

*Mangiama*: A Social Science Analysis of the Meal at the  
Home of a Leading Pharisee in Luke 14:1-24.

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## **Introduction**

In Luke's account of Jesus' journey to Jerusalem, Jesus stops at four different homes for a meal. Just as the three meals in the early part of Luke's Gospel are indicative of Jesus' Galilean ministry, so to do the four meals on the road to Jerusalem mark the commencement of Jesus' ministry in Jerusalem.<sup>1</sup> The third meal is of particular interest for the study of the meals themselves because Luke collects a great deal of information about meals within the context of this Sabbath meal at the home of a leading Pharisee. Luke 14:1-24 demonstrates Luke's use of the meal in order to both instruct and demonstrate how followers of Jesus were to relate to others. In order to accomplish this, Luke relies on the widely understood symbolic system that surrounds the rules of with whom one shared a meal, the relations between guests and hosts, as well as outsiders, in order to portray Jesus' revolutionizing understanding of how people were to interact with one another.

## **Developing Models for Meals**

In recent decades, an ever larger anthropological literature on meals and their social context has been appearing. Mary Douglas began publishing her seminal research on this topic in 1966 with *Purity and Danger*, which was followed by "Deciphering a Meal" in 1975. *Purity and Danger* puts forth the idea of "dirt" as a cultural construct. Douglas argues that "Dirt is essentially disorder...it exists in the eye of the beholder...we are not governed by anxiety to escape disease, but are positively re-ordering our environment,

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<sup>1</sup> LaVerdiere, pg. 73.

making it conform to an idea.”<sup>2</sup> The concept of pollution thus represents that which is out of place, while purity concerns that which is rightly ordered. Douglas applies this understanding of purity and pollution to the laws concerning the classification of animals as clean or unclean in Leviticus. By doing so, she laid the groundwork for understanding the world of the ancient Israelites in terms of their foundational category for their whole system of meaning: sacred and profane. The sacred is that which is pure, exclusive, and rightly ordered towards God, while the profane is that which transgresses the social order, which the ancient Israelites held as divinely ordained. Douglas extends the conclusions of categorizing animals as clean or unclean to a symbolic understanding of what may be eaten and what must not be eaten. The symbolic meaning encoded within meals replicate by analogy the rules found in other aspects of the social system. It is for this reason, that studying the meal represented in Luke 14:1-24 is so important: in so doing we can see Luke’s representation of Jesus’ values clashing with those of his interlocutors. What Jesus eats, with whom, and under what circumstances all replicate the system of values he espouses. The meals underscore how Jesus’ “use of table fellowship as a divine tool for undermining boundaries and hierarchies made him an enemy of social stability in the eyes of leading contemporaries.”<sup>3</sup>

Recently, biblical scholars such as Jerome Neyrey have undertaken the work of applying Douglas’ methods and results to narratives of meals as they appear in the New Testament. Neyrey lays out a methodology for meals to “be examined (a) as ceremony,

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<sup>2</sup> Douglas, pg. 2.

<sup>3</sup> Bartchy, pg. 797.

(b) as mirrors of social systems, (c) in terms of body symbolism, (d) in terms of reciprocity, and (e) in terms of social relations.’<sup>4</sup>

#### A. Meal as Ceremony

Victor Turner has suggested that rituals are *rites de passage*, rites through which one is transformed from one status to another. He has further suggested that rituals often occur so as to heal a breach in social relations, thus preventing a schism. Rituals then can be seen to occur on an irregular basis, as needed to transform roles for the future sustainability of the community.<sup>5</sup> Ceremonies, on the other hand, occur as regular, planned events, confirming one’s status based on some past event. Ceremonies “confirm the roles and statuses of the persons of their respective institutions,”<sup>6</sup> focusing not on shaping boundaries, but in solidifying positions within the community.

Meals are ceremonies, not rituals. Meals serve to solidify a transformation that has taken place, and may be an element of the aggregation process of a ritual. A wedding reception, for example, is not the rite which itself transforms two individual social units into one, but rather the meal that confirms the singular social identity of all present. Most meals, however, are not so immediately present to the transformation which they confirm. Meals occur on a regular basis, and often confirm events in the distant past, such as the annual Passover meal, in commemoration of the Exodus, or the weekly commemoration of the completion of Creation at the Sabbath meal. By understanding a meal as a ceremony, one will not ask the same questions asked of a ritual, but rather one

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<sup>4</sup> Neyrey 1991, pg. 362.

<sup>5</sup> Neyrey, website.

<sup>6</sup> Neyrey, website.

asks, “When it was eaten, by whom and in whose company, who presided over it, [and] in which social institution did it take place?”<sup>7</sup>

## B. Meals as Windows into a Social System

Meals are not only ceremonies, but as Douglas has observed, they communicate a system of purity and pollution. As demonstrated by Jack Goody the process of table fellowship “can be divided into five phases: production, distribution, preparation, consumption, and disposal.”<sup>8</sup> The breadth of these phases encompasses the whole of the social system in which one is embedded and the system must therefore be understood in order to gain insight into what sort of rules of purity and pollution are communicated in the context of a meal. Neyrey has delineated four aspects of the purity system which are communicated in the meals of Luke-Acts: systems of persons, places, things, and times.<sup>9</sup>

### Persons and Places

Richard Rohrbaugh’s study of “The Pre-Industrial City in Luke-Acts” seeks to understand the maps of persons and places that are assumed in Luke-Acts. Concerning the parable of the great banquet told within the context of Jesus’ Sabbath meal with a Pharisee, Rohrbaugh states that “hearers of the story would immediately catch the idea that we are talking about a host with considerable means, making the contrast between him and the final guests as stark as possible.”<sup>10</sup> The social system that Rohrbaugh puts forward is that of an urban elite living in the center of the city, attended to by the non-elite inside the city, but walled off from them. Outside the city there were villages and

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<sup>7</sup> Neyrey 1991, pg. 363.

<sup>8</sup> Goody, pp. 44-48

<sup>9</sup> Neyrey 1991, pg. 364.

other functional centers connected to the city center through a system of land control and taxation. Finally, there are those who are neither part of the elite and non-elite of the city, nor members of a protective village, but prostitutes, beggars, tanners, and other outcasts of society.<sup>11</sup> This part of Rohrbaugh's model of the city is widely accepted. Rohrbaugh, however, contends that each social class had its own area within or outside the city and did not interact with the other social classes, except in the designated market or public square. Jim Grimshaw, however contends that in the Lucan community, "the rural members are not simply on the receiving end of charity but are active providers of wealth."<sup>12</sup> He argues that those who were in the functional centers outside the city were as much a part of the community as elites and their retainers, by virtue of their production of abundant food capable of feeding the masses. Furthermore, he argues that "large landowners may have lived in the city, but they made contact with their tenants in rural areas."<sup>13</sup> So while no single model has been agreed upon by scholars studying the period in question, it is clear that certain social classes had their social spaces which were not to be transgressed except in prescribed fashions. Meals were thus to be shared with others of one's own social standing, as ceremonies confirming the socially acceptable maps of persons and places.

If this is true on the macro level, it holds also for the micro level. The Greco-Roman symposium is a meal type which influences not only Greek and Roman dining, but Jewish meals as well. Within the context of the symposia there were places of honor, as is evident from Luke 14:7-11. These places of honor were reserved for those people who

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<sup>10</sup> Rohrbaugh, pg. 140.

<sup>11</sup> Rohrbaugh, pp. 132-135.

<sup>12</sup> Grimshaw, pg. 33.

had the highest status or most important roles. Within the context of a symposium, there were customary seats for the host, the chief guest, and other guests. “The places taken by the participants in this meal reflect their status, with the chief guest closest to the host and the other guests arranged in some declining order of status.”<sup>14</sup>

### Things

The symposia prescribed not only who would sit where, with respect to their status, but also who was allowed to speak and what was to be spoken. The chief guest was accorded a special status as one who could speak at length. At the Passover meal, the host was the one who was charged with speaking the prescribed words of *haggadah*. Much as occurs at a contemporary wedding reception, there are those individuals who have a special role to speak at certain prescribed times, offering toasts in accordance with social custom. The concern for speech, namely what emanated forth from the mouth, was replicated by a concern for what went into the mouth, namely clean and holy food. Especially for the Pharisees with whom Jesus dined, concern over the holiness of the food consumed signified one’s relationship to the Torah *in toto*. Thus foods could not be consumed if they were unclean, not properly prepared, not served in the appropriate vessels, or not tithed correctly to the Temple authorities.

### Times

Luke 6:1-5 offers evidence of the concern over tithed foods, as well as the fourth area mapped out in the Judahite system of purity and pollution: time. The Pharisees are concerned with Jesus and his disciples picking grain from a field on the Sabbath. Their

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<sup>13</sup> Grimshaw, pg. 40.

concern reflects an understanding that Jesus and his disciples have failed to tithe this grain, thus making it unclean and unfit for holy persons. Moreover, Jesus and his disciples are picking grain on the Sabbath, a day preserved for the Lord, on which no work was to be done. The modern concept of fungible time was not in operation for the ancient Israelites. “Passover is not eaten just any day, but once a year on a day fixed by the calendar.”<sup>15</sup> Again, the concern over the appropriate timing for a meal at the macro level is replicated on the micro level. The sequence of events at a meal was highly regulated, as the concern for the holiness of the persons, places, and things was replicated in the times. Times form yet another “potential source of information about a group’s symbolic universe”<sup>16</sup> and the values and order the group imposes upon the world around them.

### C. Bodily Symbolism

Douglas’ *Purity and Danger* further explored the way in which each person’s physical body and the control expressed over it reflects the control maintained on the social body. “The body is a model which can stand for any bounded system. Its boundaries can represent any boundaries which are threatened or precarious.”<sup>17</sup> Douglas is here unfortunately working from an older anthropological model of culture as a bounded system, something which has come to be seen as a model which Western anthropologists read into the cultures they studied as an ideal of ‘culture’ in their own worldview. The concept of a bounded people, however, works quite well for understanding the ancient

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<sup>14</sup> Neyrey 1991, pg. 364.

<sup>15</sup> Neyrey 1991, pg. 367.

<sup>16</sup> Neyrey 1991, pg. 368.

<sup>17</sup> Douglas, pg. 115.

Israelites who did, in large part, conceive of themselves as a segregated and bounded entity.

As a bounded entity, the predominant culture of the time with which we are concerned would have been fastidious about borders and boundaries, as we saw in Rohrbaugh's account of the city as portrayed in Luke-Acts. This same concern for the gates and walls of the city was replicated onto the concern for their analogue on each person: orifices and skin. We have seen above how the rules of the symposia enforced certain type of speech, while prohibiting others; prescribing certain types of food, and seeing other foods as abominations. This extended beyond the meal to daily interactions, where special attention was paid to the skin and diseases afflicting it; the ritual purification accompanying movement of material in or out of bodily orifices; and intense notice taken of the actions of hands, feet, and eyes – the external provinces of the body.

Those who did not represent the ideal order of the body, replicating the ideal order of the society were often seen as being “too much” or “too little.”<sup>18</sup> It has also been asserted that those whom society regarded as ill had an imbalance of the four humors described by Hippocrates nearly four centuries before the period we are examining; health was being whole, possessing neither too much nor too little of the desired traits. Neyrey notes that those whom Luke has Jesus' host inviting to the great banquet are precisely those “people who suffer from being bodily ‘too little’ (Luke 14:13).”<sup>19</sup> To have someone like this at a meal was to transgress the normally accepted category of sacred and profane.

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<sup>18</sup> Neyrey 1991, pg. 370.

<sup>19</sup> Neyrey 1991, pg. 370.

## D. Meals and Reciprocity

According to Bruce Malina, three forms of reciprocity characterize the contractual relationships between persons. These are generalized reciprocity, balanced reciprocity, and negative reciprocity.<sup>20</sup> Generalized reciprocity is what one may term altruism, namely the giving of some good without expecting any good in return. This is what Marcel Mauss has termed pure gift, problematic as that characterization has proven to be. Balanced reciprocity is that type of reciprocity which occurred most frequently within exchanges that took place in first century Palestine. Balanced reciprocity is of a tit for tat nature; one does not give anything, be it inducement or honor, without receiving something in return, be it power or knowledge. This type of exchange was the only accepted exchange within the limited good world with which we are concerned. Anyone who gave something without receiving something in return was a fool, and gave away more than goods, but honor as well, as others would see this type of free giving as an inability to control one's own goods. Likewise, dishonorable was anyone who received without giving. This latter type of exchange is known as negative reciprocity; getting something without giving in return. "Common forms include cheating, theft, overcharging and various forms of appropriation or seizure of another's goods, especially against strangers or enemies."<sup>21</sup> Several of these means of illegitimate gain were forbidden by Jewish law, such as usury, because of the burden they placed on the one being charged interest. To gain without giving something in turn, to be a swindler, was a shameful action.

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<sup>20</sup> Neyrey 1991, pg. 372.

<sup>21</sup> Neyrey website.

With regard to meals, it must be remembered that since “meals are ceremonies which confirm values and structures in institutions, especially the institutions of kinship/family or politics, they would tend to be understood either in terms of generalized and balanced reciprocity.”<sup>22</sup> It was honorable and right to feed one’s own family without expecting anything in return, but for those outside of the kinship group, meals were occasions that required balanced reciprocity. One did not invite others to a meal without the expectation of a future invitation being extended, nor did one accept an invitation to a meal unless he had the means to return in kind. We will see, however, that Luke has Jesus challenge this understanding of meals in terms of a balanced reciprocity.

#### E. Meals and Patronage

Patron-client relationships were prevalent in first century Palestine, even if not a desirable condition. Lower class persons sought to form relationships with powerful patrons who could intercede for them. Israel conceived of its relationship to God as that of patron and client. God, as the patron, would ensure the prosperity of Israel, while Israel in turn needed only to be faithful to God, acknowledging Yahweh as their suzerain. A contemporary example of this type of relationship is that of Mario Puzo’s Godfather, who would do favors for his clients, and in turn they remained indebted for some future service, whether it be baking a cake for a daughter’s wedding or murdering the patron’s enemies under his direction. In a patron-client relationship, only one party has the power and the other remains indebted regardless of whether or not he has returned the favor in kind. Not all patron-client relationships occurred face-to-face; often an intermediary, or broker, was involved in the transaction. Throughout Luke’s Gospel, God is portrayed as

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<sup>22</sup> Neyrey 1991, pg. 373.

Israel's patron, with Jesus serving as the broker. Thus, when Jesus feeds the multitudes, this is not to be seen as Jesus' humanitarian efforts at alleviating hunger, but as God's benefaction on behalf of his clients, the people of Israel, who in turn owe their allegiance to God. All that is demanded of the clients is that they recognize Jesus as the broker, accept the benefaction of God, and turn their hearts towards their patron.

### **Application of Models to the Sabbath Meal**

The models developed above for the study of meals can be profitably applied to the study of Luke's account of Jesus' Sabbath meal at the home of a leading Pharisee. The model of the pre-industrial city developed by Rohrbaugh will also be applied to the passage.

#### The Textual Unit

Luke 14:1-24 is a composite of four units, which Luke has gathered together to form a coherent setting within the context a single meal. The units deal "first with the right attitude toward Sabbath observance (14:1-6), then with appropriate attitudes and behavior for those who were guests at the dinner (14:7-11), for the host in issuing the invitations (14:12-14), and for those who did or did not accept the invitation (14: 15-24)."<sup>23</sup>

Rohrbaugh argues with James Resseguie "that the whole of 14:1-33 should be viewed together as a narrative in which conflicting ideological points of view are juxtaposed and contrasted."<sup>24</sup> Luke 14:25-33, which if taken together, forms the fifth element of this

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<sup>23</sup> LaVerdiere, pg. 96.

<sup>24</sup> Rohrbaugh, pg. 137.

passage, lays out the conditions of discipleship, namely that one be willing to lay down father, mother, wife, children, brothers, sisters, and even one's own life (14:26) in order to follow Jesus.

The first three textual elements are unique to Luke's Gospel, while 14:15-24 is also found in Matthew 22:1-14. Matthew's version of the Parable of the Great Supper has those who were invited slay the messenger. He also makes no distinction between the two invitations and the two social spaces from where the final guests were culled, and includes the account of the wedding garment. What Rohrbaugh regards as the fifth element of the passage is also found in Matthew 10:37-38, although in a much shorter form. It is worth noting that Matthew does not couple the Parable of the Great Supper and the Conditions of Discipleship as does Luke. A parallel to the Parable of the Great Supper likewise occurs in the Gospel of Thomas (64:1-2). There is a great deal of uncertainty among scholars as to the original form or setting of the parable. This question of historicity is not of as much concern as is the way in which Luke's audience would have received the passage and understood it within the context of the meal.

### The Social Setting

In order to determine the social setting of the meal in Luke 14:1-24, one must first answer the questions that pertain to a meal in accord with the model we have developed – when was it eaten, by whom and in whose company, who presided over it, and in which social institution did it take place?

This meal is a ceremony. It is taking place on the Sabbath (14:1), a meal which occurs weekly, and as a ceremony seeks to reinforce the social setting. The meal is being shared

by Jesus, a leading Pharisee and others, who are not named or designated. From the model developed of isolated social spaces for each social class, and knowing how important pure meals were to the Pharisees, it can be understood that the nameless others, who are watching Jesus (14:1), are likewise Pharisees, or as some translations state, lawyers. There are two other individuals who are present, who although not named, are singled out. First, there is the man with dropsy, whom Jesus heals (14:2). Second, there is a man who challenges Jesus with the macarism, “blessed is he who shall eat bread in the kingdom of God” (14:15). It is important to note, however, that the host of this meal is a *leading* Pharisee, a man with some power and status among his peers. Jesus appears as the chief guest, if not by rank at the table, by the importance of his speeches accorded him by Luke. That Jesus was invited to share the meal with the Pharisees indicates that they considered him of equal rank, as they would not have invited him otherwise.

This meal is taken in the home of the leading Pharisee. While this meal is not in Jerusalem, the meal is likely to have taken place in an urban setting. Rohrbaugh argues that the Parable of the Great Supper is best understood in the context of the pre-industrial city and thus the hearers of the entire passage would have understood the urban setting. For, it is clear that the man who was able to host the meal was of some means, as he was a leading Pharisee. He is certainly part of the urban elite whom Rohrbaugh sees as occupying the center of the city, both physically and socially.

#### Commentary on the Textual Units

At the beginning of the meal, Jesus challenges his fellow diners with the question, “Is it lawful to cure people on the Sabbath or not?” (14:3). This is not a challenge in that it

was a difficult question to answer, it is a challenge insofar as this question is an affront to their honor. By requiring an answer, a riposte, this question would have been considered rude behavior at the meal. When the Pharisees fail to give a riposte (14:4), Jesus cures the man with dropsy in their midst, effectively gaining honor for God, while putting down those with whom Jesus was dining. The affront continues, when Jesus further asks, which of them would not rescue his property let alone his own heir on the Sabbath. Insiders are to understand that Jesus is Lord and sees the man with dropsy as his kin. The Pharisees are simply not able to understand how it is that Jesus is working on the Sabbath, a day reserved for the Lord alone.

Immediately following this account, Luke has Jesus challenge the guests who are engaging in the game of honor and shame. As the pivotal value in the first century Palestinian *Weltanschauung*, honor was always on the mind of those with whom Jesus interacted. In 14:7-11, Jesus offers a teaching on humility to the invited guests. He seeks to have the game of honor and shame reversed. Those who humble themselves will be rewarded, while those who have sought positions of worldly honor will be belittled. For those present, this certainly would have seemed sheer folly, for to debase oneself seemed to guarantee nothing other than a lessening of one's own status in order that another might gain.

In the subsequent element, concerning not the action of guests, but rather that of the host, Jesus continues the affront to the honor seeking system which he aimed to overturn. It has been noted above that those who invited others to meals expected to be invited in return. While those who accepted an invitation to a meal certainly knew that they were expected to repay in kind. Jesus challenges this kind of balanced reciprocity and in its

place encourages the host to behave according to the principles of generalized reciprocity – to invite others knowing that he will not be repaid. It must be recalled that this type of altruistic behavior was only found among members of one’s own household, and even there fathers providing food for their children expected and received unwavering respect and obedience in return. Jesus rejects any such *quid pro quo* exchanges, stating that one’s reward will be made “at the resurrection of the just” (14:14).

By introducing the kingdom of God, one of the listeners responds with the macarism, “Blessed is he who shall eat bread in the kingdom of God” (14:15). Luke has Jesus respond to this macarism, which seems to imply that all will be well in some distant future when God is with us, by pointing out that God *is* with them and that the kingdom of God *is* at hand. The Parable of the Great Supper indicates that those who long for the kingdom of God and do not live as if it were in their midst will be cast aside, while those to whom an invitation was never given will enjoy the banquet.

Rohrbaugh has considered the parable in light of the model he developed for the pre-industrial city. If we consider the meal in the parable as a meal in itself, we must begin by asking the same questions we did concerning the meal which forms the context for the parable. Namely, when was it eaten, by whom and in whose company, who presided over it, and in which social institution did it take place? The meal is a great banquet, but no special occasion is given for it. Moreover, while Matthew has the host being a king, Luke and Thomas simply have “a certain man.” That the man was able to give a great banquet indicates that he likely of some means, and clearly Luke had in mind a man like the one who was the host of the meal at which Jesus tells the parable. Those invited to attend are likewise men of no mean estate – they are men who were absentee landlords,

owners of great plots of land and the beasts needed to work them. We thus have a banquet being offered among the urban elite.

The invitations to the banquet are sent out in advance, followed by a second invitation brought by the servants to those who had accepted the initial invitation. Rohrbaugh contends that there is evidence for a system of double invitations among the urban elite in first century Palestine and that “the double invitation serves a clear purpose in the urban system of pre-industrial cities.”<sup>25</sup> Namely, the intervening period between the two invitations would have afforded those invited the necessary time to discover who else would be in attendance, whether or not they would be in good company, and thus whether or not it would damage or increase their social standing to attend the banquet. That the guests accepted the initial invitation indicates that they were willing to bear the burden of reciprocating the meal, and thus were of substantial means themselves, but their subsequent refusal to attend indicates that they had learned of some social impediment to their attendance.

Besides indicating their prosperity, the excuses given by those who did not accept the second invitation also show an irrelevance typical of the social exchange one might expect. Having decided that they would not attend the banquet for some reason, the three elites who were invited offer three diversionary excuses which serve as a social signal to other elites who might have attended that this banquet that it is not an event worthy of incurring the resulting social indebtedness. Rohrbaugh argues that the critical question of why the original guests stayed away “is itself the means by which the parable functions

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<sup>25</sup> Rohrbaugh, pg. 139.

as a parable.”<sup>26</sup> In other words, those hearing the parable would have been shocked at the rejection of those who were invited to the meal and would have pondered what it was that had led them to do so.

Luke’s audience would have pondered this question, but the truly shocking part of the parable is the response of the host. While Matthew has the host burn the homes of those who rejected him, thus creating out the parable an allegory for the Jewish rejection of Jesus as the Messiah, Luke has his angered host send his servants out to fill up the banquet hall. One must here recall Rohrbaugh’s model of the pre-industrial city as one that is enclosed by walls, separating it from the outside world, and further divided within, thus separating the various social and ethnic groups within the protective walls of the city. “Without regard for the distinctions the walls imply, the servant goes out to all and all are invited.”<sup>27</sup> The host does the opposite of his elite peers, who have refused to cross social boundaries to come to the banquet. The host crosses the social barriers and invites those people whose very presence at the host’s banquet would have signaled the cessation of his ties to other elites in the city. Again, recall Rohrbaugh’s model of the pre-industrial city where the meeting of non-elites and elites would have occurred only at sanctioned locations, such as the public square and the market. Now, however, the servants are sent not only to streets (14:21), but to the lanes (14:21), those small alleys where the poorest of the non-elite would have lived in the city. The elite host of the banquet has breeched the physical markings of social stratification to a degree that would have seemed shocking and abhorrent to Luke’s audience, elite and impoverished alike.

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<sup>26</sup> Rohrbaugh, pg. 142.

<sup>27</sup> Rohrbaugh, pg. 144.

The impoverished among Luke's audience, as with all of those in first century Palestine, would not have been upwardly mobile persons excited about being able to attend a great banquet in the elite quarters of the city. On the contrary, they would have felt awkward and incompatible with their surroundings. Furthermore, the banquet, which surely would have been taking place in the late afternoon or evening, would have continued into the night, with the gates between the areas of the cities having already been locked. One has the picture of non-elites who would have been brought into an area they knew they should not have been in, and they would have been required to remain in the elite areas after hours. In short, they were being invited to breach social stratification and rules that would have been as shocking to them as it was the elites around whom all of this would have been happening.

When it had been accomplished that all those who were bodily "too little," those who were "poor and maimed and blind and lame" (14:21), had been brought into the host's banquet hall, there was still room for more. This element is unique to Luke's account and allows him to have Jesus fully challenge the social and physical stratification of the pre-industrial city. At this point, the absolute absurdity of the host is realized. Not only has he brought those from the unclean quarters of the city into his home, but he now sends out his servants to "go out to the highways and hedges, and compel people to come in" (14:23). Those whom the host commanded be brought to his home were those whom Rohrbaugh described as those who had business in the city, but were so unclean they were not allowed to enter it, such as tanners who handled urine in their labors, prostitutes, beggars and the like. The sanctions of the social stratification were so strong that these people could not merely be invited to the banquet, but had to be compelled (*anankason*)

to the banquet. It is unfortunate that many misunderstandings of this passage have seen those who were the social outcasts immediately outside the city walls as the country dwellers of the villages (*paganos*). This has led to the misuse of this text as justification for forced conversions throughout the history of Christendom. Further, this has misunderstood Luke's invitation of the most socially unacceptable people to the banquet. The shock his audience would have received cannot be underestimated. This host has made a severe break with the social system of his day in the most radical sort of fashion.<sup>28</sup>

### **Luke's Message**

By understanding the social context of the Sabbath meal at the home of the leading Pharisee, one can come to better understand the meaning Luke intended the passage to communicate. This understanding, often referred to as the *Sitz im Leben* of the passage, precludes many anachronistic readings of the passage. Rohrbaugh conclusively argues that "Luke is using the parable to confront the rich of his own community who are avoiding association with poor Christians."<sup>29</sup> The concern of the community for whom Luke is writing is not the presence of Pharisees who will not accept Jesus as the Messiah, as was the case for Matthew. Rather, the problem confronting the Lucan community is the same that concerned Paul with his community in Corinth (1 Corinthians 11), namely the divisions between rich and poor when gathering together for common worship, a time when commensality was expected. In Luke's community, one can imagine the wealthy

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<sup>28</sup> Rohrbaugh, pg. 145.

<sup>29</sup> Rohrbaugh, pg. 142.

members who will not partake in a common meal with the poorer members of the community, not out of dislike for them, but because to do so would tarnish the elite's relationship to other members of the urban elite. It is interesting to note that similar reasoning was used by the sixteenth century Jesuit missionary Roberto deNobili, in justifying his separation from the Christian community in Goa, India in order to facilitate his social relations with the elite Brahmin whom he wished to convert. Luke's message, however, is clear: "those who reject the community by shunning association with its less reputable members will no longer be invited to participate."<sup>30</sup>

The Norwegian biblical scholar Halvor Moxnes has argued that the passage here examined was intended for the Lucan community in which "their meals served as a focusing point for the different aspects of their identity as a new community."<sup>31</sup> Specifically, Luke portrays the Jewish society in which he is writing as being characterized by negative reciprocity – the rich exploit the poor. In response, Luke advocates "a form of redistribution within the group in order to prevent striking inequalities"<sup>32</sup> from forming which would serve to undermine the cohesiveness of the community. Moxnes further notes that while Luke presents Jesus as reversing the social order of the day, "he participates in the social life of the community" and that the role of meals "is not to provoke conflicts, but to start a new group around Jesus."<sup>33</sup> The Gospel of Luke clearly represents the forming and norming stages of community development, not the storming days of Jesus' earlier ministry. "Luke alone lets us know—Jesus went to dine in a Pharisaic home (Luke 7:36; 11:37; 14:1). These Jewish *symposia* involve

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<sup>30</sup> Rohrbaugh, pg. 145.

<sup>31</sup> Moxnes, pg. 167.

<sup>32</sup> Moxnes, pg. 165.

sharp differences of opinion including on purity, but this is not at all seen as a reason to disrupt communication. The author wants his readers to understand that Jesus, while at times clashing with the Pharisees, remained on speaking terms with them or in other words *in spite of differences maintained common discourse.*<sup>34</sup> While the wealthy members of Luke's community may find it painfully necessary to give up all of their social connections to become a follower of Jesus (14:33), they are not to despise those others with whom they harbor differences of belief.

## **Conclusion**

Jim Grimshaw has stated, "Meaning is the consequence of activity. Food patterns change in response to changing social and ecological conditions."<sup>35</sup> Luke 14:1-33 deals with this reality in a way that Luke's community can understand. As an inclusive community, Luke's contemporaries must have an inclusive table fellowship. In order to understand the changing food patterns which are so prevalent in Luke-Acts, one must therefore understand the social setting. The use of social science methods is therefore not only a useful tool, but absolutely necessary. Scholars such as Neyrey and Rohrbaugh continue to apply the methods and models of the social sciences to the received texts of the New Testament with incredible profit to our understanding of the meaning of the Gospels.

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<sup>33</sup> Moxnes, pp. 160-1.

<sup>34</sup> Tomson, pp. 206-7.

<sup>35</sup> Grimshaw, pg. 38.

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