

**This Man Welcomes Sinners and Eats with Them:
An Examination of Jesus' Table Praxis**

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Thesis: Jesus' table fellowship was an acted parable of renewed Israel.

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When Jesus sat at a table, he did more than just consume food. In fact, when Jesus ate, he transformed a cultural ceremony of biological necessity into a theological proclamation. New Testament scholars agree that Jesus' table fellowship is one of the most historically reliable actions recorded in the Gospels.¹ While many of his other actions have been questioned, this practice is thought to have formed a core of his message and revealed his vision for the kingdom of God. Other renewal movements in Jesus' day offered various perspectives on what it took to become part of God's people and how one manifested loyalty to God; but, through his table fellowship, Jesus made a national-political act that stood in direct opposition to their's. In a social atmosphere that stressed the importance of exclusivism and purity, and in a cultural climate that stressed these invaluable were to be attained through eating, Jesus chose to dine with the most unlikely folk—those outside the community of salvation. He disregarded the laws that governed Israel's community, which were to bring about Israel's ultimate hope, and made his own rules. Through his table fellowship, Jesus revealed that forgiveness of sins and readmission into God's people was to be attained through him, not through the traditional, national channels. He also revealed that, on the basis of his own authority, those who ate with him would indeed be accepted by God and invited into his kingdom. In short, Jesus' table fellowship was an acted parable of renewed Israel.

Finding the Party

In order to understand the significance of Jesus' praxis, particularly with regard to his table fellowship, it is first necessary to come to an awareness of the social and political setting in which he lived. As this section will show, the *sitz im leben* of 1st century Palestine, from which the Jesus movement arose, was one of conflict due to (1) the presence of Gentile power and

¹ It passes the criterion of (1) multiple attestation, (2) double similarity and double dissimilarity (3) and overall cohesiveness.

influence and (2) to the diverse responses given within Judaism to the question, “What does it mean to be a faithful Jew under these circumstances?”²

A great deal of social tension existed because Judaism's religious and ethnocentric identity was threatened by the presence of Gentiles and Hellenistic practices.³ To put it simply, the Jewish community was under foreign oppression and was in danger of mass assimilation (i.e. the removal of distinctive Jewish practices from their communities, resulting in disobedience to YHWH). In response to these undesirable circumstances, there arose several movements from within Judaism which postulated various solutions to its national problems.

Two of the most influential movements, the Essenes and the Pharisees, emphasized the intensification of holiness as the answer to Judaism's unfortunate situation, which inevitably involved separation from those deemed unclean (i.e. ‘sinner’). Both of these renewal groups held that faithfulness to YHWH and the future security of the nation depended upon Israel's achievement of holiness.⁴ For the Essenes, holiness was expressed by separation *from* society and strict adherence to the commands of Torah, especially as they applied to purity and tithing.⁵ Those living in the community who violated the Torah were punished by expulsion for various periods of time. The Essenes viewed all those outside their separatist community as apostate

² Marcus Borg, *Conflict, Holiness, and Politics in the Teachings of Jesus* (Harrisburg, Trinity, 1998) 43.

³ Borg 42.

⁴ Borg 66. Also: Lev. 15:31 “You must keep the Israelites separate from the things that make them unclean, so that they will not die in their uncleanness for defiling my dwelling place, which is among them.” Lev 18:28 “And if you defile the land, it will vomit you out as it vomited out the nations that were before you.” Also Lev. 20:22; 26:14-41; Mal. 3:8-12.

⁵ The Essenes inhabited a remote and desolate village near the Dead Sea. Their community was exclusive and required all would-be members to undergo intense initiation practices. Everyone in this community had to uphold the highest level of Torah observance and purify themselves with a ritualistic bath at least three times a day.

Jews and they avoided contact with them, lest they be defiled by the impurity of the *amme ha aretz* (i.e. “the people of the land”) or, of course, the Gentiles.⁶

Like the Essenes, the Pharisees intensified the standard of holiness, but they required a separation from *within* society.⁷ The very name of this movement means “the separated ones” and was understood as the equivalent of *qadosh*, “holy.”⁸ The Pharisees held that Israel was to be a “Kingdom of priests and a holy nation” (Ex. 19:6), and therefore they greatly intensified the regulations of Torah and may have even held that the purity laws described in the Torah for the priesthood were to be practiced by all of Israel.⁹

⁶ Borg 72.

⁷ For further analysis of the Pharisees see esp. Jacob Neusner: *From Politics to Piety: The Emergence of Pharisaic Judaism* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1973) and *The Idea of Purity in Ancient Judaism* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1973).

⁸ Borg 73.

⁹ Neusner *From Politics*, 83. Neusner has written in several different volumes to prove this point. See also Borg 73; John Bowker, *Jesus and the Pharisees* (Cambridge: University Press, 1973) 17. It should be noted that E.P. Sanders and a few other scholars have strived at great length to disprove Neusner’s argument. I believe that Sanders has done Jesus scholarship a great service through his efforts, though he seems to have fallen into the trap of over emphasizing one extreme so as to disprove the point of another. While I will not interact with his material at length in this section, his works has been taken into account and I will attempt, though indirectly, to give justice to his research throughout this paper. With N.T. Wright, I believe a balance needs to be drawn between the two (Neusner and Sanders), but that Sanders has significantly downplayed the influence and political interest of the Pharisees and that that indeed the purity codes did play a vital role of pre-70 Pharisaism, functioning in close symbolic relationship to the wider political agenda. *The New Testament and the People of God* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1992) 186-7. Craig Blomberg has come to a very similar conclusion. See *Contagious Holiness* (Dowers Grove: IVP, 2005) 25-6.

If the Pharisees did not require all of Israel to adhere to the priestly purity code, we can still be sure about 3 facts: (1) the Pharisees certainly would have preferred such behavior from all of Israel, (2) they definitely stressed the intensification of purity in some form or fashion, and (3) they would have considered the citizenship of non-observant Jews within Israel as questionable at the best.

N.T. Wright, in attempting to peg the ideology that motivated this emphasis writes, “Faced with the social, political, and cultural ‘pollution’ at the level of national life as a whole, one natural reaction was to concentrate on personal cleanness, to cleanse and purify an area over which one did have control as a compensation for the impossibility of cleansing or purifying an area—the outward and visible political one—over which one had none. The intensifying of the biblical purity regulations within Pharisaism may well therefore invite the explanation that they are the individual analogue of the national

All Jews supposed that the purity laws were to be kept in the Temple, where the priest performed cultic duties. They also held that everyone who went to the Temple had to be ritually pure; but the Pharisees attempted to keep the purity laws *outside* of the Temple. It was their conviction that, in light of the current circumstances that had plagued their people, being a faithful Jew consisted of intensified observance of Torah and ritualistic purity. Accordingly, they ate secular food (ordinary, everyday meals) in a state of ritual purity as if they were Temple priests and may have even emphasized that ordinary Jews do the same.¹⁰ As Neusner has stated, “The Pharisees thus arrogated to themselves—and to all Jews equally—the status of the Temple priests. The table of every Jew in his home was seen as being like the table of the Lord in the Jerusalem Temple. Everyone was a priest, everyone stands in the same relation to God, and everyone must keep the priestly laws.”¹¹ In addition, these laws applied not only to the consumption of food but on its tithing. “Tithing was a dietary law, rendering food ritually acceptable, just as washing hands made the man unclean and washing dishes made the utensils

fear of, and/or resistance to, contamination from, or oppression by, Gentiles. Ceremonial Purity functions almost as a displacement activity when faced with the apparent impossibility of national purity” (187).

¹⁰ Neusner, *From Politics*, 83. Once again, this point has been debated, but Wright, a more moderate scholar, notes that there is no question that the Pharisees “tried to maintain purity at a higher degree than that prescribed in the Hebrew Bible for ordinary Jews under ordinary conditions” (195).

¹¹ Neusner, *From Politics*, 84. In further support of this claim, he writes in *The Idea of Purity*, “It is perfectly clear that in later times some food taboos were widely observed by people who had no expectation of entering the Temple and also were not Pharisees or Essenes. In communities where such taboos were observed, failure to keep them would result in practical excommunication. So we must not be taken in by the viewpoint of [that purity only mattered for those associated with the Temple]. Their claim that purity was primarily a cultic concern simply is false. Uncleanliness served as a metaphor for idolatry or unethical behavior. Cleanness was compared to service to the one God alone, and correct action. These metaphors were natural in the context of the cult, which above all else signified holiness and produced the right relation to God” (118). As was noted above, some of his stances represent more than can be known for fact.

ritually acceptable.”¹² As a result of all these rules, the Pharisees were appropriately designated “a table fellowship sect.”¹³

The only problem with the above classification is that the Pharisaic program was not intended to be sectarian or strictly for the elite, but instead for all of Israel.¹⁴ As Bowker has observed, “They did not intend to be a party within Israel, they intended to be Israel itself.”¹⁵ They were a group which arose during a time of intense Gentile domination and were comprised of men who were concerned with the proper behavior for Israel when faced with encroachments on non-Jewish ways of life. As Wright has stated, “They saw themselves as standing firm for the old ways, the traditions of Israel, against paganism from without and assimilation from within. Their extreme focus on Torah makes perfect sense within this setting; and so does the increasing concentration on issues of purity.”¹⁶ The Pharisees were not simply interested in their own holiness (as with the Essenes), they were interested in compelling the Jewish people to live in such a way that would prompt God to deliver them from their oppressors and fulfill his covenantal promises to Israel. It was their goal to “purify Israel by summoning her to the true ancestral traditions, to restore Israel to her independent theocratic status, and to be in the vanguard of such movements by the practice and intensification of Torah.”¹⁷

¹² Neusner, *From Politics*, 80.

¹³ Neusner, *From Politics*, 80. Borg notes that no less than 229 of the 341 rabbinic tests attributed to the Pharisaic schools of Shammai and Hillel pertain to table fellowship (95).

¹⁴ Borg 74.

¹⁵ Bowker 21.

¹⁶ Wright 187.

¹⁷ Wright 189. This goes against two common assumptions, the first of which has already been mentioned: the Pharisees were not interested only in their own purity but were concerned about Israel and Judaism at large. Second, their goal was not piety for the sake of piety or elitism. Nor was their devotion part of a system that promoted the self-salvation so frequently and anachronistically ascribed to them by

The Pharisees believed that God had given Israel his Torah, “so that by keeping it she may be his people, may be rescued from her pagan enemies, and confirmed as ruler of her own land.”¹⁸ This is how several of Israel’s significant stories worked out (e.g. the book of Joshua, Esther, and Maccabees to name a few) and it is likely that a large portion of their bible stories would have also been read through this lens.¹⁹ The Pharisees greatly desired to bring about the renewal of Israel and witness their deliverance from exile, and they firmly held that their brand of holiness and their program of Torah intensification was the divinely-given means to achieving this end.²⁰

Before proceeding, it is essential to briefly emphasize the role that both the Torah and the Temple played as symbols within Israel. For they became respectively the constitution and the religio-political center of Judaism.²¹ The Temple was the heart and focal point of Jewish national life, and it was regulated by the Torah, which formed the covenant character for all that Israel was and hoped for.²² The Temple was the place where YHWH lived and where he forgave, restored, and enabled Israel to be cleansed of defilement and so continue as his people.²³

post-Pelagius Christians. They wanted to remain faithful to YHWH and bring about the restoration of Israel, that is why they intensified Torah observance.

¹⁸ Wright 220.

¹⁹ Wright 221. It must be noted that the stories a community believes will alter the way that people understand the world and provide a template for how to act in a given situation. As Wright notes in *Jesus and the Victory of God* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1996), “The community would order its life and thought by telling and retelling events which had made them who they were” (133-4).

²⁰ For further reading see Wright, *NTPG*, 215-243.

²¹ Borg 66. Borg points out that, “By far the greatest number of known protests against Rome were occasioned by practices of the ruling authorities which violated the Torah or threatened to defile the Temple (78). Wright places these two, along with land and racial identity as the 4 major symbols (224).

²² Wright, *NTPG*, 224.

Defilement resulted in uncleanness and could be contracted in a number of ways, which meant disassociation from the people of the covenant God. Forgiveness, restoration and consequent reintegration into the community of Israel was attained by means of the Temple.²⁴ The Temple, therefore, served as a type of kidney, which purified those who came into and out of it.²⁵ And this purification was integral for the forgiveness of sins and re-entry into Israel.

The Torah was of equal but different value. And, like the Temple, one's status as a member of Israel was determined by its utilization.²⁶ In fact, if one abandoned the Torah, he was looked upon as a traitor of Israel (i.e. traitors to the national symbol, the national hope, and the covenant God).²⁷ The Torah provided the vital covenant boundary-marker, particularly in those geographic areas where it seemed important for Israel to maintain its distinctiveness (as certainly was the case in Galilee).²⁸ As Wright has observed

If one were in Jerusalem, the Temple (still governed by Torah, but assuming the central role) was the dominant cultural and religious symbol. It was around this that Israel was organized, it was this that the covenant God would vindicate. But away from Jerusalem (in Galilee or the Diaspora) it was Torah, and particularly the special badges of Sabbath and purity, that demarcated the covenant people, and therefore provided the litmus tests of covenant loyalty and signs of covenantal hope.²⁹

²³ Wright, *NTPG*, 225. On the significance of Temple-worship see esp. E.P. Sanders, *Judaism: Practice and Belief* (Philadelphia: Trinity Press, 1992) 47-71.

²⁴ Wright, *NTPG*, 225.

²⁵ K. C. Hanson and Douglas E. Oakman, *Palestine in the Time of Jesus: Social Structures and Social Conflicts* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1998) 144.

²⁶ It may have been common for people to debate the details of how obedience to the Torah was to manifest itself, but there was never any question as to whether obedience was to be rendered.

²⁷ Wright, *NTPG*, 230.

²⁸ Wright, *NTPG*, 238.

²⁹ Wright, *NTPG*, 238.

Adherence to the Torah was the badge that one wore to distinguish himself as members of God's covenant people, a badge which verified their citizenship within God's chosen community. In addition, obedience to the Torah was also seen as an action which would actually hasten YHWH's vindication and redemption of his people. Torah, therefore, with or without the intensified interpretation of the Pharisees, was of supreme significance for Israel.

In summation, the Jews who lived in 1st century Palestine were under the oppressive rule of the Gentiles. This prolonged period of subjugation severely threatened the racial identity of the Jewish people, which resulted in both the insulation and isolation of the Israelites. This manifested itself in the rejection of pagan and Hellenist practices and rigid adherence to Torah, even to intensified degrees. This was done as (1) an expression of covenant loyalty and faithfulness to YHWH, (2) as a means of distinguishing oneself as a member of God's people and (3) also to receive forgiveness of sins and citizenship in the community of salvation.

Setting the Table

Observance of Torah was essential for the Jewish community, and one of the primary ways that this was demonstrated was through adherence to the purity laws. These purity laws sanctioned what could be eaten, when it could be eaten, and with whom one could eat. There was simply no other forum like the table to demonstrate one's faithfulness as a Jew, or to measure that of another.

In addition to the importance of table conduct in Judaism, it was also of supreme importance throughout the ancient world. In the first century, partaking of a meal with another was an expression of intimacy and fellowship; to dine with another honored them and expressed both trust and acceptance.³⁰ Likewise, to reject table fellowship clearly communicated

³⁰ Borg 94.

disapproval and rejection. Accordingly, such rejection became a form of social control whereby undesired behavior was discouraged.³¹ In this section we will trace table fellowship in the Torah, then look at its developments in the intertestamental period, and finally assess with more clarity the significance of table fellowship in Jesus' day.

In the book of Genesis there are numerous accounts of meals, but never are they ordinary matters.³² Certainly they did eat regular meals, but the ones chosen for inclusion convey additional meanings, usually the establishment of peace between individuals who were previously at odds or the celebration of gifts to God's people. The importance of meals in Genesis is highlighted by the covenant-making and breaking activities that occur during them.³³ In addition, oftentimes the one hosting the meal admits (or re-admits) the other into their family circle.³⁴ When, however, these meals turn into occasions for treachery and deceit, the sin is made all the more heinous because of the link with the meals at which it occurred, which should have been an occasion for honest interaction between like-minded persons.³⁵

The volume of passages describing table interaction decreases throughout the rest of the Pentateuch, but Exodus 12 and Leviticus 1-11 both contributed significantly to the canonical

³¹ Borg 94. See Duncan Derrett, *Law in the New Testament* (London: Wipf & Stock, 1970), who writes, "Social ostracism has, or at least had, some chance of being an effective deterrent. Unless people are deprived of their social potential there is, under normal eastern conditions, no hope of keeping them in check" (282).

³² Abraham and Melchizedek (14:18), Abraham and his three visitors (18:1-18), Isaac's weaning, which was marred by Sarah's jealousy (21:8), celebration feast for Isaac and Rebekah's engagement (24:54), wedding feast for Jacob and Rachel's wedding, complicated by Laban's deceit (29:22-23), the trading of Esau's birthright (25:29-31), swearing of a peace oath between Isaac and Abimelech (26:30-31), peace meal between Jacob and Esau (31:54), and the reconciliation between Joseph and his brothers (43:24-34). For further analysis see esp. Blomberg 32-37.

³³ Blomberg 35.

³⁴ Victor Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis*, 2 Vols, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995) 207.

³⁵ Blomberg 36.

understanding of meals. When Jews participated in the Passover meal they would celebrate with their family units, establish solidarity with their Israelite community and form a sense of distinctness and separation from other nations.³⁶ In Leviticus, we find regulations on food consumption that were to guard all of Israel from eating food which God deemed unacceptable. One could remain ritually pure only if s/he ate strictly clean food. While various explanations for the rationale behind this command have been set forth, it is clear that in following these dietary laws, “The Israelites obeyed God’s instructions several times each day, developing deep in their consciousness an attitude of obedience to God...It also led to the erection of a high barrier against the assimilation and amalgamation of the Jewish people, which would result in the loss of their racial identity.”³⁷

In the Torah specifically, and throughout the Old Testament in general, meals helped to draw boundaries.³⁸ As Blomberg has observed, “Only those who in some sense belonged were included, the outsider was not welcome.”³⁹ The unrepentant among the Israelites and enemies among the foreigners were never invited to formal table fellowship with faithful Jews.⁴⁰ This theme must be grasped, because, along with the developments of the intertestamental period, it formed the way table fellowship was understood and approached in 1st Century Palestine.

³⁶ Blomberg 37. See also Jerome Neyrey “Meals, Food, and Table Fellowship” *The Social Sciences and New Testament Interpretation* Ed. Richard Rohrbaugh (Peabody: Hendrickson, 1996) who notes that the Passover was such an influential meal that it “colored the way Judeans perceived and structured other eating events” (163).

³⁷ John Hartley, *Leviticus* (Dallas: Word, 1992) 163.

³⁸ Meals also play a significant role in the reigns of Saul and David, in the ministries of Elijah and Elisha, in the wisdom literature (specifically Psalms and Proverbs), and in the major prophets, especially Isaiah.

³⁹ Blomberg 64.

⁴⁰ Blomberg 63.

The intertestamental period produced a body of literature that is far too vast to survey in this section, and a great deal of it is too Hellenized to accurately reflect the life and times of Jesus. However, it will prove profitable to briefly summarize the relevant material from the Apocrypha and the Qumran texts.

In the Old Testament Apocrypha, food consumption and table fellowship play a vital role in the victory of God's people and their deliverance from oppression. Nowhere is this more evident than in the stories of Judith and the Maccabees. In Judith, the right kind of table fellowship makes the difference between life and death and between liberation and defeat.⁴¹ And in the Maccabees, worshipping God is equated to keeping oneself separate with respect to foods and meal companions.⁴² First Maccabees 1:62-63 offers an overall summary, "Many in Israel stood firm and were resolved in their hearts not to eat unclean foods. They chose to die rather than to be defiled by food or to profane the holy covenant, and they did die."⁴³ Additionally, in the book of Sirach a large emphasis is placed on the faithful not associating with the unrighteous and Tobit restricts the giving of bread to the sinful.⁴⁴ Bloomberg notes that one of the chief themes in apocryphal literature is the "stress on the need for ritual purity, separation from

⁴¹ Ivor Jones, *The Apocrypha* (Peterborough: Epworth, 2003) 58. This is the story of a Jewish woman who kills Holofernes, the Assyrian commander. Holofernes knows that Israel's victory will only come about if they obey the Torah, particularly the dietary laws, so Judith convinces him that she has defiled herself by eating forbidden food, thus rendering her unclean and susceptible to defeat. But Judith never ate the food that Holofernes provided, instead she secretly brought along her own supply so that she would not become defiled. Judith was eventually able to get the Assyrian commander drunk and cut off his head.

⁴² Bloomberg 70.

⁴³ In addition to this text, 2 Maccabees 6:18-7:42 recounts the story of Eleazar and the mother with seven sons who suffered martyrdom rather than submit to the Syrian kings' command to eat unclean food. 4 Maccabees devotes 14 chapters to recounting reflecting on this event.

⁴⁴ Patrick Skehan, *The Wisdom of ben Sira* (New York: Doubleday, 1987) 220. Tobit likens table fellowship between a godly man and a sinner to that of lamb and wolf (13:17).

sinners, and related boundary markers in the context of meals.⁴⁵ While this is clearly a mark of apocryphal literature, it is all the more true for the Qumran texts.

The participants in the Qumran community were consumed with the desire to remain pure in any/every situation by the avoidance of everything that could defile, especially with regard to meals. Their meals were communal events where all full members (men free from handicaps and ritual uncleanness) gathered together to express the pure character of the group and its collective identity.⁴⁶ Since they held that faithfulness to YHWH and obedience to Torah necessitated a heightened state of purity, they held that the rest of Judaism was unclean and thus wicked and sinful.⁴⁷ There was to be absolutely no association between the members of the Qumran community and those who were impure, whether Jew or anyone else. Such interaction would render the Essenes unclean and result in their temporary expulsion from the community (i.e. the true Israel, the people of salvation). And there was no other place where this desire to remain pure expressed itself more readily than at the table.

The Qumran community is an example of how exclusive one sect of Israel was willing to become in order to embody their understanding of true Judaism. But this group was merely elaborating on the God-given principles found in the history of their people (found in, but not restricted to the Old Testament, the Apocrypha, and even the pseudepigrapha) to which nearly all Jews subscribed. Fundamental among those principles was the notion that unclean people and

⁴⁵ Blomberg 67-68. Blomberg is careful to note that, “Sinners may mean the ritually impure, the wholly other (e.g. Gentiles) or the morally wicked. This inevitably leads to the blurring of some of these categories, which the primary literature itself does not all that infrequently” (68).

⁴⁶ Hartmut Stegemann, *The Library of Qumran: On the Essenes, Qumran, John the Baptist, and Jesus* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998) 191.

⁴⁷ Blomberg 82. It is important to note that their use of words like “sinners” and “wicked” refers not only to the morally reprobate, but also to the portion of Israel that was classified as ritually impure.

objects constantly threatened to corrupt God's holy, elect nation, both corporately and individually.⁴⁸ If Israel was to honor God and be vindication as his people, they had to avoid such defilement at all costs.

In the first century, given the intimate and culturally significant nature of the setting of meals, dining was an occasion to draw boundaries, solidify kinship, and perpetuate social values.⁴⁹ To eat with people of a different rank or class, to eat with sinners, or to eat with the unclean was to defile oneself and recognize their status as either acceptable or equal to one's own.⁵⁰ Loyalty to God was expressed through eating the right kinds of foods with the right kinds of people (i.e. the people who shared and adhered to the same vision for what obedience to God meant). Those who failed to do so were not remaining faithful to God and failed to embody in their lives what Israel was supposed to be.

Getting Invited

Given all that is known about the political and social setting of 1st century Judaism, especially with regards to the cultural significance of table fellowship, the fact that Jesus shared meals with those who had no right to eat with a true Jew has monumental implications. In the Gospels, three specific groups are mentioned: prostitutes (only once), tax collectors, and sinners. Before the full meaning of Jesus' selection of meal mates can be recognized, however, their

⁴⁸ Blomberg 93.

⁴⁹ Although the following quotation dates to around AD 220, it quite nicely illumines the above point. "Nor do we take our food from the same table as the Gentiles, inasmuch as we cannot eat along with them, because they live impurely. But when we have persuaded them to have true thoughts, and to follow a right course of action...then we will deal with them. For not even if it were our father, or mother, or wife, of child, or brother, or any other one having claim by nature on our affection, can we venture to take our meals with him; for our religion compels us to make a distinction" (*Clementine Homilies* 13.4 Ante-Nicene Fathers).

⁵⁰ Scott McNight, *Jesus Under Fire: Modern Scholarship Reinvents the Historical Jesus* Eds. Michael Wilkins and J.P. Moreland (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1995) 64.

precise identity must first be established. This is a pivotal issue and one that has been made difficult in wake of the various suggestions that have been made.

Nowhere in the Gospels is it explicitly stated that Jesus ate with prostitutes, but his acceptance of such women can almost certainly be assumed for a number of reasons.⁵¹ First, Jesus' statement in Matthew 21:32 that tax collectors and *prostitutes* are entering the kingdom of God ahead of the religious leaders is a good indication that they were members of his table fellowship.⁵² Second, while at a feast he accepted the worship of the sinful woman who was most likely a harlot (Luke 7:36-50).⁵³ Third, Mary Magdalene, who was one of Jesus' most intimate followers, has traditionally been viewed as a former prostitute. And finally, while some have suggested that the "prostitutes" with whom Jesus associated were merely increasingly emancipated women who left their homes to attend banquets,⁵⁴ this position simply will not stand. Not least because of the fact that "tax collectors and prostitutes" have their professional titles connected because of their mutual exemplifications of Jews who had betrayed Israel by collaborating with the occupying forces of Rome (prostitutes because the Gentile soldiers were their principle clientele). Jesus did not merely associate with liberal women, he accepted and ate

⁵¹ *Contra* Horsley, *Sociology and the Jesus Movement* (2nd ed.; New York: Continuum, 1994) who denies Jesus' interaction with harlots and writes, "Aside from such people not being identifiable social groups, there is little or no evidence that Jesus himself ministered to or associated with such people as tax collectors or prostitutes" (121).

⁵² Some have questioned the reliability of this statement, but the fact that this teaching would have portrayed Jesus in a negative light lends credibility to its authenticity.

⁵³ Blomberg 137; Green 309; François Bovon, *Luke 1* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2002) 293. Technically, she could have been a sinner for a number of reasons (e.g. being the wife of a man with a dishonorable trade, a woman in debt, or an adulteress), but the most common reason for a woman to be so stigmatized would be that she was in fact a harlot.

⁵⁴ Kathleen Corley, *Women and the Historical Jesus: Feminist Myths of Christian Origins* (Santa Rosa: Polebridge, 2002).

with impure, sinful harlots who rejected the vision of Israel as a holy people and whose profession epitomized disloyalty to God.

In addition to prostitutes, Jesus also dined with tax collectors. It has been recognized for some time that this term does not refer to the true Roman *pulicani*, the very wealthy and influential who oversaw the entire tax collection process.⁵⁵ Instead, the tax collectors in the gospels were tax contractors or middlemen, “Jews working for Rome, in charge of the collection of tolls, customs duties or certain yearly taxes in specific locations; men who made their money by charging more than what they had to pass on to their overlords.”⁵⁶ Tax collectors were not necessarily levitically unclean, but they were still despised as immoral. For, like the prostitutes, they rejected the vision of Israel as a holy, separate people by collaborating with their oppressors, to the disadvantage of their fellow Jews. And while their profession did not necessarily force them to break purity laws, as Ben Meyer has observed, “What held on a ritual basis held also on a moral basis. In fact, the ritual and moral orders tended to interpenetrate.”⁵⁷ Accordingly, their profession caused them to be considered Israel’s most despised and unclean citizens. Thus, they were deprived of national rites and considered “as Gentiles.”⁵⁸ Table fellowship with tax collectors was strictly prohibited.

The third (and unquestionably the most disputed) group of Jesus’ table companions identified in the Gospels is the sinners. Traditionally it had been assumed that when people were

⁵⁵ Blomberg 23. The obvious exception is Zacchaeus. In the gospels, however, he is the exception, not the rule.

⁵⁶ Blomberg 24.

⁵⁷ Ben Meyer, *The Aims of Jesus* (London: SCM Press, 1979) 159. Borg notes that, in addition, their constant interaction with Gentiles caused them to almost constantly be at risk of defilement (99).

⁵⁸ Joachim Jeremias, *Jerusalem at the Time of Jesus* (London, SCM Press, 1969) 311.

classified as sinners in the Gospels, the derogatory term was used in reference to the *amme ha aretz*.⁵⁹ This group encompassed the vast majority of simple Jewish farmers and fisherman, housewives and artisans, “who were not aligned with any sect and did not follow the purity laws that the Pharisees had superimposed onto the Torah to contextualize the commandments of Moses for their day.”⁶⁰ Thus, the sinners were ordinary Jews, all non-Pharisees who did not keep the purity laws.⁶¹

Over the last 20 years, however, this consensus has been thoroughly challenged, particularly by the work of E.P. Sanders.⁶² Sanders held that the Pharisees were too small in number and had too little influence to successfully stigmatize the vast majority of Israel as sinners. He also notes that, in general, the Pharisees were not even interested in the purity of the common people.⁶³ Thus, Sanders concluded that the sinners in the Gospels were the flagrantly wicked, the grossly immoral, people on par with the tax collectors (giving explanation to the frequent name association) and who defiantly transgressed the law and betrayed the God who redeemed Israel.

⁵⁹ In its earliest usage, this term referred to the people living on the land, distinct from the countries leaders, priests, and prophets. But after the exile the phrase acquired a pejorative sense as it was frequently used to label the people with whom the Jews who were not exiled intermingled and intermarried. By Jesus’ day, this phrase described those whose ritually purity was uncertain at best.

⁶⁰ Blomberg 24.

⁶¹ Horsley, in his work, *Jesus and the Spiral of Violence* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1987) states that this view is “the scholarly consensus” (221).

⁶² E.P. Sanders, *Jesus and Judaism* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1985) 174-211.

⁶³ This issue has already been dealt with in a previous section and in the corresponding footnotes. Accordingly, it will not be addressed further. For a more extensive treatment on this issue see esp. James Dunn, “Pharisees, Sinners and Jesus”, in *Jesus, Paul and the Law: Studies in Mark and Galatians* (Louisville: WJKP, 1990) 61-88.

Sander's work certainly deserves a response. First, the number of Pharisees in Jesus' day is difficult to assess. All that modern scholars have to go on is the approximation that Josephus gives of "over 6,000" in *Antiquities* 17.42. However, Josephus was recounting an event dated to 10 B.C. that only included those Pharisees living in Jerusalem who were involved in a protest against Herod. In Jesus' day (after 40 years and 2 major revolts which likely prompted many others to join this movement), this number was likely much higher.⁶⁴ Especially since the Pharisees, while having their base in Jerusalem, were not restricted to that city. Regardless, compared to the population of around six hundred thousand, they represented a minority of the country.⁶⁵ Despite this, however, Borg has noted that, "their influence continued to grow until many, perhaps most, of those outside the Pharisaic fellowships granted the validity of the Pharisaic vision of holiness for Israel, even those who did not fulfill the Pharisaic regulations."⁶⁶ Because of this, they likely did have the influence to classify those who failed to adhere to their method of being Israel as 'sinners,' at least to an extent.

To temper Borg's perspective, it is possible that not everyone would have considered the *amme ha aretz* to be sinners (though all sinners would certainly have been *amme ha aretz*), but it is unlikely that anyone in the first century drew a sharp distinction between the two.⁶⁷ It is important to note that, in the minds of the religious elite, there was a great deal of continuity between them, for both had flouted the Torah.⁶⁸ A distinction between the two may have existed,

⁶⁴ Wright, *NTPG*, 196.

⁶⁵ Borg 74.

⁶⁶ Borg 74.

⁶⁷ Wright, *JVG*, 266. This is not to say that there was no understanding of the "upright poor," but simply to assert that, as a group, there was typically not a rigid demarcation.

but the distinction was blurry and shaded to say the least. Technically, the term sinners denotes both non-Pharisaic (= unclean) Jews and the blatantly wicked (in the Gospels it probably refers to both as well); neither of whom would have been considered adequate examples of the true Israel that God would vindicate when he established his kingdom. Therefore, neither would have been proper table companions.

In eating with prostitutes, tax collectors and sinners, Jesus was offering the most intimate association with the most unlikely individuals. His companions ranged from the non-observant to Israel's most scandalous and notorious sinners. As Jeremias has stated, "they were the disreputable, the *amme ha aretz*, the uneducated, the ignorant, whose religious ignorance and moral behavior stood in the way of their access to salvation."⁶⁹ As a teacher, Jesus clearly associated with people he should not have. The next question that must be answered is obvious: what was Jesus doing by dining with those who were considered to be outside the community of salvation and non-citizens in the kingdom of God?

Eating with Jesus

Now that the socio-political setting of 1st century has been identified, along with the cultural significance of table fellowship and the identity of Jesus' meal mates, it is now possible to address the meaning of Jesus table fellowship. As the pertinent New Testament passages are examined, it becomes apparent that Jesus' table fellowship signified the forgiveness of sinners and revealed the identity of those who would comprise his kingdom. In achieving these ends, it also subverted Judaism's national symbols and served as an acted parable of renewed Israel.

⁶⁸ Meyer 296, n. 109.

⁶⁹ Joachim Jeremias *New Testament Theology* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1971) 112.

Mark 2:13-17 records Jesus having dinner at a tax collector's house, eating with many tax collectors and sinners. As has been shown, this was an unacceptable practice for numerous reasons. In sharing this meal, Jesus was defying the conventions of his world and accepting a group of people deemed traitorous and corrupt in his society.⁷⁰ Accordingly, the teachers of the law and the Pharisees asked his disciples, "Why does he eat with tax collectors and sinners?" Jesus replied, "It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick. I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners." Jesus offered a common sense response: just as a doctor must have intimate contact with the sick, so also I must have intimate contact with sinners. There was certainly no place more intimate than the table, and Jesus' response indicated that his contact with the unacceptables and outcasts was part of the restorative process.⁷¹

In sharing this meal with these sinners, Jesus was visibly demonstrating that he accepted them, and that he did so *before* they repented. This is where the offense lied. Any Jew would have forgiven these men and admitted them into their fellowship if they had first submitted themselves to God's commandments and gone through the Temple. The Pharisees did not reject Jesus' actions because he was preaching love and grace while ordinary Judaism, including the Pharisees, remained hostile to these ideas.⁷² The religious leaders were upset because, through Jesus' table fellowship, he offered acceptance before repentance—at least in how repentance had traditionally been understood. Jesus was declaring, with actions that spoke louder than words,

⁷⁰ Blomberg 102.

⁷¹ Borg 103

⁷² Wright, *JVG*, 273

that even though the wicked had not made restitution or demonstrated conversion in any traditional way, they would still be included in his fellowship.⁷³

However, it is not as though Jesus did not require repentance. He did require repentance, but not the kind that came through the Torah and the Temple! Repentance was necessary, but according to Jesus it was to be had through him. What mattered to Jesus was not loyalty to the national symbols, but loyalty to him.

The notion that one could repent and regain acceptable status within Israel apart from its national symbols was completely novel. Not until John, who scandalously offered repentance down in the Jordan instead of through Temple and Torah, had such an idea occurred.⁷⁴ And Jesus advanced John's message a few steps further by making repentance about acceptance of him. In this the Pharisees found the true offense, not in his love and mercy, but in his blasphemous audacity to claim that the wicked were no longer sinners (and thus, no longer outside of Israel) simply because they accepted him.

It is important to remember that Jesus' association with sinners was not exclusively a religious action. Jesus was aware of the integral role that table fellowship played in the culture and in the opposing renewal movements⁷⁵ and therefore he used it as a weapon, as "chosen

⁷³ It is important to note, as Sanders does, that Jesus was not allowing them back into Israel; he did not have the power to do so. Instead, he was allowing them into his group of followers, into his kingdom, into the Israel that would be constituted around him (203).

⁷⁴ Wright, *JVG*, 257. Contra Sanders, *Jesus*, who states that John called from repentance and righteousness as ordinarily understood (205).

⁷⁵ It is important to remember that table fellowship was used build a community of faithful Jews and easily identify those who had citizenship in the true Israel. It was also believed that such separatist, ethnocentric behavior would revive a religion and nation devastated by domination and occupation. See Curtiss DeYoung, *United by Faith: The Multiracial Congregation as an Answer to the Problem of Race* (New York: Oxford, 2003) 16-18.

terrain on which to do battle.”⁷⁶ In eating with the wicked, Jesus was declaring the wrong people forgiven. He removed the national symbols⁷⁷ and let all who were loyal to him become a part of the Israel he was reconstituting (i.e. the kingdom of God). As Wright has noted, Jesus was not just making religious declarations, “He was offering the return from exile, the renewed covenant, the eschatological forgiveness of sins—in other words, the kingdom of God. And he was offering this final eschatological blessing outside the official structures, to all the wrong people, and on his own authority.”⁷⁸

It is clear that, as Jesus ate with sinners and accepted them into his fellowship, he was offering the forgiveness of sins and identifying those who would partake in the kingdom of God. Jesus’ welcome of sinners had everything to do with eschatology, because, as he dined with them, he invited them to become a part of the restored people of YHWH, the renewed Israel.⁷⁹ Therefore, in his table fellowship, “he was celebrating the coming kingdom, and those who shared this celebration with him were benefiting from the great forgiveness of sins.”⁸⁰ All this defends the thesis that Jesus’ table fellowship truly was an acted parable of renewed Israel. If this is true, it has particular significance as it pertains to Jesus’ other meals.

Mark 6:30-44 records Jesus feeding five thousand in the wilderness. While much else could be said about this miracle, here we will note that the meal pointed beyond itself to the

⁷⁶ Borg 97.

⁷⁷ To be precise, Jesus did remove the national symbols, *per se*, but claimed that he was the embodiment of them.

⁷⁸ Wright, *JVG*, 272. Wright holds that the Jewish people understood themselves to be in exile and that forgiveness of sins was equated with the return from exile (NTPG 268-72; *JVG* 126-27, 203-4). For a positive assessment of this position see Craig Evans, “Jesus and the Continuing Exile of Israel” *Jesus and the Restoration of Israel* Ed. Carey Newman (Downers Grove: IVP, 1999) 77-100.

⁷⁹ Wright, *JVG*, 272.

⁸⁰ Wright, *JVG*, 272.

fellowship of the kingdom of God.⁸¹ The group that Jesus fed certainly consisted of a wide cross-section of Galilean society; it was a hodgepodge of farmers, fishermen, homemakers and a myriad of other people, some of whom were certainly outcasts and sinners.⁸² By Pharisaic standards, this gathering was unquestionably impure.⁸³ By ignoring the impurity of those he ate with and the ritual practices that made food acceptable, Jesus was breaking all the rules. This was not by happenstance! Jesus' table fellowship with this eclectic group materially demonstrated his acceptance of sinners and the joy of God's uncalculated forgiveness.⁸⁴ Thus, it is appropriate to understand this meal as a foreshadowing of the Messianic banquet.⁸⁵

Jesus' feeding of the four thousand should also be interpreted in the same category. The account in Mark 8: 1-10 shows Jesus disregarding all the same rules for table conduct as he did in the first miracle, only to a greater degree, for this time he was dining with Gentiles.⁸⁶ As Jesus ate with these unlikely groups of people, he was indicating that they could be a part of the kingdom of God.⁸⁷

⁸¹ William Lane, *The Gospel According to Mark* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1974) 233.

⁸² Blomberg 106.

⁸³ James Edwards, *The Gospel According to Mark* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002) 193.

⁸⁴ Blomberg 106.

⁸⁵ Craig Keener, *A Commentary on the Gospel of Matthew* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999) 402.

⁸⁶ See Ben Witherington, *The Gospel of Mark: A Social-Religious Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2001) 235-36. Many commentators hold this position because Jesus was in Gentile territory, there were 7 baskets of food remaining (a number used to represent universal realities, as apposed to the 12 baskets which represent Israel), and the word for the baskets used is σπιριδας, a large gentile basket, not the type used by Jews.

⁸⁷ Steven Bryan, *Jesus and Israel's Traditions of Judgment and Restoration* (Cambridge: University Press, 2002) 80.

Jesus' table fellowship revealed his vision for the renewed people of God. As he dined with sinners, he invited those he ate with to see themselves as the Israel that would benefit from his work.⁸⁸ They would be the ones who celebrated the feast in the kingdom of God. This teaching also appears evident in Jesus' parable of the Great Banquet (Luke 14:15-23). This parable shows Jesus upending the common understanding of who would be included in the kingdom. As Joel Green has elaborated, "When Jesus subverted conventional mealtime practices, he was doing far more than offering sage counsel for his table companions. Rather, he was toppling the familiar world of the ancient Mediterranean, overturning its socially constructed reality and replacing it with what must have been regarded as a scandalous alternative."⁸⁹ Jesus had a competing vision for who Israel was to be and he revealed that it was a reality that would be enjoyed by outsiders, simply because they responded to him. In the context of the parable, those included were marginal characters, just like the type he chose to eat with on other occasions.⁹⁰ Jesus' teaching and table fellowship clearly communicated that outsiders would partake in his kingdom, while those thought to be within it would be excluded (Matt 8:10-12).⁹¹

Jesus' message did not go unchallenged. In fact, he was indicted for it on several occasions. In Luke 15:1-2 Jesus was once again surrounded by tax collectors and sinners who came near to hear him, and the Pharisees responded by muttering, "This man welcomes sinners and eats with them." Jesus responded by telling three parables, the climax of which was a story about a prodigal son, whose father rejoiced at his return. Just as the father of the prodigal

⁸⁸ Wright, *JVG*, 244.

⁸⁹ Green 550.

⁹⁰ Blomberg 147-48.

⁹¹ The religious were not excluded because Jesus refused them entry, but because they refused him. Jesus appeared more than willing to dine with Pharisees, but they failed to align themselves with him and his vision of the kingdom, that is why they were excluded.

celebrated at his repentance and dined with his son, so too Jesus rejoiced at the repentance of the lost and ate with them. Jesus' wise reply was much more than just an attempt at self defense, however. He was also asserting that his table fellowship with sinners was an invitation to those who grumbled at his practice to join in celebrating the return of the sinners (who were also children of Abraham, even though they were "lost" and "as dead").⁹²

In hearing this parable, the Pharisees are forced to see themselves as the elder son—responsive and obedient, it would seem, but failing in their solidarity with the redemptive purpose of God.⁹³ The words spoken to the older son are implicitly directed to Jesus' opponents, "We had to celebrate and be glad, because this brother of yours was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found." These final words hang in the air, trailing an unexpressed question, "Will the elder son join in the celebration?"⁹⁴ The Pharisees are forced to answer that question by deciding if they are willing to abandon their vision about the community of God and what it means to be a faithful Jew in exchange for Jesus'.

If Jesus was simply a regular teacher who accepted sinners at his table, he would not have ruffled too many feathers or elicited the criticism of the religious elite. But Jesus was not just another sage, he came preaching the kingdom of God. As Jesus dined with sinners, he was announcing God's acceptance of them and inviting them into his community, the kingdom of God, the renewed Israel. He was declaring these sinners forgiven on his own authority, without the utilization of the usual channels, simply because of their positive response to him. In Jesus' announcement and open table fellowship, the heavenly reality, in which the poor and the outcast

⁹² Green 586; Borg 105.

⁹³ Green 586.

⁹⁴ Borg 106.

would be welcome into the community of God, was coming true in flesh and blood.⁹⁵ Jesus' table fellowship spoke loud and clear, anyone who responded to Jesus and his kingdom proclamation would be within the kingdom. This was completely revolutionary and it had very immediate religious, cultural, political, and social ramifications. For Jesus was casting a new vision for how faithfulness to YHWH was to be expressed and what it meant to be God's people. And this vision was void of Judaism's national symbols because he now served their role.

Conclusion

Jesus' table fellowship was a proleptic indication of those who would be included in his kingdom and what it required to be God's people. He offered his vision in direct opposition to the other views of his day, which stressed Judaism's national symbols and exclusivism as the answer. According to contemporary wisdom, one manifested loyalty to God and prompted Israel's return from exile by adhering to a heightened interpretation of the Torah and avoiding all things that could defile, especially at the table. It was for this very reason that dining with unclean sinners was unacceptable, and perhaps why Jesus utilized it as a means of tangibly demonstrating what the kingdom of God would be like. Jesus' kingdom announcement functioned like a narrative in search of fresh characters, and those he dined with would be the actors in his new plot.⁹⁶ Jesus narrative, his vision for renewed Israel, included the forgiveness of sins (i.e. the return from exile) and a new way of expressing faithfulness to God. Sins would be forgiven through responding to Jesus and faithfulness would be measured by one's allegiance to him. In eating with those outside of Israel, those known as "sinners," he altered their status and declared them full members in the renewed Israel that he was constituting around himself. Jesus'

⁹⁵ Wright, *JVG*, 255

⁹⁶ Wright, *JVG*, 244.

table fellowship was a visible demonstration of his vision for the people of God, a provocative theater that disclosed God's embrace of all people; in other words, it was an acted parable of renewed Israel.

Application: Hungry Anyone?

While meals do not function in the same role as they did in the 1st Century Mediterranean world, much of Jesus' table praxis has a great deal of applicability in 21st century America. Meals may no longer be the means by which a given people distinguish themselves and promote their survival, but they still play a significant role in communal life. This is evidenced in middle school cafeterias, wedding feasts, birthday celebrations, funeral gatherings, college graduations, and especially fellowship dinners on Sunday afternoons. Few activities provide forums to gather as a community, build memories, and share life together like the table—or Sunday mornings. It is my belief that, as the Church joins together on a weekly basis to honor God, celebrate their identity, and rejoice in their hope, their fellowship functions quite similarly to table fellowship in Jesus' day. They are the community of salvation and those within their ranks comprise the people of God. Accordingly, as local bodies of the Church congregate on a regular basis, their fellowship should offer acceptance to the outcasts and embrace all people with the grace of God.

The word “sinners” no longer conjures up images of tax collectors and unclean shepherds, but in Christian communities, it still has its referents. In the 21st century, homosexuals, activists of opposing political parties, women who have had abortions, the socially awkward, the poor, and sometimes even the mentally handicapped and racial minorities are thought of as sinners, or at least as having secondary status among the people of God. And unfortunately, some local churches have acted like the rotary club in admitting people into their fellowship: “all are welcome, as long as they look like me.” When the Church acts in such ways, it betrays Jesus and is unfaithful to the true image of his body. God desires his kingdom to consist of all types of peoples (Matt 28:19; Luke 14:13; Eph 2:11-22; Rev 7:9), even those who are not typically thought of as comprising the nucleus of his community.

In Jesus' table fellowship, he removed all social, political, and cultural boundaries and reinvented all the rules. For example, he did not require the ostracized to convert and repent before accepting them into his fellowship, and neither should we. In fact, a church that is criticized for accepting the most vile and scandalous of sinners would probably look much more like Jesus' group of followers than those who pride themselves on their righteousness and orthodoxy. By no means does this mean that a changed life should not be required, but it does mean that the Church should show love, acceptance, mercy and grace to those who are outside its borders. And perhaps, just like with Jesus, this demonstration of acceptance might even promote true repentance.

The Church does not need to stigmatize the outsiders of society. Nor does it need to heap condemnation upon them (they have already received enough of this). Instead, by welcoming them into our fellowships and providing a place where they are welcomed and loved, the Church needs to offer them the same invitation it has already responded to: the invitation to join God's ongoing narrative and be included in his people, the renewed Israel, the kingdom of God. Each local congregation has a distinct manner of expressing loyalty to God and fidelity to the biblical vision, but perhaps our churches need to break down the rules and regulations that the religious and righteous have chosen to define God's people by and disclose God's grace to all by being willing to include them among our ranks. When God's people gather together, heaven and earth collide. And as this happens, the earthly picture ought to properly portray the heavenly reality.

Such a phenomenon will not occur overnight, nor will it happen by "letting go and letting God". Instead, the leaders of God's people must faithfully and persistently cast a vision of God's kingdom (not simply with their words, but also with their life), just like Jesus did as he ate. They must preach to those who don't want to hear it (2 Tim 4:2-5) and even to those who have,

unknowingly, acted like the Pharisees in keeping people out of God's people. Churches will have to change their budgets, open their doors, use their kitchens and be indicted by others who claim to know far more about God and his ways. But such discomforts must be welcomed. After all, is any price too great to pay to be faithful to Jesus?

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