

Superabundant Table Fellowship in the Kingdom: *the feeding of the five thousand and the meal motif in Luke*

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Introduction

Apart from the resurrection, the only miracle that is recorded in all four Gospels is the Feeding of the Five Thousand. It is immediately obvious that the Evangelists wanted to draw different lessons from the story. In Mark, as in Matthew, the Feeding Miracle leads immediately to the incident of Jesus walking on the lake. The point of this juxtaposition in Mark is clear when we read: ‘when they saw him walking on the sea they thought it was a ghost, and cried out ... And he got into the boat with them and the wind ceased. And they were utterly astounded, for they did not understand about the loaves, but their hearts were hardened.’ (Mk. 6:49-51)¹ These two incidents occur in a long section in the gospel (starting in 3:13) emphasizing the slowness of the disciples to understand the identity of Christ and the cost of being his disciples. This section culminates in Peter’s confession of Christ and his refusal to accept that the Christ had to suffer (Mk. 9:29f).

In contrast, John tells us of the failure of understanding on the part of the *crowd*: immediately after he had fed the five thousand, ‘perceiving then that they were about to come and take him by force and make him king, Jesus withdrew again to the mountain by himself.’ (Jn. 6:15) When the crowd finally tracked Jesus down, it was the occasion for him to declare, ‘I am the bread of life; he who comes to me shall not hunger ...’ (Jn. 6:35); in other words, the physical bread, like the physical element in other Johannine miracles, was a sign (*semeion*, 6:14).

The centrality of the Feeding pericope in Luke

The context of this miracle in Luke (9:12-17) is yet again distinct: it immediately leads to Peter’s confession of Jesus as the Christ (9:18-20). The long track of material in Mark and Matthew between these two incidents is notably absent. This ‘great omission’ suggests that Luke wants to couple the Feeding Miracle very directly to the issue of Jesus’ identity. This idea receives further support when we note that the story in Luke is in fact ‘sandwiched’ between two pericopes dealing with the question of who Jesus was. Before the Feeding story, we read:

Now Herod the tetrarch heard of all that was done, and he was perplexed, because it was said by some that John had been raised from the dead, by some that Elijah had appeared, and by others that one of the old prophets had risen. Herod said, “John I beheaded; but who is this about whom I hear such things?” (9:7-9)

¹ Unless otherwise stated, biblical quotations come from the Revised Standard Version.

Immediately after the Feeding story, on the other hand, Luke tells us this:

Now it happened that as he was praying alone the disciples were with him; and he asked them, “Who do the people² say that I am?” And they answered, “John the Baptist; but others say, Elijah; and others, that one of the old prophets has risen.” And he said to them, “But who do you say that I am?” And Peter answered, “The Christ of God.” (9:19-20)

This ‘A-B-A’ setting for the Feeding Miracle is unique among the Evangelists: this story, sandwiched as it is between two episodes in which Jesus was wrongly identified as John the Baptist, Elijah or one of the prophets³, evidently offers a vital key for sorting out the widespread confusion. Immediately after the Feeding pericope, Peter correctly identified Jesus as the Christ.⁴

The link between the Feeding Miracle and Jesus’ question about his own identity is further strengthened by an apparently minor difference between Luke and Matthew/Mark. The latter’s version of Jesus’ question reads: ‘Who do people (*anthropoi*) say ...?’ Luke, however, has ‘Who do the crowds (*hoi ochloi*) say I am?’⁵ The choice of *ochloi* rather than *anthropoi* creates a clear resonance in the reader’s mind with the Feeding pericope, where *hoi ochloi* featured throughout – they followed Jesus (9:11), it was they whom the disciples proposed to send away (9:12), and abundant food was set before them (9:16).⁶ Now, in the immediately next pericope, Jesus wanted to know ‘Who do *hoi ochloi* say I am?’ The answer came, ‘Some say John the Baptist; others say Elijah ...’ No, *hoi ochloi* have not understood, despite what has just happened. The particular poignancy of Jesus’ next question to his disciples in this Lucan context becomes clear: ‘Who do you say that I am?’⁷

I therefore agree with Howard Marshall that Luke deliberately and ‘positively’ wanted to ‘move straight from the Feeding Miracle ... to the christological confession which was *aroused by it*,’ and that the Feeding Miracle in its Lucan context ‘constitutes a decisive revelation of Jesus to the disciples.’⁸ But why is the Feeding Miracle for Luke a ‘decisive revelation’? Below I investigate this question in two

² Greek, *hoi ochloi*, ‘the crowds’ – see later for the significance of this word choice.

³ The verbatim repeat (in Greek) of ‘that certain prophets of old rose again’ helps to ensure a tight coupling of the two pericopes in the reader’s mind.

⁴ The prediction of the passion which follows does *not* include Peter’s objection to the idea of Christ’s suffering – the slowness of the disciples to understand was definitely *not* uppermost in Luke’s mind.

⁵ A number of manuscripts in fact have *anthropoi* in Luke; this is clearly a mistake. The translations here are from the New International Version; the RSV has ‘people’ in all three Synoptic accounts.

⁶ In vv. 11, 12, and 16, the Greek has *ochlos/ochloi*; English versions rather randomly alternate between ‘the crowd(s)’ and ‘the people’.

⁷ Thus Fitzmyer cannot be wholly correct when he says: ‘What is striking in the Synoptic account of the feeding of the five thousand ... is the absence of any audience reaction of the miracle. Contrast John 6:14-15. This absence is particularly noteworthy in Luke 9:17, after which comes the omission of Marcan material and the rather abrupt introduction of Peter’s confession of Jesus as God’s Messiah.’ J. A. Fitzmyer, *The Gospel According to Luke I-IX* (New York: Doubleday, 1981), p. 769. Marshall concurs: ‘Nothing is said about the reaction of the crowd to what had happened (contrast Jn. 6:14).’ I. H. Marshall, *The Gospel of Luke* (Exeter: Paternoster, 1978), p. 363. If I am right, then there is at least an implied Lucan criticism of the crowds’ failure to understand – the transition to Peter’s confession is not as ‘abrupt’ as Fitzmyer suggests; neither would it be fair to say that Luke completely ignored the issue of ‘audience reaction’.

⁸ Marshall, *op. cit.*, pp. 364; 357; the italics are mine.

steps. First, a close reading of the pericope itself suggests some answers. Secondly, I will consider Luke's account in the context his well-known interest in the theme of eating and table fellowship.

A close reading of the Feeding pericope in Luke

Turning first to a close reading of the Feeding Miracle in Luke, I suggest that three minor textual differences with the version in Mark and Matthew (which are close to being identical) provide clues to how Luke wants us to understand this incident. First, consider Luke's version of the disciples' opening statement:

Now the day began to wear away; and the twelve came and said to him, "Send the crowd away to go into the villages and country round about, to lodge and get provisions; for we are here in a lonely place."

The underlined portion is uniquely Lucan. Long ago, Cadbury had already pointed out that this was one instance of Luke's special interest in 'the matter of lodging'.⁹ But is there any more to it than that? It is striking that Jesus completely ignored this aspect of the people's apparent plight – no multiplication of tents occurred. The failure to pick up the matter of lodging was taken as one example of 'editing fatigue' on Luke's part in one recent study.¹⁰ Another interpretation is possible. The pointed silence of Jesus on the matter of accommodation could lead the reader to infer that going to surrounding villages for shelter was *not* impractical – the disciples were perhaps lacking in faith, but they were not stupid! In that case, it would not have been impractical to travel to these places for food, either: Luke's Jesus did not multiply bread primarily to satisfy a physical need.

A second Lucan linguistic feature supports this conclusion. The Synoptics agree that the crowds followed Jesus despite his wish to be alone. Having been thus thwarted, Jesus nevertheless 'had compassion on (the crowds)' (Mt. 14:14/Mk. 6:34). While not explicitly stated, the subsequent feeding fits under the rubric of Christ's compassion on the *needy* crowds. Luke puts it differently: 'He welcomed them' (9:11b). This choice of word (*apodechomai*, which occurs only in Luke/Acts in the New Testament¹¹) at least downplays the suggestion of 'need'. I therefore agree with Fitzmyer that 'Luke has suppressed the motive of compassion that one finds in Mark.'¹² This is consonant with the suggestion that the Feeding Miracle in Luke is not primarily about meeting needs.

What, then, is the Lucan emphasis on this miracle? Another apparently minor textual difference with Mark and Matthew may provide a clue. Mark and Matthew ended their narrative by telling us the number of people fed ('five thousand men', Mk. 6:44; cf. Mt. 14:21, where it also says 'besides women and children'). Luke, however, gives this piece of information in the middle of the story, as a rather awkward parenthetical

⁹ H. J. Cadbury, *The Making of Luke-Acts* (London: Macmillan, 1927), p. 249.

¹⁰ M. Goodacre, *NTS* 44, 45-48 (1998), 'Fatigue in the Synoptics'.

¹¹ Interestingly, the only other Gospel occurrence is in 8:40 – Jesus returned from ministering in a predominantly Gentile region; the crowds *welcomed* him. A little later, the Twelve returned from their ministry, the crowds followed Jesus, who *welcomed* them (9:11). There is thus a recurrence of the 'return-welcome' motif in close textual proximity, linked by *apodechomai*.

¹² Fitzmyer, *op. cit.*, p. 764, who concluded from this that Luke had Eucharistic symbolism in mind.

explanation to the disciples' suggestion of sending the crowd away to find food (9:14a; some translations indeed have this within parenthesis). This enables Luke to end with: 'They all ate and were satisfied, and the disciples picked up twelve basketfuls of broken pieces that were left over.' (9:17) For Luke, the feeding of the five thousand is therefore primarily a miracle of superabundance. Marshall agrees on this point:¹³ 'The final emphasis falls ... upon the abundance of the provision.'¹⁴ Note further that while the feeding took place in 'a lonely place', it nevertheless had elements one would expect of formal table fellowship. The guests reclined (vv. 14, 15, 'sit' in all English versions), Jesus the host gave thanks (v. 16a), and the disciples as servants set the food before the guests (v. 16b).¹⁵ The Lucan Feeding Miracle is therefore a story about *superabundant table fellowship*.

Luke's treatment of food and drink

For Luke, then, Jesus presiding over a gracious miracle of superabundant table fellowship provides a vital key to his identity. To understand why this is the case, we should consider his wider treatment of eating and drinking. It is well known that Luke has a special interest in this theme.¹⁶ Robert Karris lists no less than 51 relevant passages.¹⁷ As he aptly notes: 'there is considerable truth in what one wag said about Luke's Gospel: Jesus is either going to a meal, at a meal, or coming from a meal.'¹⁸

To my mind, Luke's abundant use of 'meal imagery' adds up to this:

- (1) The good news of God's unconditional acceptance of sinners is *materially fulfilled* by Jesus' table fellowship with all kinds of 'undesirables' without regard to the meal conventions of the Pharisees.
- (2) The abundant provision at these shared meals is symbolic of the *joy* of God's *uncalculating* forgiveness, and a pointer to the eschatological *messianic banquet*.

From these two points, it inevitably follows that

- (3) Jesus' offer of table fellowship are also occasions of *judgement*, and
- (4) Jesus' practice of table fellowship provides an example of *service* to those who would be his followers.¹⁹

¹³ Marshall, *op. cit.*, p. 363. As support, Marshall notes, *inter alia*, that Luke places *pantes* (all ate) in v. 17 in an emphatic position, and that his 'improvement' on the Greek of Mark 8.7 uses *perisseuo*, 'to be left over' – other uses of the word in Luke (12:15; 15:17; 21:4) have the meaning 'to be abundant, plentiful.'

¹⁴ The thematic comparison with John is therefore the wedding at Cana (Jn. 4:1-11), where Jesus miraculously turned six stone jars of water into good wine. If the conjecture that these referred to jars used in ritual purification is correct, then we are talking about in excess of 100 gallons.

¹⁵ These elements are common to all three Synoptic accounts. Luke's unique choice of word for 'recline' in vv. 14, 15, *kataklyno*, probably does not have any significance (see Marshall, *op. cit.*, q.v.).

¹⁶ See, for example, Robert J. Karris, *Luke: Artist and Theologian* (New York: Paulist, 1985), chapter 3, and Dennis E. Smith's essay in *JBL* 106, 613-638 (1987), 'Table fellowship as a literary motif in the Gospel of Luke'.

¹⁷ Karris, *op. cit.*, pp. 49-51.

¹⁸ Karris, *op. cit.*, p. 47.

¹⁹ My analysis is chiefly inspired by Karris' two headings: (i) 'In Jesus God demonstrates his fidelity to his hungry creation by feeding it' and (ii) 'Jesus is a glutton and a drunkard'. His heading (i) overlaps with to my (2), while my (1) and (3) are treated together under Karris' heading (ii). Karris only discussed the Feeding Miracle under his heading (i), and did not show how it illuminates Luke's use of 'meal imagery' across the board. I have also been influenced by Dennis E. Smith's essay. Smith's purpose is primarily literary rather than theological – he wants to discuss Luke's use of the table

The significance of table fellowship for Jesus' proclamation of the good news is well summarised by Jeremias:²⁰ 'In Judaism ... table-fellowship means fellowship before God, for the eating of a piece of broken bread by everyone who shares in a meal brings out the fact that they all have a share in the blessing which the master of the house had spoken over the unbroken bread. Thus Jesus' meals with the publicans and sinners ... are not only events on a social level ... but had an even deeper significance. They are an expression of the mission and message of Jesus ... The inclusion of sinners in the community of salvation, achieved in table-fellowship, is the most meaningful expression of the message of the redeeming love of God.' In other words, Jesus' table fellowship with all and sundry was an 'acted parable' of God's unconditional acceptance. This motif comes across to a certain extent in Matthew and Mark, but Luke emphasizes it, and deploys unique material to this end, such as the command to invite 'the poor, the maimed, the lame, the blind' to banquets (14:13) – for both Jews and Greeks, these were 'undesirable' at table.²¹

God's unconditional acceptance occasions joyous celebration. Oriental celebration is inseparable from banqueting – eating and drinking beyond the mere satiation of physical need and involving the widest possible community.²² Thus, when Levi became a follower of Jesus, Luke tells us that he threw a 'great feast' (5:28)²³ Perhaps of more paradigmatic significance for my purposes here, when the prodigal returns home, his father orders his servants to 'bring the fatted calf and kill it, and let us eat and make merry' (15:23).²⁴ Here, the culturally-informed comments of Kenneth Bailey are important:²⁵

The selection of a calf rather than a goat or a sheep means that most, if not all, the village will be present that evening. The entire animal will spoil in a few hours if not eaten. ... The main point of killing such a large animal is to be able to invite the entire community. ... This size feast requires over a hundred people in attendance to eat the animal. ... The calf means at least a joy so great that it must be celebrated with the grandest banquet imaginable.

In other words, we have a 'feeding of the hundred(s)' with possibly some left over! Such superabundance is a picture of the way Jesus actually relates to 'sinners' and outcastes – his acceptance of them was in no way calculated or 'tit-for-tat'; rather, he offered a 'prodigal' forgiveness²⁶. Writ large, the joyful communal celebratory meal

fellowship motif in the light of the 'symposium' tradition in classical literature. This he does under five headings. The last two, on the theme of 'service', overlap with my heading (4).

²⁰ J. Jeremias, *New Testament Theology: The Proclamation of Jesus* (New York: Scribner's, 1971).

Quoted in Karris, *op. cit.*, pp. 58-59.

²¹ Karris, *op. cit.*, pp. 62-62, gives documentary evidence for this claim.

²² Another Lucan theme, 'joy', often occurs together with the food motif in uniquely Lucan pericopes, e.g. in Mary's joyful 'Magnificat', she tells us that God 'has filled the hungry with good things'.

²³ In Luke, Levi *epoiesen dochen megalen* (made a great feast), while Matthew and Mark merely informed us that Jesus was reclining (at table) in Levi/Matthew's house.

²⁴ Note also that the shepherd and the woman in the first two 'lost and found' stories in Chapter 15 said to friends and neighbours: 'Rejoice with me!' In the oriental setting, a celebratory feast must be implied.

²⁵ Kenneth E. Bailey, *Poet and Peasant & Through Peasant Eyes – A Literary-Cultural Approach to the Parables in Luke* (Grant Rapids: W. B. Eerdmans, combined edition 1983); Part 1 ('Poet and Peasants') pp. 186-187.

²⁶ 'Tit-for-tat' and 'prodigal' are Karris' description of God's justice as portrayed by Luke. Karris, *op. cit.*, pp. 32-33.

for God's redeemed becomes the messianic banquet: 'On this mountain the LORD of hosts will make for all peoples a feast of fat things' (Isaiah 25:6f).

The rejection of God's 'prodigal' offer of salvation brings judgement. This is clear from all four Gospels. Luke again deploys the theme of food and drink to bring home this point. Early on in this Gospel, Jesus criticises the 'men of this generation' for their failure to 'tune in' to his 'acted parables' of eating and drinking:

They are like children sitting in the market place and calling to one another, 'We piped to you, and you did not dance; we wailed, and you did not weep.' For John the Baptist has come eating no bread and drinking no wine; and you say, 'He has a demon.' The Son of man has come eating and drinking; and you say, 'Behold, a glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners!' (7:31-35)

Uniquely in Luke Jesus also repeatedly dined with Pharisees (7:36ff, 11:37ff, 14:1ff), who in each case were shown up as being hostile to Jesus' mission and therefore, *de facto*, under judgement. Karris' comments on the parable of the great banquet in 14:15-24 can serve to sum up this theme:²⁷

The gathering of the religious leaders "to eat bread" together is for them an "acted parable" of the nature of the messianic banquet. Their closed table fellowship reveals those whom God has elected and those whom he has rejected. As Charles W. F. Smith says so pointedly: "It is, then, in reply to this attitude (smug self-confidence) that Luke represents the parable as being spoken, as if Jesus had turned to his sanctimonious neighbor and said, 'Yes, but let me tell you a story.' In this context it is not merely effective *but well-neigh devastating*."

Another Lucan pericope (13:24-27) adds to the 'devastating' effect of Jesus' table fellowship with Pharisees. Jesus enjoins his listeners to 'strive to enter by the narrow door'. After the door is shut, some will knock and say, '*We ate and drank in your presence, and you taught in our streets.*' But they will receive the answer: 'I tell you, I do not know where you come from; depart from me, all you workers of iniquity!'

Finally, Jesus' acts of joyful table fellowship in Luke teach us about service. Here again, Luke adds a unique 'food and drink' flavour to a common synoptic theme. Thus Jesus tells the seventy that sharing table fellowship with whoever that is willing is an essential part of sharing the good news of the Kingdom (10:7). Later on, we read that it is the proper role of the servant to prepare supper and serve it to the master who sits (literally, reclines) at table, before eating and drinking himself (17:7-10). Perhaps most significantly, Luke places the disciples' arguing about greatness during the last supper, where Jesus' familiar admonition has a unique 'food and drink' ending – 'let the greatest among you become as the youngest, and the leader as one who serves. For which is the greater, one who sits at table, or one who serves? Is it not the one who sits at table? But I am among you as one who serves.' The last statement should be read in the light of an earlier saying to the effect that watchful servants will be rewarded by their returning master serving them at table (12:35-38).²⁸

²⁷ Karris, *op. cit.*, p. 63. The quote from Charles Smith comes from *The Jesus of the Parables* (Philadelphia: United Church Press, 1975), p. 126. The italics are mine.

²⁸ One aspect of Luke's use of the meal motif not explicitly reflected in my four-fold scheme is that of justice, e.g. as in the story of Lazarus and the rich man (16:19ff). Feeding the needy, of course, can be seen as part of the disciples' service. How we treat the needy in our eating and drinking also overlaps with the theme of judgement.

The Feeding Miracle in the context of Luke's treatment of food and drink

Luke therefore has a varied use of the food motif, and Karris is right to say that in one sense, the Lucan Jesus 'got himself crucified because of the way he ate.'²⁹ It is in *this* Gospel that we find the Feeding Miracle sandwiched between two pericopes pointedly raising the question about Jesus' identity. I now turn to show how the various strands of Luke's use of the food motif are focussed and illuminated by the story of the Feeding of the Five Thousand.

At first sight, the motif of Jesus' table fellowship with various social and religious 'undesirables' is not obviously present in the Feeding story. However, in a study of eating and drinking in Luke from the perspective of social anthropology, Jerome Neyrey points out that

A "desert place" is unsuitable for eating because it would preclude concern for: (a) proper foods which were correctly tithed and properly prepared, (b) proper persons with whom one might eat, and (c) proper water etc. for purification rites. A "desert place," a chaotic place which admits none of the principles of an ordered cosmos, cannot in any sense meet the requirements of proper place for meals. Even at a proper meal, there would also be concern over the seating arrangement of those eating, a ranking in terms of some value or honor system.³⁰

In other words, with this many at an impromptu feast, there could have been no 'vetting' of the guests – in fact many of those named in the list of undesirables alluded to in 14:13 must have been present.³¹ There presumably was no seating plan – compare Jesus' criticism of the Pharisees' fondness for rank-ordering at table (14:7f). There could have been no facility for ritual washing – compare the gripe by one of the Pharisees who invited Jesus for dinner that he did not wash properly (11:38). Neither could the food have been tithed. In other words, this was a meal that would have raised Pharasaic eye brows for multiple reasons. Conversely, Jesus' impromptu feeding of this crowd in a deserted place can be seen as an acted parable of God's unconditional acceptance on the grandest possible scale.

In the Gospel of Levi's 'great banquet' and the Prodigal's father's 'fatted calf', the Feeding Miracle can be seen as the one grand feast to top all of the others put together. This is the feast of which all of the others reported by Luke are but reflections. In this sense, therefore, we can say that Luke's Feeding Miracle has more claims to be a prefiguring of the eschatological messianic banquet than in the other two Synoptics. This is, of course, consonant with my reading of the internal evidence from the pericope itself, which suggests that Luke wanted to highlight the element of 'superabundance'.

Again, the motif of judgement does not appear obvious in the Feeding Miracle. To see that it is present at least implicitly, we need to recall the Lucan saying to the effect

²⁹ Karris, *op. cit.*, p. 70.

³⁰ Jerome H. Neyrey, Chapter 13, in *The Social World of Luke-Acts* (Peabody: Hendrikson, 1991), ed. Jerome H. Neyrey.

³¹ The presence of people with handicaps can certainly be inferred from Jesus' healing activities prior to the Feeding Miracle.

that not all who ate and drank in Jesus' presence would have the door opened to them (13:24-27). The largest group of people who could claim to have had the privilege of eating and drinking in Jesus' presence were presumably *hoi ochloi* in the Feeding Miracle. As I have pointed out above, the immediate next pericope had Jesus pointedly asking, 'Who do *hoi ochloi* say that I am?' The answer was not encouraging: even after the Feeding Miracle, they still thought that Jesus was John the Baptist or Elijah – the arch-ascetics. At least those 'men of this generation' criticised by Jesus back in Chapter 7 had got as far as perceiving a fundamental difference between the eating and drinking habits of John the Baptist and Jesus! No, *hoi ochloi* had not understood. When brought to mind in the context of Jesus' parable of judgement in 13:24-27, the Feeding Miracle raises the 'well-neigh devastating' question: how many of those five thousand would be told, 'Depart from me.'?

Finally, the Feeding story is rich in resonances with Luke's treatment of the theme of service using the food motif. On the most obvious level, the disciples were the servants: they were the ones who 'girded their loins' and served food to the seated guests – compare 17:7-10. But we could also ask: what was Jesus' role in all of this? Of course he was the host – it was the host's responsibility and privilege to bless and give thanks (9:16). But on another level, Jesus stood with the disciples in their role as servants. Recall 22:27 – For which is the greater, one who sits at table, or one who serves? Is it not the one who sits at table? In the Feeding story, it was the 5000 who reclined³² and presumably ate first (again, recall 17:7-10). Jesus was indeed among them as the one who served.

The Feeding of the Five Thousand is therefore a miracle of superabundant food in which Jesus the messiah-servant-judge unconditionally accepted all and sundry into table fellowship without reference to any rules or rituals. Almost all of these elements could be read into the Feeding Miracle recorded in any of the four Gospels. I believe, however, that it is only in Luke, with his widespread and varied use of the food motif, that we are encouraged to draw out these elements and consider them in a unified fashion. Read this way, the story Luke took to hold the key to Jesus' identity does indeed illuminate the rest of his Gospel, while his treatment of table fellowship in the rest of the Gospel also brings certain features of the Feeding story into sharp relief.

Conclusion: the Feeding Miracle, Emmaus and the disciples' mission

Few now subscribe to the once-popular suggestion that the Feeding Miracle was invented by the early Church based on their Eucharistic practices. Nevertheless, most commentators detect varying degrees of Eucharistic overtone in each Evangelist's account. Fitzmyer's conclusion is typical: 'the parallels between the various Synoptic accounts of the feeding and the eucharistic institution are too close to be explained otherwise.'³³

While there are undoubtedly Eucharistic overtones in the Feeding story, I would like to argue that in Luke, the Feeding Miracle looks forward primarily *not* to the upper

³² Jesus broke the bread to give to the disciples immediately after he had blessed the food. Given that Jews always prayed standing, the natural inference of the first readers/listeners would be that Jesus was standing in the midst of the reclining crowd distributing bread to the disciples. He was the servant among them.

³³ Fitzmyer, *op. cit.*, p. 764.

room (22:14-23), but to the Emmaus road (24:13-35). The similarity in wording between the thanksgivings for the bread in 9:16 and 24:30 is at least as strong as that between the former and 22:19. Moreover, Luke talks about the day ‘wearing away’ in each case in reporting the time of the meal³⁴. A reader of the Greek text of the Emmaus pericope is likely to pick up this linguistic resonance with the Feeding Miracle. In this context, Caird’s comments of the Emmaus story are illuminating:

The disciples recognized Jesus by the way in which he broke the bread. Luke and his friends would no doubt find in the solemn scene at the supper table an anticipation of their own eucharistic observances. Yet these two disciples had not been present at the last supper. The memories which Jesus’ action evoked must have been of other meals which he had held with his friends, perhaps, like the last supper, as anticipations of the messianic banquet of the kingdom.³⁵

According to my reading of Luke, the most prominent of these ‘other meals’ must be the Feeding Miracle.

It is possible, therefore, that the primary forward reference of the Feeding story in Luke is not so much the last supper, but the resurrection appearance on the Emmaus road. If this is indeed so, then it is intriguing to note an inversion of roles in the two episodes. In Chapter 9, Jesus welcomed and fed the crowds whom he unexpectedly met. On the way to Emmaus, two disciples welcomed and fed one whom they thought was a stranger (24:16) – they were beginning to follow the example Jesus set them by his practice of table fellowship. In so doing, they entertained the resurrected Christ himself. Read thus, the Feeding Miracle does not so much point (via the upper room) to the early Church’s Eucharistic practices, but to the early Church’s mission (via the Emmaus road).

In the light of this, we may expect that the food motif to be prominent also in Acts. This is indeed the case. Note, for example, the problem of food distribution to widows (6:1f) and Peter’s vision of clean and unclean foods (Chapter 10). More generally, we know that food practices was an important issue in the early Church. If Karris is right to say that Jesus ‘got himself crucified because of the way he ate,’ then the disciples showed that they were his followers by the way *they*, in turn, ate and fed others. This has an interesting implication for the study of early Christian morality. Wayne Meeks suggests that ‘we cannot begin to understand the process of moral formation until we see that it is inextricable from the process by which distinctive communities were taking shape.’³⁶ If that is the case, then the role of a ‘new table fellowship’ in this process should repay careful study.³⁷

Postscript: towards a Lucan sacramental theology?

Robert Karris, himself a Catholic, suggests that ‘readers who are Roman Catholics may have special difficulty in appreciating Luke’s use of the motif of food because of

³⁴ Fitzmyer (*op. cit.*, p. 766) and Marshall (*op. cit.*, 360) both note this fact, but without further comments either under Chapter 9 or under Chapter 24.

³⁵ G. B. Caird, *Saint Luke* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1963), p. 259.

³⁶ Wayne A. Meeks, *The Origins of Christian Morality – The First Two Centuries* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993), p. 5.

³⁷ Meeks himself has a short discussion, pp. 96-98, but largely limited to Eucharistic practices. The essays in Neyrey, *op. cit.*, offer very suggestive pointers in this direction.

a tendency to reduce almost all occurrences of this motif to eucharistic references.³⁸ If commentators' discussion of 'Eucharistic overtone' in the Feeding Miracle is anything to go by, this danger is not confined to Catholics. Nevertheless, Luke does rather uniquely give high prominence to the theme of food and feeding. One may therefore wish to ask whether he has anything to teach us about sacraments in general. A detailed treatment of this question will take me far beyond the primary focus of this essay. A short answer, in the form of a quotation from one of the most prominent Eastern Orthodox theologians in twentieth-century East-West dialogue, Alexander Schmemmann, can nevertheless be given.³⁹

The world was created as "matter", the material of one all-embracing eucharist, and man[kind] was created as the priest of this cosmic sacrament. Men [and women] understand all this instinctively if not rationally. Centuries of secularism have failed to transfer eating into something strictly utilitarian. Food is still treated with reverence. A meal is still a rite – the last "natural sacrament" of family and friendship, of life that is more than "eating" and "drinking". To eat is still something more than to maintain bodily function. People may not understand what that "something" is, but they nonetheless desire to celebrate it. They are still hungry and thirsty for sacramental life.

Based on evidence from his Gospel, Luke, I think, might well have agreed.

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³⁸ Karris, *op. cit.*, pp. 47-48.

³⁹ A. Schmemmann, *The World as Sacrament* (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1966).