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Contagious holiness

JESUS' MEALS WITH SINNERS

Craig L. Blomberg



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for Jan and Bob Williams,
who have hosted special meals
with Christian grace and unaffected hospitality
for more different people and more different kinds of people
in more different situations
while intentionally ministering to the outcast
than anyone else I personally know.

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Series preface

New Studies in Biblical Theology is a series of monographs that address key issues in the discipline of biblical theology. Contributions to the series focus on one or more of three areas: 1. the nature and status of biblical theology, including its relations with other disciplines (e.g. historical theology, exegesis, systematic theology, historical criticism, narrative theology); 2. the articulation and exposition of the structure of thought of a particular biblical writer or corpus; and 3. the delineation of a biblical theme across all or part of the biblical corpora.

Above all, these monographs are creative attempts to help thinking Christians understand their Bibles better. The series aims simultaneously to instruct and to edify, to interact with the current literature, and to point the way ahead. In God's universe, mind and heart should not be divorced: in this series we will try not to separate what God has joined together. While the notes interact with the best of the scholarly literature, the text is uncluttered with untransliterated Greek and Hebrew, and tries to avoid too much technical jargon. The volumes are written within the framework of confessional evangelicalism, but there is always an attempt at thoughtful engagement with the sweep of the relevant literature.

In the unlikely event that they do not know him from his long list of publications elsewhere, readers of this series will recognize the name of Dr Craig Blomberg from his earlier contribution to this series, viz. *Neither Poverty Nor Riches* (vol. 7). The topic he addresses here may not be as 'hot' as questions about poverty and wealth, but perhaps it deserves to be. The people with whom we eat say a great deal about us. Even if 'table fellowship' is not as intrinsically freighted with symbolism in Western culture as in cultures in other places and times, much more is being said than the numbers of calories we are taking in. Dr Blomberg not only addresses current disputes about the 'table fellowship' practices of the historical Jesus, but traces out the historical and theologically-laden implications of table fellowship

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across the canon of Scripture and issues a call to contemporary Christians to reform their habits in this matter. And, once again, Dr Blomberg accomplishes all this while simultaneously engaging with the most recent literature and writing with the limpid clarity for which he has become known.

D. A. Carson
Trinity Evangelical Divinity School

Author's preface

In early 2001, Darrell Bock, representing the Jesus Group of the Institute of Biblical Research, graciously invited me to write an article for the *Bulletin for Biblical Research* on the topic of 'Jesus, Sinners and Table Fellowship'. For several years this study group has convened every June in Dallas to discuss various essays on the historical Jesus and to make suggestions for revision as they are prepared for the *BBR*. Ultimately, a dozen or so of these will have surveyed representative swaths of each major section of the ministry of Jesus, and the hope is to update and collect them together into a single edited volume that will demonstrate how sizeable the database for research into the historical Jesus actually is, and how a coherent understanding of his intentions can emerge when the Gospels are studied against the Jewish backgrounds of his day.

When I realized I had until June of 2004 to complete my first draft of this article, I readily agreed to the assignment. Within a few weeks of that invitation came another one – to deliver the Moore College Lectures in Sydney in the summer of 2002. Acknowledging what a rare honour this was, but explaining that I had already committed myself to teaching two different overseas courses during that same period of time, I reluctantly declined the invitation. I was similarly scheduled for the next year as well. Admitting my presumption, I did, however, add that I had no commitments yet for the summer of 2004, and would be delighted to prepare those lectures if they still wanted me. For months I heard nothing, and I became more and more convinced that I had lost all chance of participating in what might have been a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity.

Nearly a year later, to my astonishment, Moore College did in fact take me up on my offer. Of course I should have interpreted their silence quite differently. They had obviously been plenty busy arranging the lectureships for the intervening years, but were now ready to think that far into the future. What topics might I be willing to address? I suggested several, all based on various research in which

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I was engaged (or in which I soon hoped to be engaged), and we settled on 'Jesus, Sinners and Table Fellowship', a biblical-theological survey that would grow naturally out of my shorter article.

My work began in earnest in 2003. Knowing that IVP's *New Studies in Biblical Theology* series had first right of refusal on all the current Moore College Lecture series, I contacted the editor, Don Carson, to see if he thought there would be interest in my topic. He encouraged me to proceed. I subsequently learned that he had something to do with recommending me to the kind folks at Moore in the first place! Anticipating my next sabbatical in the spring semester of 2004, it seemed reasonable to me that not only could I complete the article by June 2004 and the lectures by August of that same year; I could have the book in reasonably good shape by the end of that summer as well.

Normally the order of my deadlines (the last of the three being self-imposed) would have dictated the order of the projects. But with 'plenty' of time in advance, and an immediate return to all of my regular seminary duties after my sojourn to Australia, I thought it better to work backwards. I would write a draft of the book, excerpt the lectures from it, and then choose and reword the most important sections, particularly on the Gospels themselves, for the article. Little did I know that in February 2004 I would re-aggravate a repetitive stress injury in my shoulders and neighbouring body parts that I had contracted seven and a half years earlier (and from which I had largely recovered six years previously), thus losing the equivalent of at least two months' sabbatical-time work. Mercifully, thanks to a series of 'coincidences' so extraordinary that I can attribute them only to God's providential intervention, I was able to get extra help in transcribing dictation; I was introduced to a state-of-the-art voice-activated word-processing program, which Denver Seminary agreed to pay for (along with the new computer I would need to run it); and a student directed me to a local chiropractor who is one of only three in the Denver area conversant with the 'Active Release Techniques' that speeded up the healing process almost tenfold compared with the first time I had been injured. Without this set of events, I would have lost far more than two months.

Notwithstanding these mercies, it became clear that I would not get the book done in time to create separate, carefully crafted lectures for Moore College, much less a succinct article for the IBR Jesus Group. The conveners of the latter amazingly agreed to postpone my deadline with them for a year, while my audiences in Sydney had to put up

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with the less than ideal format of my alternating between reading portions of my overly long manuscript and summarizing intervening sections. But God seemed to work in spite of it all, for which I am enormously grateful. Here then is my book, even though, as of this writing (October 2004), I have yet to produce the article! Lord willing, that will occur between now and next May.

In view of this narrative, I obviously must thank co-conveners Darrell Bock and Bob Webb and the entire IBR Jesus Group for their confidence in me three and a half years ago and for their understanding when I ruined their plans last spring. Principal John Woodhouse and the entire Moore College community could not have extended a warmer welcome, not only to me but to my entire family, as we spent almost two weeks on their campus (and in the Woodhouses' home). The week prior to coming to Sydney, we had an equally warm welcome at the Bible College of Victoria, thanks to the recommendation of my former D. Min. student Mike Grechko, now Administrative Pastor of Crossway Baptist Church in Melbourne, and the invitation of Principal David Price (in whose home we likewise experienced warm hospitality). At BCV I was able to teach a number of classes from the material in this book in a more informal setting. Not surprisingly, a large portion of the hospitality in both Australian colleges involved food, and it was encouraging to see how both institutions had largely preserved the often-vanishing tradition of eating together regularly as an entire college community.

It goes without saying (but I will say it anyway) that I am grateful to Denver Seminary's generous sabbatical programme and to its faculty, administration and board for granting me my fifth term (three quarters and two semesters) in my eighteen years with the school away from classroom duties this past spring, so that I could work more steadily on this project. My colleague and the director of our Doctor of Ministry programme, David Osborn, gave me a demo copy of Dragon Works' program Dragon Naturally Speaking, which convinced me of the enormous advances voice-activated software has made in the seven years since I last attempted to use it. My student Tom Hall appeared at my office door on Good Friday like an angel of mercy, referring me to Dr Glen Hyman for what he called my 'miracle cure'. Only God knows how direct an answer this was to the prayers of the previous day by my charismatic Romanian friends Elena Bogdan and Ana Ploscaru, when they laid hands on me and pleaded for God's healing, though undoubtedly they were hoping for on-the-spot results such as they have frequently seen in other similar situations.

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Many other individuals and groups deserve my profound thanks for their help in this enterprise. Drs Philip Duce of Inter-Varsity Press and D. A. Carson, with the NSBT series overall, have been most cordial, prompt and helpful editors. As she has done for so many years on so many of my writing projects, Jeanette Freitag, Assistant to the Faculty of Denver Seminary, happily typed numerous notes and drafts of specific sections of chapters, while also helping with various phases of the editing process en route. In successive years my research assistants Jeremiah Harrelson and Mariam Kamell helped with the actual research, particularly in tracking down and surveying primary source material. My colleague and fellow Greek instructor Elodie Emig rechecked countless quotations and references for accuracy and spared me numerous mistakes that the dictation process inevitably introduces. And my adult Sunday School class, 'Bridges' at Mission Hills Baptist Church (whose property sits on either side of the border between the townships of Greenwood Village and Littleton, Colorado), tolerated three of the crazier Sunday mornings I have ever inflicted on them as I tried out selected portions of this material with them just before leaving for Australia.

I probably would never have agreed to begin studying this topic in depth in the first place were it not for my former MA student Michelle Stinson, who had just completed under my supervision her thesis on the topic of Jesus' table fellowship in Luke the year before the IBR invitation first came. I am thrilled to watch her career advance as she embarks on the final stages of a PhD in Old Testament at Wheaton College, and I am immensely grateful for her close scrutiny and critique of this entire manuscript, along with her particularly thorough analysis of my treatment of meals in the earlier Testament which has now become her specialty. That analysis read like the product of a seasoned veteran and colleague, as her own dissertation research continues her interest in the topics addressed in this volume. Her subsequent work will no doubt correct whatever errors remain in mine and will have the space to go into considerably greater detail.

After I had completed the final draft of this manuscript, Scot McKnight's outstanding new work *The Jesus Creed: Loving God, Loving Others* (Brewster, MA: Paraclete, 2004) appeared. His pioneering synthesis of cutting-edge historical Jesus work with issues of spiritual formation regularly echoes convictions I had come to about the nature of Jesus' table fellowship in its Jewish setting and even uses the expression 'contagious holiness'. While unable to utilize

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McKnight's insight in this work, I am grateful to find a fellow scholar who has synthesized much of the same material in so similar a fashion. This book may be viewed as the detailed support for the brief generalizations that McKnight repeatedly makes.

All unlabelled New Testament Scripture quotations in this volume follow Today's New International Version published by Hodder & Stoughton in 1996. Quotations from the Old Testament follow the New International Version, published by the same company in 1984. Citations from the Apocrypha adopt the translations of Metzger (1977). Pseudepigraphical references mirror the standard English edition of Charlesworth (1983, 1985). Renderings of passages from the Dead Sea Scrolls utilize the Hebrew-English compilation of García Martínez and Tigchelaar (1997, 1998). Josephus, Philo and the various Greco-Roman authors quoted come from the Greek-English volumes of the Loeb Classical Library, unless otherwise specified.

I dedicate this study to my good friends Dr Bob and Jan Williams. My wife, Fran, and I met them in the fall of 1986, just a couple of months after moving to the Denver area. Bob is one of three co-founders of the Inner-City Health Center in Denver, a not-for-profit private Christian healthcare clinic for the particularly needy, which last year celebrated its twentieth anniversary. Jan, a second co-founder, was the administrator of the clinic for many years, has been active in work with numerous non-profit organizations and societies concerned with Christian community development, and today is the administrator for Joshua Station, an arm of Denver's Mile-High Ministries that provides low-cost, temporary housing for people who would otherwise be homeless, in the context of Christian love, counselling and job-placement aid. For nearly fifteen years, Fran and I have been part of a small group with the Williams, which has met as often as every other week (for several years), as little as once a quarter (for a couple of years), and now aims at a gathering every six to eight weeks. Two other couples who joined shortly after we did have remained throughout these years, as other couples and singles have come and gone for various multi-year stretches at a time.

Together we have studied Scripture, discussed important Christian books, brainstormed on ministry-related issues, prayed, laughed, cried, loaned each other substantial sums of money when needed, celebrated family milestones, renewed wedding vows, and acted as a surrogate church for various individuals during periods of time in which they needed to recover from less than Christian treatment at

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churches of which they had been a part. All of us have shared an interest in, commitment to, and experience of inner-city ministry, and all of us have recognized the special dynamic that attaches to the intentional Christian meals (or portions of meals) which we share together every time we meet. But none has hosted as many, with us and with many other individuals and groups, as the Williams. Thanks, Jan and Bob, for your friendship; for your model of Christian sacrifice and service; for your faithfulness over the years to God, to his people and to so many who have not yet become his people; and for all the wonderful events you have hosted or celebrated with us at other venues (not least in Greece and Turkey). If anyone knows the potential of Christian meals, you do. I can't wait until we can celebrate together forever at the wedding feast of the Lamb!

Craig L. Blomberg

Abbreviations

<i>ABR</i>	<i>Australian Biblical Review</i>
<i>ARTS</i>	<i>Arts in Religious and Theological Studies</i>
<i>ATR</i>	<i>Anglican Theological Review</i>
<i>BAR</i>	<i>Biblical Archaeology Review</i>
<i>Bib</i>	<i>Biblica</i>
<i>BR</i>	<i>Biblical Research</i>
<i>BTB</i>	<i>Biblical Theological Bulletin</i>
<i>CBQ</i>	<i>Catholic Biblical Quarterly</i>
<i>EJT</i>	<i>European Journal of Theology</i>
<i>ET</i>	<i>Expository Times</i>
<i>ETL</i>	<i>Ephemerides Theologicae Lovanienses</i>
<i>HBT</i>	<i>Horizons in Biblical Theology</i>
<i>HeyJ</i>	<i>Heythrop Journal</i>
<i>HTR</i>	<i>Harvard Theological Review</i>
<i>HUCA</i>	<i>Hebrew Union College Annual</i>
<i>Int</i>	<i>Interpretation</i>
<i>JBL</i>	<i>Journal of Biblical Literature</i>
<i>JETS</i>	<i>Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society</i>
<i>JJS</i>	<i>Journal of Jewish Studies</i>
<i>JITC</i>	<i>Journal of the Interdenominational Theological Center</i>
<i>JR</i>	<i>Journal of Religion</i>
<i>JRT</i>	<i>Journal of Religious Thought</i>
<i>JSJ</i>	<i>Journal for the Study of Judaism</i>
<i>JSNT</i>	<i>Journal for the Study of the New Testament</i>
<i>JSOT</i>	<i>Journal for the Study of the Old Testament</i>
<i>JSS</i>	<i>Journal of Semitic Studies</i>
<i>JTS</i>	<i>Journal of Theological Studies</i>
<i>Neot</i>	<i>Neotestamentica</i>
<i>NovT</i>	<i>Novum Testamentum</i>
<i>NTS</i>	<i>New Testament Studies</i>
<i>PRS</i>	<i>Perspectives on Religious Studies</i>
<i>RB</i>	<i>Revue Biblique</i>

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<i>RQ</i>	<i>Revue de Qumran</i>
<i>SBL</i>	<i>Society of Biblical Literature</i>
<i>SEÅ</i>	<i>Svensk Exegetisk Årsbok</i>
<i>SJT</i>	<i>Scottish Journal of Theology</i>
<i>SLJT</i>	<i>Saint Luke's Journal of Theology</i>
<i>TJT</i>	<i>Toronto Journal of Theology</i>
<i>TynB</i>	<i>Tyndale Bulletin</i>
UBSGNT ⁴	United Bible Societies' Greek New Testament, 4th edition
<i>VT</i>	<i>Vetus Testamentum</i>
<i>WW</i>	<i>Word & World</i>
<i>ZAW</i>	<i>Zeitschrift für die alttestamentliche Wissenschaft</i>
<i>ZNW</i>	<i>Zeitschrift für die neutestamentliche Wissenschaft</i>
<i>ZPE</i>	<i>Zeitschrift für Papyrologie und Epigraphik</i>

Chapter One

The current debate

‘Sinners who need no repentance’ and Did Jesus really eat with the wicked?

A casual perusal of contemporary New Testament scholarship would suggest that Jesus’ practice of sharing table fellowship with the outcasts of his society is one of the most historically reliable pieces of information that can be extracted from the Gospels. J. D. Crossan (1991: 344), co-chair of the famous Jesus Seminar, determines that Jesus’ ‘open commensality’ lay at the heart of his programme of ‘building or rebuilding peasant community on radically different principles from those of honor and shame, patronage and clientage’ and ‘based on an egalitarian sharing of spiritual and material power at the most grass-roots level.’ Joachim Gnilka (1997: 105), in a standard liberal German text on the historical Jesus, agrees that ‘those whom Jesus accepted were flagrant sinners, or were viewed as such’, so that his eating with them symbolically expressed the forgiveness of sins brought about ‘less by means of the message than by the manifest personal acceptance, the effective restitution and granting of a new beginning in the context of fellowship.’

More evangelical scholars generally concur. N. T. Wright (1996: 149), bishop of Durham, explains that Jesus ate and drank with all sorts of people, often in an atmosphere of celebration.

He ate with ‘sinners’, and kept company with people normally on or beyond the borders of respectable society – which of course in his day and culture, meant not merely social respectability but religious uprightness, proper covenant behaviour, loyalty to the traditions and hence to the aspirations of Israel.

Not surprisingly, ‘this caused regular offence to the pious.’ Even as staunch a conservative as the South African David Seccombe (2002: 240) declares:

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Once we see that Jesus construed his eating with sinners – his offer of friendship and their acceptance of it – as tantamount to entrance into the kingdom of God, we see how appropriate was the conviviality and celebration which got him his reputation as ‘a wine drinker and a glutton’ as well as ‘a friend of tax collectors and sinners’. Their meals together were an expression of their new relationship with Jesus, which was celebrated as though it was a new relationship with God.

This apparent consensus across the theological spectrum does not lack a good foundation. The theme of Jesus’ table fellowship with sinners permeates every layer of the Synoptic tradition. In Mark 2:13–17 and parallels, Jesus calls the tax collector Levi to be one of his disciples and then attends a party with Levi’s associates. In Mark 6:30–44 and 8:1–10 and parallels, he feeds the five thousand and the four thousand, crowds that would have included very heterogeneous groupings of people. In the so-called Q-material, Jesus indeed acknowledges that his critics consider him a glutton and drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners (Matt. 11:19 par.), and he predicts a coming eschatological banquet in which Gentiles will come from all over the world to eat at table with the Jewish patriarchs (Matt. 8:11–12 par.). At the end of a passage unique to Matthew, the parable of the two sons, Jesus observes that tax collectors and prostitutes are entering the kingdom ahead of the Jewish leaders (Matt. 21:31–32). In material unique to Luke’s Gospel, Jesus commends the faith of a disreputable woman who anoints him during a meal at the home of Simon the Pharisee (Luke 7:36–50); dines with Mary and Martha but puts spiritual priorities above culinary ones (10:38–42); unleashes a bitter invective against the Jewish leaders at another dinner with a Pharisee (11:37–54); upends conventional standards about whom to invite to a banquet (14:1–24); justifies his scandalous behaviour by telling the parable of the prodigal son (15:1–2, 11–32); takes the initiative to eat with the chief tax collector Zacchaeus (19:1–10); and discloses himself as resurrected to the unnamed disciples in Emmaus during their breaking of bread together (24:30–32). Distinctively Johannine passages include Jesus’ turning water into wine in the context of a wedding feast (John 2:1–12) and appearing to his followers in order to eat breakfast with them by the Sea of Galilee (21:1–14).

The theme of Jesus’ table fellowship with a broad cross-section of people thus clearly satisfies the criterion of authenticity known as

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multiple attestation. It similarly appears to pass the dissimilarity criterion with flying colours: it is not quite like anything else in Jesus' Jewish world or in early Christian practice.¹ And it fits the principle of coherence with other authentic teachings of Jesus, particularly those which focus on the arrival of the kingdom of God (see esp. Franzmann 1992). Notice how many parables involve meals and/or sinners: in addition to those already cited, compare especially the wedding banquet in Matthew 22:1–14; the faithful servants in Luke 12:35–38; the rich man and Lazarus in 16:19–31; and the Pharisee and tax collector in 18:9–14. At the same time, Jesus' practice satisfies the criterion of Palestinian environment, as it proves to be a natural extension of hospitality practices deeply embedded in Ancient Near Eastern and Mediterranean cultures.² Indeed, as recently as 1998, Hungarian scholar János Bolyki could write an entire monograph on *Jesu Tischgemeinschaften*, defending the substantial authenticity of this theme passage by passage throughout all four canonical Gospels.³

Several important recent challenges to this consensus, however, clamour for attention. Pride of place among these must go to Dennis Smith's Harvard dissertation (1980) and numerous articles (see esp. 1987; 1989; 1991), now conveniently summarized in his 2003 volume *From Symposium to Eucharist*. Smith argues that the Greco-Roman form of banqueting known as the symposium had become a model so pervasive throughout the empire that Jewish and early Christian meals would have adopted at least parts of this structure as well: a formal meal during which participants reclined on couches, followed by a time for drinking wine, discussion of controversial topics and entertainment of various kinds, usually musical and often sexual. Smith thinks he can detect elements of this format in the Corinthians' practice of celebrating the Lord's Supper. On the basis of pre-Christian hints from the Wisdom of Sirach and post-Christian details of the prescriptions for Passover in the rabbinic literature, he believes that Jewish feasts had adopted this format as well. Thus both Jesus'

¹ For a detailed analysis of this theme in light of both of these criteria, see Brawley 1995: 18–23. Cf. also Barty 2002.

² For a book-length study of the New Testament practice of hospitality, see Koenig 1985. For an analysis limited to Luke's extensive presentation of the practice, cf. Byrne 2000.

³ A more classic tradition-historical perspective is reflected in Kollmann 1990, but he still retrieves substantially authentic cores from most of the relevant passages. For other important treatments coming to similar conclusions, see Hofius 1967 and Chilton 1992.

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Last Supper and his festive meals more generally must be understood as forms of symposia. For our purposes, only the second of these two claims requires analysis, but it is precisely here that Smith argues that the Gospel portraits are primarily unhistorical. Employing both an older form-critical dissection of the pericopae and a more recent literary-critical analysis of the theme of table fellowship in the Gospels in general and in Luke in particular, Smith concludes that the theme is largely the construct of the Evangelists themselves.⁴

In both instances, Smith is fairly quickly rebutted. The form-critical analyses assume a fallacious and now outmoded kind of historical research. The very literary-critical approach to which Smith subsequently appeals has demonstrated that one cannot strip unhistorical layers from a historical core of Gospel pericopae, as once was thought. And demonstrating that a theme is crucial to a Gospel writer's literary purposes bears no relation to the probability of its historical authenticity (for both points see, e.g., Green 2003). But Smith's research opens the door for others to make more challenging assaults. Is it really the case that the symposium model had become pervasive in first-century Jewish society *in Israel*? If not, and if the model *is* reflected in the Gospel tradition, then it may be unhistorical, because it does not fit the Galilee of Jesus' day. Alternatively, it is striking how infrequently Jesus' eating with sinners appears in Mark or Matthew by comparison with Luke. On the standard theory of Markan priority, this distribution of material could suggest that the theme is primarily of Luke's creation.⁵

A second challenge comes from Kathleen Corley. In her two books on women, meals and the historical Jesus (1993b; 2002; cf. also her article – 1993a), she adopts Smith's symposium hypothesis but then explores in more depth the label 'tax collectors and prostitutes'. Corley notes how Roman women during the late republican and early imperial periods were increasingly emancipated, taking the initiative to be seen in public, including at banquets. This in turn triggered a conservative backlash, so that such women were often viewed as

⁴ For a strikingly similar volume from recent German scholarship, see Klinghardt 1996.

⁵ Numerous studies analyse Jesus' table fellowship in Luke. See Via 1985; Karris 1985: 47–78; Moxnes 1986; Esler 1987: 77–86; Neyrey 1991; Kelley 1995; Kayama 1997. Moritz (1996) explicitly defends its authenticity. Elliott (1991) extends his study to include Acts as well. Klosinski (1998) believes he finds the theme prominent already in Mark but still considers it a literary construct. Neufeld (2000) does the same but from a sociological perspective. Stinson (2000) finds important foreshadowings of the Messianic banquet.

unscrupulous. The term ‘prostitute’ could thus be just a slanderous label for what Bruce Winter (2003), in a different context, has recently called ‘the new Roman women’. They were not in most cases literally sexually immoral, just unconventional by attending public banquets. Because literal prostitutes were often licensed, and taxes on their ‘profession’ were collected by tax farmers, it was natural for ‘tax collectors and prostitutes’ to be joined together into a rhetorical vilification, even when those actual occupations were not represented by the persons slandered (Corley 1993b: 152–158). If Corley is right, then a key piece of the consensus that Jesus fraternized with the worst of his society’s outcasts is undermined.

On the other hand, the mere fact that the terms could be used in broader senses does not mean that literal tax collectors or prostitutes are not in view in the Gospels. J. Gibson (1981: 430) cites evidence from Josephus and the Babylonian Talmud to suggest that these terms were linked together because ‘both groups were regarded by their contemporaries as prime examples of the type of Jew who collaborated with the occupying forces of the Roman government’ (soldiers being a principal clientele of the ‘courtesans’). Dorothy Lee (1996) stresses the strong contrast in the three Gospel accounts that portray women as sinners (Luke 7:36–50; John 4:4–42; and John 7:53 – 8:11) between the faith of those women and the misguided behaviour of the male authorities surrounding them, suggesting that extreme examples have been chosen (like literal prostitutes or unfaithful wives) to highlight the surprising reversal of praiseworthy roles. And Sean Freyne (2000: 271–286) observes that even when the slogan ‘tax collectors and prostitutes’ (or ‘sinners’) was not meant literally, it still represented serious vilification, such that its targets were being viewed as wicked. At the same time, our picture of Jesus’ fraternizing with the outcast does change considerably if we imagine him dining with the wives of his peers rather than with inherently immoral women.

Just as there have been questions about the identity of the women who surrounded Jesus in the intimate context of table fellowship, so also recent scholarship has disclosed considerable interest in identifying the ‘tax collectors’ more precisely. It has been recognized for some time now that these were not the true Roman *publicani*, the very wealthy and influential government officials who oversaw the entire tax collection process (on which, see esp. Badian 1972). Rather they were tax farmers, or middlemen: Jews working for Rome, in charge of the collection of tolls, customs duties or certain yearly taxes in

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specific locations; men who made their money by charging more than what they had to pass on to their imperial overlords. Thus, except in some very limited circles, their ostracism had far more to do with their making a living – at times via considerable greed and extortion – to the detriment of their own country than with any supposed laws of ritual impurity that they might have transgressed (see Youtie 1937; Donahue 1971; Herrenbrück 1981, 1987). Fritz Herrenbrück has completed the most thorough investigation of this topic, concluding that ‘tax contractors’ might be the best English rendering of the Greek *telōnai* (1990: 25) and that the heart of the historical Jesus’ ministry to these people involved his sense of mission to ‘all Israel’, including the nation’s most despised (1990: 285). Even studies that engage in more radical tradition-historical dissection usually come to similar conclusions (e.g. Völkel 1978).⁶

From analysing the two groups denoted by ‘tax collectors and prostitutes’, it is a small step to considering what the Gospels mean by the more common epithet ‘tax collectors and sinners’ (or the term ‘sinner’ or ‘sinners’ by itself). Precisely who is and who is not included under this broad heading? For much of the twentieth century, the stereotypical response to this question was the *‘am-hā-‘āres*, the ‘people of the land’: the vast majority of simple Jewish farmers and fishermen, housewives and artisans, who were not aligned with any Jewish sect and did not follow the purity laws that the Pharisees had superimposed onto the Torah to contextualize the commandments of Moses for their day.⁷ Specific studies that investigated the problem in more detail often considerably narrowed the scope of who would have been called a ‘sinner’, focusing, for example, on those guilty of an immoral mode of life or who practised a dishonourable vocation (Jeremias 1931).⁸ Others added Gentiles of various categories, or the priestly aristocracy who had compromised too much with Rome, or other non-Pharisaic leadership sects (see Perrin 1967: 93–94; Borg 1984: 83–86, esp. 84–85; Westerholm 1978: 69–71).

⁶ Farmer (1978) thus thinks that ‘tax collectors’ in the phrase ‘tax collectors and sinners’ refers to the social, economic and political constituency of the outcasts, while ‘sinners’ indicates their religious status. Rau (1998) believes he discerns two stages in Jesus’ ministry, so that his initial popularity among the people symbolized by ‘tax collectors’ eventually becomes a key catalyst in his later rejection by the religious authorities.

⁷ See classically Raney 1930; Horsley (1987: 217–221) claims it as a consensus a half-century later.

⁸ But Jeremias (1969: 259, 26–67) later confused things by moving more in the direction of seeing all the *‘am-hā-‘āres* as sinners.

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In the mid-1980s, however, E. P. Sanders' blockbusting *Jesus and Judaism* challenged these approaches head on. Building on an earlier article (1983), Sanders (1985: 174–211) argued that the Pharisees had too little influence and were too few in number to have successfully stigmatized as 'sinners' all non-Pharisees, or even the majority of the people of the land. What is more, why would Jesus be criticized for eating with what amounted to his own cultural subgroup, since he was not a formally trained teacher or aligned with any of the leadership movements? Rather, the 'sinners' in the Gospels must be seen as the flagrantly wicked. The Greek term employed, *hamartōloi*, in the Septuagint regularly translated the Hebrew *rəšā'īm*, a word consistently used for serious forms of immoral or evil behaviour. Now one can understand why Jesus would be severely criticized.

Sanders goes even further, to allege that by eating with the wicked, Jesus demonstrated his acceptance of them *without* calling them to repentance. Sanders points to the paucity of references to 'repentance' in Mark and Matthew; the few references that do occur he believes prove historically suspect. Mark 1:15 and parallels are the Evangelists' creation of a kind of headline over Jesus' ministry, summarizing how he went around telling people to repent in light of the imminently arriving kingdom. The majority of explicit references to repentance occur in Luke, several in demonstrably redactional additions to Mark or Q, so that it would appear this is a favourite theme of Luke and not necessarily of the historical Jesus (cf. also Sanders 1993: 231–232).⁹

Now Sanders does not deny that, if asked, Jesus would have responded that turning from sin was a good thing to do; he just does not believe it formed the distinctive or dominant core of Jesus' message. Rather, what stood out was Jesus' pronouncement of God's forgiveness of sins to people without requiring of them the standard Jewish signs of true repentance: the offering of animal sacrifices in the temple; restitution where crimes, particularly financial ones, against people could be compensated for; and a period of penance or probation during which one's change of heart and behaviour could be tested.

Scholars have responded to Sanders' claims in several ways. This last point, that Jesus bypassed the provisions in both written and oral Torah for demonstrating true repentance via the temple cult and

⁹ Without always coming to the same historical conclusions, see the detailed unpacking of the concern in Luke for tax collectors by Ford (1984: 65–78) and for sinners more generally by Neale (1991). For an entire monograph on the theme of repentance in Luke, with detailed consideration of Jewish backgrounds, see Nave 2002.

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specific restitution or penance, has been widely accepted. Herein may well have lain one of the major ‘scandals’ of Jesus’ ministry (see esp. Chilton 1992). On the other hand, Sanders has probably overly minimized both the impact of the Pharisees in Jesus’ world and the pervasiveness of a desire for ritual purity, even on the part of the ordinary people (whose scrupulous concern for the Law can, at the same time, certainly be overestimated). Jacob Neusner’s many writings provide a counterpoint to Sanders at this juncture,¹⁰ while Roland Deines has provided perhaps the most balanced analysis seeking a middle ground between exaggerating and overly minimizing the role of purity in Pharisaic thought and practice.¹¹ The rejection of any widespread concern for repentance, finally, is the weakest link in Sanders’ chain of argument. The claim that Lukan theological emphasis implies unhistorical fabrication is again a *non sequitur*, and, even apart from specific uses of the term in the earlier Gospels or Gospel sources, the whole thrust of Jesus’ ethical teaching highlights stringent moral living, in contrast to many prevailing trends of his day, as the sign of the transformed lives the in-breaking kingdom generates among his followers (see esp. Chilton 1988; cf. N. Young 1985).

William Walker (1978) offers a more sweeping challenge to the conviction that Jesus’ acceptance of tax collectors formed a central and authentic part of his historical mission. He itemizes six reasons for rejecting this theme in its entirety.

- (1) The tradition appears only in the Synoptic Gospels within the New Testament.
- (2) The most authentic Synoptic material presents Jesus holding a very negative view of the tax collectors (grouping them with sinners and prostitutes in pejorative slogans: Matt. 5:46–47; 18:15–17; 21:31–32).
- (3) The references to Jesus’ positive association with them appear mostly in accusations by his critics, which therefore cannot be trusted (Matt. 11:18–19 par.; Luke 15:1–2).
- (4) The two narratives that actually portray Jesus dining with tax collectors (Mark 2:15–17 pars.; Luke 19:1–10) can be viewed as artificial constructions.

¹⁰ See esp. Neusner 1991. For a balanced, mediating perspective see Dunn 1990; for a similar approach in dialogue with the ongoing debate between Sanders and Neusner, see Hengel and Deines 1995.

¹¹ See esp. Deines 2001. Cf. also Hengel and Deines 1995 and Dunn 1990.

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- (5) There is confusion surrounding the identity of one of those tax collectors, Levi, since Matthew's Gospel refers to him as Matthew instead (Matt. 9:9–13).
- (6) Finally, an Aramaic word *tēlānē*, which means something like 'playboy', could have been confused with the Greek *telōnēs* for tax collector.

None of these arguments seems strong. Regarding (1), the Synoptic Gospels are overwhelmingly the place where even fairly sceptical scholars turn to find the *most* reliable historical information about Jesus. In response to (2), the negative uses of 'tax collector' all involve Jesus echoing the conventional views of his day in teachings that also challenge his listeners to a quite different ethic. Concerning (3), stereotypical charges, even when they include an element of caricature, are usually built on a core historical truth. Argument (4), about artificial constructions, is called into question by the integrity and logic of the relevant passages that emerges when we examine them in depth one at a time (see chapters 4 and 5). Point (5), dealing with the different names assigned to the tax collector Jesus calls as a disciple, makes the Synoptists' agreement on his identity as a tax collector that much more significant and secure. One can also be uncertain of people's names yet still remember accurately a lot of other information about them, as anyone who has begun to age even a little can attest! As for (6), it is improbable that an Aramaic word would ever have led to a Gospel writer rendering it with a similar-sounding Greek word on that basis alone. On any theory of Gospel authorship, the writers knew they were *translating* Jesus' teaching from one language to another, not looking for similar-sounding words. Aramaic *can* be shown to influence our exegesis of the Greek of the Gospels when a specific nuance in the Aramaic word Jesus most likely used does not automatically carry over to the Greek term, but that is not what Walker is proposing.¹²

Yet even if wholesale rejections of Jesus' welcome of the outcasts of his world can be fairly readily dispensed with, it is clear that the current state of scholarship is more in flux on this topic than many introductory overviews concede. Moreover, even after eliminating the idiosyncracies of the Jesus Seminar, it is increasingly recognized that the standard criteria of authenticity used in Gospels scholarship – multiple attestation, dissimilarity, coherence and Palestinian

¹² For a similar but independent critique of Walker, see Neale 1991: 110–115.

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environment – cannot bear all the weight that has often been placed on them.¹³ In fact, N. T. Wright and a trio of German scholars (Gerd Theissen, Dagmar Winter and Annette Merz) have independently developed a four-part criterion that holds out considerably greater promise for valid historical-Jesus research. Wright (1996: esp. 131–133) calls it the criterion of ‘double similarity and dissimilarity’. The Germans refer to it as the *Plausibilitätskriterium*, which in English translation has been rendered ‘the criterion of historical plausibility’ (Theissen and Merz 1997: 115–118; Theissen and Winter 2002). In short, the criterion suggests that when an element of the Gospel tradition (1) makes sense in the first third of the first century in Israel, yet (2) depicts Jesus challenging conventional Jewish thinking in some respect *and* (3) shows signs of having been followed by early Christianity either inside or outside the New Testament, yet (4) seems to have changed in some significant way in that later context, *then* we have powerful support for believing it to be authentic. That is to say, other early Jewish or Gentile Christians are unlikely to have created it and read it back onto the lips of Jesus.

What happens to our theme of Jesus, sinners and table fellowship when this four-part criterion is applied to it?¹⁴ We may deal with two of the four parts quite briefly because there is little controversy attached to their application. Celebrating communal meals together continued to play a central role in early Christian living. The first summary of Christian fellowship in Acts 2:42 describes the believers ‘breaking bread’ together, a practice subsequently stated as occurring in their homes on a daily basis (v. 46). Acts 6:1–7 depicts a daily distribution to needy believers, which may well have involved food (the other possibility is money). Peter’s ‘breakthrough’ with Cornelius involved his recognition that by declaring all foods clean, God was declaring all people clean, so that there could no longer be valid objections to Jewish Christians residing and eating with Gentiles (Acts 10; cf. 11:3). Paul and Silas enjoyed a meal with the Philippian jailer and his family, on which occasion the latter were baptized (16:34). Paul and his companions likewise ‘break bread’ with the church in Troas, after which Paul preaches into the night

¹³ I have summarized the state of research already in Blomberg 1987: 246–254, with updates in Blomberg 2001: 63–66.

¹⁴ In very sketchy form, Rau (1998) has done this for Jesus’ association with sinners more generally. Cf. his generally positive results with the fairly meagre conclusions of Fiedler’s book-length work (1976) on Jesus and sinners using the older criteria of authenticity and tradition-critical dissections of each passage.

(20:7–12).¹⁵ While not pervasive, the motif of Christians eating special meals with each other and extending table fellowship to outsiders appears just often enough to demonstrate that Jesus' practice was not something unique to his mission or ministry but remains a model for Christians everywhere.

The most significant meal for early Christians, of course, was the Lord's Supper, which may already be referenced in Acts 2:42. Important epistolary teaching on its practice occurs in 1 Corinthians 10:14–22 and 11:17–34, in which Paul rebukes the Corinthian Christians for the way they are eating food sacrificed to idols in the context of pagan temple worship and are profaning the Lord's Supper by not caring adequately for the poor and needy in their midst.¹⁶ Hebrews 13:10 may also allude to the Eucharist when it avers, 'We have an altar from which those who minister at the tabernacle have no right to eat,' but this is disputed. Hebrews 13:2 certainly reflects the need for early Christian hospitality more generally, as it alludes to Abraham's experience of entertaining angels 'unawares' (KJV).

Revelation 2:14–16 and 20–22 contain further reproof of early Christian communities improperly eating food sacrificed to idols, again because they confuse pagan worship with Christian. In 3:20, Jesus introduces the precious metaphor of coming in to eat with those who open the door to him when he knocks. And perhaps the most important reference to a Christian meal in the New Testament outside the Gospels is the glorious picture of the wedding feast of the Lamb (Rev. 19:7–9), a stunning portrait of the intimacy of table fellowship that all God's people will enjoy with all the company of the redeemed of every age when Christ returns. A number of Jesus' meals with his disciples even before the Last Supper may well have intentionally foreshadowed this banquet, especially given the imagery Jesus utilizes in Matthew 8:10–11 and parallel, of people coming from every direction of the compass to eat with faithful Jews when the kingdom comes in all its fullness.¹⁷ There is thus no doubt that lines of continuity proceeded from Jesus' dining customs into early Christian meal practices in the rest of the New Testament (cf. further Oden 2001).

¹⁵ For a similar overview, see Bolyki (1998: 208–210), who adds the meal on board the ill-fated ship in Acts 27:33–38. But there is no indication that Paul here is 'breaking bread' with any other Christians, or that the meal is anything other than an ordinary one after so many days of fasting.

¹⁶ On both passages, see further Blomberg (1994a: *ad loc.*).

¹⁷ For a more detailed survey of the texts presented in this paragraph (along with a few others), see Bolyki 1998: 210–215.

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At the same time, significant discontinuity appears. Precisely because Jesus' Last Supper (Mark 14:12–26 pars.) took on such central significance and became prescriptive for the repeated celebration of the Lord's Supper, the unambiguous evidence of Christians continuing to go out of their way to have ordinary meals with the sinners and outcasts of their communities remains comparatively meagre. Jude 12 affords the lone New Testament reference to the *agapē* or love feast, terminology which is repeated in Ignatius, Tertullian, Clement of Alexandria, the *Sybilline Oracles*, the *Epistula Apostolorum*, the *Apocalypse of Paul* and perhaps a few other early Christian sources. But while there is a diversity of meals to which this terminology is applied, none unambiguously describes a fellowship meal *apart from* the celebration of the Eucharist (McGowan 1997; cf. Bolyki 1998: 223–227). *Didache* 11 offers instructions on how long to provide hospitality for itinerant Christian prophets, but these seem to apply only to ordinary meals in private homes. Otherwise this document's various references to table prayers and fellowship meals point to eucharistic practices (cf. further Bolyki 1998: 222–223). None of this is to say that believers cannot combine some of the objectives of Jesus' table fellowship with outsiders with the celebration of the Lord's Supper, but the caution that not everyone should partake of the latter (1 Cor. 11:27–32),¹⁸ contrasting with the radical inclusiveness of the former, makes it more difficult to combine the two kinds of meals than to keep them separate.

Ironically, it is actually non-Christian Judaism that appears to preserve a somewhat closer parallel to the format of Jesus' original festive meals, particularly in the Pharisaic *hābūrôt* (White 1988). But of course these were not open to 'sinners', whether the ritually impure or the morally wicked, while the Christian celebration of the Lord's Supper, precisely because of the warnings of 1 Corinthians 11, became increasingly limited first to believers only and then, in even narrower fashion, to Christians of certain theological traditions or to 'believers in good standing' with the Lord, as we might say today. Within a few centuries after the beginning of the Christian era, no context remained in which Christians re-created the conflicted

¹⁸ This is true regardless of one's interpretation of precisely who should exclude themselves from the Lord's Table and for what reasons. A fair number of recent commentators argue, persuasively in my opinion, that 'discerning the body of the Lord' in v. 29 refers to truly recognizing who God's people are and thus caring for the poor in their midst (contrast vv. 17–22) (see further Blomberg 1994a: 231). But non-Christians by definition cannot truly understand who Christ's body is, or they would become Christians.

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dynamic of what Jerome Neyrey (1996: 160) calls 'Jesus' own eating customs, his choice of table companions, his disregard for washing rites preceding meals, and his unconcern for tithed bread': precisely the behaviour that 'provoke[d] controversy with other religious reformers'.

Because there is such a vast literature already on the Last Supper and the Lord's Supper, I have chosen not to focus on those meals on this occasion. What have been comparatively neglected are the *other* meals that Jesus celebrated and the company he kept at them. It is true that the Gospels do describe one notorious sinner, namely Judas Iscariot, participating for a portion of the Last Supper with Jesus (cf. Matt. 26:20–25 with John 13:18–30), but it is doubtful if we can make any generalizations for Christian practice based on this one exceptional figure who had a unique role to play in the events that led to Jesus' death. But what about the various kinds of 'sinners' who regularly graced the table with Jesus and his disciples on other occasions? What of the other two parts of the double similarity and dissimilarity criterion, comparing the teachings and actions attributed to Jesus with Jewish backgrounds? After all, here will appear answers not only to questions of authenticity but also to those of meaning. Later Christian practice may help us evaluate the former, but it cannot be used to determine the latter. Jesus could have assumed knowledge only of that which already existed during his lifetime, either by comparison or contrast with the practices of his contemporaries, if he wanted his audiences to understand his behaviour.

Our way forward, therefore, will be as follows. First we will survey the different kinds of Old Testament meals that potentially provide background for Jesus' teaching and behaviour, highlighting the texts that offer important illustrations of those meals. Then we will turn to developments in the intertestamental period, from both Jewish and Greco-Roman contexts, that may shed similar light. For if Smith and Corley are right, the symposium model had so permeated the ancient Mediterranean world that even orthodox Jews adopted forms of it. But it will have to be determined if indeed those scholars *are* right. Finally, we will proceed to analyse in greater depth the key texts in the Gospels mentioned at the outset of this introduction and grapple with questions both of their authenticity and of their meaning. In closing, we will briefly suggest some possible contemporary applications of our findings.