51–24:53*, Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1996), 1718.

³⁵ Chester, *Meal*, Kindle ed., Ch. 3 (Location 862).

6. Conclusion

Reflecting on raising her children in the Lord, a wise friend once remarked that the best teaching moments often occurred around the dining table. Similarly, the meal scenes in Luke's Gospel help readers to better understand the nature of Jesus's ministry and His kingdom. From these portraits, the following brushstrokes emerge: grace, a seat at the table for any repentant sinner; community, an unlikely collection of people from different backgrounds who gather to remember His Word and share table fellowship; reversal, as those who seek the seat of honour will be made lower than those who recline at table humbly; rebuke, for the legalism and hypocrisy present in Pharisaical hospitality; provision, from Jesus who miraculously hosts an overabundant feed; and salvation, enacted through Christ's body and blood sacrificed for sinners. "The Son of Man came eating and drinking"? Thank God for that!

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