

Exegetical Paper

**A Redaction-Critical Study of the Last Supper Account in Luke**

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The New Testament accounts of Jesus' last meal with his disciples are uniquely important because of their connection to the origin of the celebration of the Eucharist, the central act of worship of the Christian community throughout its history. However, the liturgical significance of the meal complicates the redaction-critical study of the work of each evangelist by introducing the possibility that the evangelist's Last Supper account has been influenced by the liturgical practice of the Eucharist in his community. Under the two-source hypothesis, Luke's account of the meal would generally be analyzed in comparison to that of Mark. In the course of discussing the similarities and differences between those accounts, it was necessary to investigate the possibility that each may have been influenced by the evangelist's understanding not only of the Christian community's celebration of the Eucharist but also of the Jewish community's celebration of the Passover Seder meal.

By studying both the way Luke edited Mark's Last Supper account and the way he used Passover imagery, several aspects of Luke's soteriology were brought to light: (1) Luke emphasized Jesus' expectation that the coming of the kingdom of God was imminent and that Jesus' own suffering would be instrumental in bringing it about; (2) Luke made a connection between Jesus' practice of open table-fellowship and what it meant for the kingdom of God to come to fulfillment; and (3) Luke made use of the Jewish understanding of remembrance, as expressed in the Passover ritual, to express the significance of Jesus' actions over the bread and the cup at the Last Supper.

## **The Redaction-Critical Method**

The focus of this study was the portion of the Last Supper account in Luke 22:15-20. Based on the two-source hypothesis, that passage was analyzed in comparison with the shorter, but presumably earlier, account found in Mark 14:22-25. First, the similarities and differences between the passages were determined and listed. The next step was to discern patterns of differences between a number of vignettes in Luke which appear to have parallels in Mark. In a study such as this which focused on just one vignette, the patterns were sought by consulting biblical commentaries. Finally, the patterns of Luke's editorial changes were studied to see what hypotheses they suggested regarding his theology, social situation, or audience.<sup>1</sup>

## **List of Similarities and Differences**

Using Aland's *Synopsis of the Four Gospels*, the following similarities and differences were noted.<sup>2</sup>

- I. Both Mark and Luke identify this as a Passover meal (Luke 22:15, Mark 14:12). All three Synoptic Gospels agree on this point, but the Gospel of John does not. This will be an important factor in later discussions of the differences between Luke and Mark.
- II. In Mark's account, Jesus foretells his betrayal by one of the disciples just as the account of the meal begins (Mark 14:18). In Luke's account, the

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<sup>1</sup> Catherine M. Murphy, *John the Baptist: Prophet of Purity for a New Age*, Interfaces, ed. Barbara Green (Collegeville: Liturgical, 2003) 35-37.

<sup>2</sup> Kurt Aland, ed., *Synopsis of the Four Gospels* (RSV) (New York: American Bible Society, 1985).

betrayal is foretold after the bread and wine are shared (Luke 22:21).

- III. Luke's account begins with Jesus' statement to his disciples that he has earnestly desired to eat this Passover with them before he suffers, and that he will not eat it again "until it is fulfilled in the kingdom of God" (Luke 22:16).<sup>3</sup> This portion of the account is an addition that has no parallel in Mark.
- IV. In Luke 22:17, Jesus takes a cup, gives thanks, and tells his disciples to divide it among themselves. This is a major addition to Mark, because it represents the first of two shared cups mentioned by Luke. Mark mentions only one shared cup and places it after the sharing of the bread.
- V. In Luke 22:18, Jesus asserts that he will "not drink of the fruit of the vine until the kingdom of God comes." This wording is similar to Mark 14:25 where Jesus says he "shall not drink again of the fruit of the vine until that day when I drink it new in the kingdom of God." In addition to the fact that the statements are worded somewhat differently, Luke places Jesus' comment after the account of a cup that is shared before the bread is blessed and broken, while Mark puts it after the only cup in his account, which is shared after the bread.
- VI. Luke 22:19 and Mark 14:22 are parallel accounts of the sharing of the bread. Luke omits Mark's opening phrase, "And as they were eating . . ." Both accounts agree that Jesus took bread. Mark continues simply, "and blessed and broke it," whereas Luke says, "and when he had given

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<sup>3</sup> Aland, *Synopsis*.

thanks he broke it.” Both accounts agree that Jesus then gave the bread to the disciples. In Mark’s account, Jesus says, “Take; this is my body.” Luke expands this to, “This is my body which is given for you. Do this in remembrance of me.”

VII. In verse 22:20, Luke continues, “And likewise the cup after supper, saying, ‘This cup which is poured out for you is the new covenant in my blood.’” This is substantially shorter than Mark 14:23-24, “And he took a cup, and when he had given thanks he gave it to them, and they all drank of it. And he said to them, ‘This is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many.’” It is at this point that Mark includes Jesus’ words (discussed in item V. above) about not drinking again of the fruit of the vine. Note that Luke’s wording seems to indicate that this cup—the second one he mentions—is not shared immediately after the bread but rather at the end of the meal. Mark’s wording is not specific, but leaves the impression that the cup is shared immediately after the bread.

### **Liturgical Influences**

The next step in redaction criticism would normally be to attempt to discern whether there were patterns in the types of editorial changes that Luke made when using Mark as a source. That step will be postponed to allow consideration of whether liturgical practices familiar to the authors might have influenced their respective accounts of the Last Supper. These liturgical practices may have served as additional sources for the original author, or may have motivated later interpolations by those who copied the texts. In either event, the dependence of

Luke on Mark may have been diluted, so that caution is required in evaluating Luke's presumed motives for having made any observed changes.

The Last Supper narrative has links to two types of liturgical celebration: the Jewish Passover Seder meal and the Christian Eucharist. The authors of Mark and Luke would have used their knowledge of these rites in composing the passages being compared here. Their accounts would also have been influenced by how familiar they presumed their audience to be with the nature and structure of the celebrations.

The Passover Seder: As mentioned in item I. above, the Synoptic Gospels all portray the Last Supper as a Passover meal. The general structure of the first century Jewish Passover meal is known, though it is impossible to be specific about every detail.<sup>4</sup> Celebrated annually in Jerusalem, the Passover meal re-presented and relived the Jews' liberation from Egyptian bondage. "Associated with this reliving of their historic liberation was an anticipation of an eschatological, even messianic, deliverance."<sup>5</sup>

As part of the memorial meal, the paterfamilias would offer blessings and give explanations associated with the various elements of the meal. The ritual included three (or even four) ceremonial cups of wine, as well as the blessing, breaking, and sharing of bread. The fact that Luke's account of the Last Supper includes two cups would be entirely consistent with this type of meal, as would his account of Jesus' giving explanations of their significance.

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<sup>4</sup> Luke Timothy Johnson, *The Gospel of Luke*, Sacra Pagina Series, vol. 3 (Collegville: Liturgical, 1991) 341.

<sup>5</sup> Joseph A. Fitzmyer, S.J., *The Gospel According to Luke (X-XXIV)*, The Anchor Bible, vol. 28A (New York: Doubleday, 1985) 1390.

Jesus' explanation in Luke 22:15-18 clearly resonates with the expectation of eschatological deliverance which had long been associated with the meal, with the added implication that Jesus clearly anticipated the imminent fulfillment of that expectation, which he refers to as the coming of the kingdom of God.

Similarly, it was common for bread to be blessed, broken, and shared even at daily meals, but at the Passover Seder it was identified as “‘the bread of affliction’ (Exod16:3), which our fathers had to eat as they came out of Egypt. . . . Instead of identifying the unleavened [bread] as ‘the bread of affliction,’ Jesus identifies the bread with his ‘body,’ i.e. with himself.”<sup>6</sup> In Luke 22:19, he gives it a soteriological significance by specifying that it is “‘given for you.” He then reinterprets the Passover tradition of remembrance of deliverance from Egypt by encouraging his disciples to, “Do this in remembrance of me.”

The Passover meal traditionally ended with a cup of blessing. In Luke's account, the second cup is specified as being shared “after supper.” This would be in accord with the Jewish ritual.

The Christian Eucharist: Though the Last Supper is commonly understood to be the origin of the Christian celebration of the Eucharist, it is also understood that “The early Christian community's experience of the Eucharist has influenced the way the Last Supper is presented in the biblical accounts.”<sup>7</sup> As evidence for this, scholars point to the similarity between the Last Supper

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<sup>6</sup> Fitzmyer, *Luke (X-XXIV)*, 1391.

<sup>7</sup> Jerome Kodell, *The Eucharist in the New Testament* (Collegeville: Liturgical, 1988) 22.

accounts in the Gospels of Mark and Matthew on the one hand, and those in the Gospel of Luke and Paul's First Letter to the Corinthians on the other.

Although there is no evidence that Luke used Paul as a source, it is believed that each may be reflecting elements of an Antiochene Eucharistic liturgy with which he was independently familiar. The account common to Matthew and Mark is understood as reflecting the liturgical experience of Christians in Jerusalem.<sup>8</sup>

Other evidence that the Last Supper accounts have been impacted by liturgical practice comes from the history of the early development of the Eucharist, during which the place of the meal in the celebration tended to decrease.

At the beginning, its place was central, since Jesus invited his disciples to a real farewell meal with a benediction over the bread at the beginning of the meal, and a benediction over the wine at the end of the meal. During the apostolic period, the two liturgical actions over the bread and wine were moved to the end of the *agapè* meal and took place immediately after one another. Finally, in the post-apostolic period, the meal disappeared, being replaced by a symbolic ritual.<sup>9</sup>

The fact that Mark's account of the Last Supper portrays the liturgical actions over the bread and wine as occurring immediately after each other with no mention of a meal in between leads van Cangh to surmise that the account

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<sup>8</sup> Fitzmyer, *Luke (X-XXIV)*, 1391.

<sup>9</sup> Jean-Marie van Cangh, "Evolution in the Tradition of the Last Supper (Mk 14, 22-26 and par.)," in *Antikes Judentum und Frühes Christentum: Festschrift für Harmut Stegemann zum 65. Geburtstag* (Berlin; New York: Walter de Gruyter, 1999) 370.



reflects the liturgical practice of the early Christian community with which the Marcan evangelist was familiar.<sup>10</sup>

### **Redactional Patterns in Luke**

Having established that contemporary Jewish and Christian liturgical practices may have influenced the Last Supper accounts of both Mark and Luke, the next step in this redaction-critical study was to attempt to discern whether there were patterns in the types of editorial changes that Luke made when using Mark as a source. Because this paper focused on a single vignette, evidence for such patterns was sought in the literature.

Raymond Brown lists eight characteristic types of changes that the Lucan evangelist makes when using material from Mark.<sup>11</sup> Some are general changes, such as the fact that Luke improves on Mark's Greek, and states at the beginning his intention to provide "an orderly account" of the gospel events. Other patterns of editorial changes are evident only in certain passages of Luke. Of those, the one most relevant to the Last Supper account is that Luke "eliminates Mark's transcribed Aramaic names and words . . . presumably because they were not meaningful to the intended audience."<sup>12</sup> Though that particular change is not seen in this pericope, the motivation behind it, namely that Luke was writing for an audience that was not familiar with Jewish words and customs, may explain why he lengthened the descriptions and explanations of the actions over the bread and the cup, even adding a second cup. Luke may have felt it necessary

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<sup>10</sup> van Cangh, *Last Supper*, 371.

<sup>11</sup> Raymond E. Brown, *An Introduction to the New Testament* (New York: Doubleday, 1997) 263-264.

<sup>12</sup> Brown, *New Testament*, 265.

to convey to his intended non-Jewish audience a somewhat more detailed sense of the spirit and structure of the Passover meal.

Jerome Kodell points out that in Luke, “Meals and food are a more pervasive theme than in Mark and Matthew.”<sup>13</sup> It is Jesus’ open table-fellowship which “is a parable of God’s offer of life and salvation to all.”<sup>14</sup> The meal accounts all look toward the Last Supper at which Jesus’ body is given and his blood poured out in the ultimate act of service that brings the kingdom of God to fulfillment.

Catherine Murphy points out that, “Luke often broadens Mark’s references to crowds or Jews to include more generic groups of people, and sometimes explicitly Gentiles.”<sup>15</sup> Fitzmyer likewise comments that, though the concept of salvation as universal appears at times in the Gospels of Mark and Matthew, “the abundance of references in the Lucan Gospel (and in Acts) makes obvious the universalist concern of this evangelist.”<sup>16</sup> This reinforces the idea that the imminent coming of the kingdom of God will be salvific, not just for the Jewish people, but for all humanity.

### **Hypotheses Regarding the Soteriology of the Lucan Evangelist**

The redactional patterns in Luke mentioned in the previous section have convinced most scholars that the Lucan evangelist was a Greek speaker who was not an eyewitness to Christ. He shows great familiarity with both the style and the content of the Septuagint, but was unfamiliar with Palestinian geography

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<sup>13</sup> Kodell, *Eucharist*, 105.

<sup>14</sup> Kodell, *Eucharist*, 117.

<sup>15</sup> Murphy, *Baptist*, 37.

<sup>16</sup> Joseph A. Fitzmyer, S.J., *The Gospel According to Luke (I-IX)*, The Anchor Bible, vol. 28 (New York: Doubleday, 1981) 187.

and with some Jewish customs and practices. Brown suggests that he may have been “a Gentile who was . . . converted or attracted to Judaism some years before he was evangelized.”<sup>17</sup> The evangelist’s use in Luke 22:19-20 of a eucharistic formula believed to be associated with the church at Antioch has led to speculation that he may have lived in that city.<sup>18</sup>

This redaction-critical study, focused on Luke’s Last Supper passage, led to several hypotheses concerning the evangelist’s understanding of the saving work of Jesus:

- **Luke emphasized Jesus’ expectation that the coming of the kingdom of God was imminent and that Jesus’ own suffering would be instrumental in bringing it about.**

This hypothesis is supported by the redactions listed as Items III, VI, and VII above. Luke’s account begins with Jesus’ statement to his disciples that he has earnestly desired to eat this Passover with them before he suffers, and that he will not eat it again “until it is fulfilled in the kingdom of God” (Luke 22:16).<sup>19</sup> Because it is an addition that has no parallel in Mark, Luke must have included it to emphasize Jesus’ consciousness of his impending death and of his sense that his death would in some way bring about the coming of the kingdom.

It is solely Luke who depicts Jesus as a suffering Messiah, as the Messiah who “must suffer” (Luke 24:26). . . . He further depicts him as the prophet aware that he has to perish in Jerusalem

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<sup>17</sup> Brown, *New Testament*, 268.

<sup>18</sup> Brown, *New Testament*, 269.

<sup>19</sup> Aland, *Synopsis*.

(Luke 13:33), and Acts 13:28-30 clearly explains that what happened to him was divinely related to God's salvific plan.<sup>20</sup>

Fitzmyer goes on to point out that Luke is the only Synopsist who has preserved the eucharistic words over the bread and the cup with the added phrases, "which is given for you," and "which is poured out for you," which scholars have recognized as having sacrificial nuances.<sup>21</sup>

- **Luke made a connection between Jesus' practice of open table-fellowship and what it meant for the kingdom of God to come to fulfillment.**

This is supported by Items II - VII and by the pervasive theme of meals and food in Luke that was mentioned in the previous section. Jesus' first words in the Lucan Last Supper passage express his earnest desire to eat with his disciples. Unlike Mark, Luke does not have the meal begin with Jesus' prediction of his betrayal but transposes that until later. "Luke is extraordinarily circumspect. He does not identify Judas as the betrayer or draw attention to him. The one who has invited Satan into his heart will not dominate this meal (Luke 22:3)."<sup>22</sup> At this meal, the eschatological hopes of this ancient Jewish rite would be fulfilled.

The Last Supper is one of many Lucan meal stories and is the one to which all of the others look forward. "Within the Lucan Gospel this supper

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<sup>20</sup> Fitzmyer, *Luke (I-IX)*, 220.

<sup>21</sup> Fitzmyer, *Luke (I-IX)*, 220.

<sup>22</sup> Johnson, *Luke*, 342.

scene is the 'last' in another sense, for the evangelist has been preparing for this climax by the foreshadowing in six other banquet/dinner scenes."<sup>23</sup>

Fitzmyer adds that an echo of this supper will be heard in Luke's account of the post-Resurrection meal at Emmaus. All of these Lucan meals have soteriological implications.

They reveal Jesus as the one who welcomes all, serves all, feeds all, is willing to eat with all—and challenges his followers to do likewise. He commands them to invite, not those who can repay their hospitality, but the crippled, the lame, and the blind. He promises that those who follow his instruction "will be repaid at the resurrection of the just" (Luke 14, 14).

The instruction led one of Jesus' fellow guests to exclaim, "Blessed is the one who will dine in the kingdom of God."

When the Christians followed Jesus' injunction their mission also became a sacrament. . . . Their assembly became a living witness to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus (Acts 4:33) and a sacrament of the kingdom of God (Luke 24:36-53).<sup>24</sup>

Luke proclaims that the kingdom of God is already present within human history whenever the Christian community reflects the nurturing, all-encompassing love and service of others which Jesus himself demonstrated at his earthly meals.

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<sup>23</sup> Fitzmyer, *Luke (X-XXIV)*, 1392.

<sup>24</sup> Eugene LaVerdiere, SSS, *Dining in the Kingdom of God: The Origins of the Eucharist in the Gospel of Luke* (Chicago: LTP [Liturgy Training Publications], 1994) 194.

- **Luke made use of the Jewish understanding of remembrance, as expressed in the Passover ritual, to express the significance of Jesus' actions over the bread and the cup at the Last Supper.**

This hypothesis is supported by Item VI. When Luke adds the words, "Do this in memory of me," to Mark's account of Jesus' sharing his bread/body with the disciples, he is building upon the Passover concept of anamnesis. Anamnesis means more than simple remembering. It implies that those who are remembering become present to the original event. As the Jews celebrated Passover each year, they became present to God's original saving liberation at the time of the Exodus and were once again formed into the nation of Israel, God's Chosen people. In his account of the Last Supper Luke presents Jesus as the one who will mediate the coming of God's kingdom into human history by giving his own body—his life—in the service of all. For all time, those who obey Jesus' command to share his bread/body in remembrance of his saving act will thereby experience the kingdom of God present to them here and now in the world.

### **Conclusions**

This redaction-critical study of Luke's Last Supper account revealed the evangelist's insights into what Jesus meant by the coming of the kingdom of God and into the way the celebration of the Eucharist would continue to make Jesus present to the world for all time. Luke used familiar settings of human meals, and in particular the ancient symbolism of the Passover ritual meal, to proclaim the good news that God has entered human history once and for all. Every person is

invited to meet Christ and to become Christ for others by following his command to remember—in a very profound sense—what he did at the Last Supper.

### **Pastoral Implications**

An understanding of the sacred scriptures is vital for anyone who works in pastoral ministry. People have heard the scriptures proclaimed every time they have attended Mass. They can quote passages from memory and they wonder about apparent contradictions or unfamiliar concepts. They wonder and they ask, and the person whom they ask will be someone they recognize as a pastoral minister.

This redaction-critical study has given me a deeper appreciation of the reason scripture passages may sometimes be obscure or even appear to conflict. My previous understanding centered on the idea that the Bible was not a single book but a collection of manuscripts written by many different people, in several different languages, over a period of many centuries, and all of this long before the invention of the printing press simplified the process of producing accurate copies of documents. To this I can now add additional insights based on the nature of redaction criticism. Norman Perrin points out that “not the least of the services of redaction criticism” is that it helps us understand the true nature of the literary form we call a “Gospel.”<sup>25</sup>

In revealing the extent to which the theological viewpoint of the evangelist or transmitter of the tradition has played a part in the formation of the Gospel material, [redaction criticism] is forcing us to recognize that a Gospel does not portray the history

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<sup>25</sup> Norman Perrin, *What is Redaction Criticism?*, ed. Dan O. Via, Jr. (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1969) 75.

of the ministry of Jesus from A.D. 27–30, or whatever the dates may actually have been, but the history of Christian experience in any and every age; . . . however, it is also clear that there is real continuity between those two things.<sup>26</sup>

From a pastoral point of view, this provides an excellent avenue by which to approach the concerns of those who may have become overly focused on specific scriptural phrases while minimizing the significance of their own day-to-day faith experiences. Perrin's insight respects both the faith experiences of those who composed the gospel message and of those who may now be struggling to understand it. It is very helpful to be able to point out to such people that the reason passages may be unclear or even appear to conflict may well lie in the vast disparities between our life experience and that of the evangelists or even between the experiences and intentions of the evangelists themselves.

With regard to insights I may have gained from the particular passage which I studied, I cannot resist quoting G. B. Caird who said that "the Lucan account of the Last Supper is a scholar's paradise and a beginner's nightmare."<sup>27</sup> Since I regard myself as more of a beginner than a scholar, I found myself somewhat overwhelmed by the quantity of material available in the scholars' "paradise." Nevertheless, I found Luke's insights into the meaning of the coming of the kingdom and into the opportunity each of us has to participate in its fulfillment by celebrating the Eucharist to be both intellectually rewarding and spiritually enriching.

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<sup>26</sup> Perrin, *Redaction Criticism*, 75.

<sup>27</sup> G. B. Caird, *The Gospel of St. Luke* (Baltimore: Penguin, 1963) 237, as quoted by Fitzmyer, *Luke (X-XXIV)*, 1386.



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