MEALS WITH JESUS IN LUKE'S GOSPEL

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We begin with a confession: among the gospel authors I have a favorite and his name is Luke. Indeed over a long period of time this evangelist has been a major mentor for me in things biblical. More recently I have been intrigued by the topic of table fellowship as it is featured in the Third Gospel and focused in the meal scenes presented therein.

In the various cultures underlying the New Testament, dining with someone indicated solidarity with that person. To eat with is to identify with. To take a meal with another was to offer that individual the right hand of fellowship in the deepest sense of the term. Meal fellowship — what an appropriate image for an incarnational Christianity.

The thematic emphasis on table fellowship fairly explodes in Luke's Gospel (sometimes labeled the Gospel of Hospitality). Meal scenes and meal imagery (including parables spoken at or about a meal) serve as a "main course" here, for these episodes which involve Jesus at a meal are nearly twice in number as compared to counterparts elsewhere. A closer look, therefore, at such meals and their location, function, and significance in Luke is very much in order.

I count ten meal scenes in which Jesus eats with others in the Gospel of Luke. Three of them have parallels in the other gospels; seven, however, can only be found in Luke, and as we shall discover, are decidedly integral to and reflective of the theological interests of this particular evangelist.

The ten scenes are placed fairly evenly throughout Luke's story of the ministry and message of Jesus although more episodes do appear in the Central Section of Luke, the great journey to Jerusalem, than in any other major section of this gospel. A summary of the distributive effect of the ten scenes would yield this pattern:
three occur in the account of the Galilean ministry;
four appear in the Central Section;
three take place in the period of the last days in Jerusalem, with
two of these occasions being post-resurrection meals.

As a footnote to the fact and the impact of these latter meals with
Jesus as the Risen Lord, it is well to recall the Lukan testimony be-
yond the gospel itself in Acts as Peter is addressing Cornelius and his
household by saying:

“They put him to death by hanging him on a tree; but God raised
him on the third day and allowed him to appear, not to all the people
but to us who were chosen by God as witnesses, and who ate and
drank with him after he rose from the dead.” (Acts 10:39b-41)

When it comes to sizing up Jesus’ table companions, one has to
speak in terms of Jesus’ democratic eating habits. For Jesus not the
food but the people he ate with mattered most. The Lukan audience
for the occasion of his eating with others is both diversified and
inclusive. Note well: it is always a case of shared meals in Luke. Je-
sus, when eating, never eats alone! It will be repaying, accordingly,
to see how this all plays out in the respective meal scenes in Luke,
the Ecumenical Gospel.

The first and seventh occasions, in our list of ten, illustrate Jesus’
most shocking behavior, at least as far as the Pharisees viewed it.
Initially, we have Jesus attending a feast given by Levi immediately
after the tax collector’s call and conversion yet preparatory to his en-
rollment among the twelve — and then Jesus’ self-invitation, as it were,
to the home of still another despised tax collector, Zacchaeus, whereby
salvation (Luke’s overriding theme) becomes a reality for him and his
household. To host Jesus is to be host to salvation. Where Jesus is
present on the human scene, salvation is present — such is the con-
tention of Luke, theologian of redemptive history. And what better
image for that kind of emphasis can there be than the feast, the major
metaphor for salvation.

Equally surprising, and at the other end of the spectrum, is that