

The Eucharistic Context of “The Breaking of the Bread” in Luke-Acts: A Catholic View

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WALKING AWAY from the holy city of Jerusalem shortly after the events surrounding Jesus’ Passion and death, two men come upon and converse with the Risen Jesus, whom they fail to recognize until, at table, he takes, blesses, breaks, and gives them bread—reminiscent of his actions at the feeding of the five thousand (Luke 9:12–17) and the Last Supper (22:14–20)—and vanishes, inspiring the enlightened disciples to return to Jerusalem and inspiring faith in the Risen Lord (Luke 24:13–35). This episode on the road to Emmaus presents a synopsis of the Eucharistic experience of the postresurrection Lukan community, in which the Risen Jesus becomes present in the “breaking of the bread” (κλάσει τοῦ ἄρτου), a theme that is further developed in Acts (2:42–47; 20:7–12; 27:33–38). The meals Jesus shared with his disciples and with others expressed the communal unity and fellowship essential to their mission, and served as occasions for teaching, healing, and prophecy (for example, with Levi, 5:27–39; Pharisees, 7:36–50; 11:37–54; 14:1–24; Zacchaeus, 19:1–10; and with the disciples in Jerusalem, 24:36–53).¹

¹ Eugene LaVerdiere, *The Eucharist in the New Testament and the Early Church* (Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 1996), 79–111, lists ten meals in Luke’s gospel, and eight situations in Acts, that he believes show the development of the Eucharist. While I think LaVerdiere overstates his case to see “Eucharist” in almost every meal situation in Luke-Acts, he does an admirable job of explaining the background to the “breaking of the bread” theme in Luke-Acts and its relationship to the Eucharist.

What he commissioned the disciples to do in “remembrance of me” (εἰς τὴν ἐμὴν ἀνάμνησιν, 22:19) at the Last Supper developed into a continuing pattern of sacred communal meals through which the presence of the Risen Lord was “recognized.” This paper will examine key postresurrection meal accounts in Luke–Acts to show how they describe the experience and aspects of the development of the Eucharist in these communities.

Background: The Importance of Meals in Judaism and Jesus’ Ministry

Meals serve as an important expression of purity (טהרה) in ancient Judaism, wherein people eat what is considered acceptable with “acceptable” people—one reason why Jesus’ welcoming and eating with tax collectors and sinners bothered the scribes and Pharisees (Lk 15:2)—to reveal the purity of both food and the people, expressing the holiness of Israel as God’s chosen people. In the book of Leviticus, for example, the imperative for purity is expressed by God’s command that “you shall be holy, because I am holy” (11:45; 19:2; 20:7); uncleanness will result in death (15:31), and failure to observe the statutes (תקנות) and judgments (משפטים) results in expulsion from the land. The detailed descriptions and regulations of sacrifices throughout Leviticus speak to the importance of purity and holiness in Israel.²

In the Priestly theology of Leviticus, freewill choices by human beings are responsible for committing “demonic” acts—impurity results from wrongdoing—which in turn could pollute the sanctuary that represented the presence of God. Therefore, by such impure actions, people “forced God out of the sanctuary and out of their lives.”³ The absence of God’s presence is equated with death. Holiness gives life and overcomes impurity–death; Israel serves God by obeying the commandments and thus overcomes impurity–death.⁴ Milgrom identifies purity and holiness “as antonyms,” so that the identification of impurity with death stands in contrast to holiness, which represents life. The later Priestly source “H,” extends holiness to all Israel, including even the גר, the resident alien, who are obliged to observe the commandments. Sanctification (מקדש) is an ongoing process for both priests and laity (Lev 21:8, 15, 23; 22:9, 16, 32); the sacrificial system fulfills the psychological, emotional, and religious needs of the people in terms of purification and restoration. Effec-

² Bruce Chilton, *A Feast of Meanings: Eucharistic Theologies from Jesus through Johnine Circles* (Leiden: Brill, 1994), 13–14.

³ Jacob Milgrom, *Leviticus 1–16* (New York: Doubleday, 1991), 43.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 46–47.

tive expiatory sacrifice requires an acknowledgment of guilt (חטא) by the worshipper, and reparation.⁵ Jesus likewise responded favorably to those who acknowledge their sins in contrast to the self-righteous (for example, Lk 18:9–14). Another important aspect of the sacrificial system in Leviticus is the concern for the poor: regardless of means, provision was made for any Israelite to bring an acceptable offering to the Lord.⁶

The extension of holiness to all Israel in the sacrificial system, including the resident alien, along with the concern for the poor, are reflected in Jesus' actions of embracing and eating with those considered "impure" by legalists. Jesus is sanctified by God as the holy one (Lk 1:35), filled with the Holy Spirit and bringing forth the holiness of God among his people, thus fulfilling the prophecy of Ezekiel (37:24–28) as the "new David," who is God's agent in sanctifying the people.⁷ Therefore Jesus represents the everlasting covenant of peace and the sanctuary (Ez 37:26–27). Jesus' desire to enter a Samaritan village (Lk 9:52–56), his healings and ministry in Galilee—an area avoided by legalistic Jews because of purity concerns—reveal the extension of holiness and membership in God's kingdom through his ministry. Whereas in the Hebrew Bible holiness is transmitted to things (Ex 29:37; 30:26–29; Lv 6:11, 20), or in Ezekiel from holy things to people (42:14; 44:19; 46:20), Jesus' holiness is transferred directly to people, as evidenced in his healings and cleansing of impurities.⁸

During the time of Jesus' ministry, Pharisees held influence among Jews in encouraging proper participation in the cult—note that many local scribes were likely Pharisees, which may explain why they are often grouped together in conflict with Jesus (for example, Lk 5:30; 11:37–53; 16:14–15; 20:45–47)—and served as interpreters of the Torah, including the declaration of "clean" and "unclean." Enter Jesus, whose meal fellowship in the gospels clearly challenges the conventional notions of purity, in respect to both the eating of foods and the status of those with whom he ate. The observation, by Jesus himself, that he is considered a "glutton"

⁵ Ibid., 48–50. The earlier Priestly source identified by Milgrom as P, restricted holiness to the sanctuary, priests, and Nazirites (Nm 6:5–8); H extends the concept more broadly (48).

⁶ Ibid., 51.

⁷ Hanna Stettler, "Sanctification in the Jesus Tradition," *Biblica* 85 (2004): 153–78, esp. 156.

⁸ Ibid., 160–65. Stettler sees Jesus as fulfilling the prophecy of Ezekiel 36, placing a renewed Spirit and heart within God's people, thus making them obedient to God's commandments (and pure).

(φάγοι) and a “friend of tax collectors and sinners” (τελωνῶν καὶ ἁμαρτωῶν 7:33–35), shows that, in the eyes of the Pharisees and other religious leaders, he eats with the wrong people. The group of “sinners” may collectively include those considered impure by their lifestyle and social status: In Rabbinic literature these are often the *אֲמֵהָאָרֶץ*, the *’am ha’aretz*, “people of the land,” considered impure due to their work, which prevents them from fulfilling the requirements of the Law, or because they engage in trade and fellowship with diverse groups of people.⁹ For Jesus, love and mercy—part of YHWH’s self-identification, *יְהוָה אֱלֹהֵינוּ* (see Ex 34:6)—become the true meaning of holiness, as he recasts Leviticus 19:2 (“be holy, for I, the Lord, your God, am holy”) as “be merciful, just as also your Father is merciful” (6:36). By forgiving sin and healing, Jesus overcomes the impurities that formerly excluded people from God’s kingdom. Jesus effectively abrogates purity Torah, and its divisions, in favor of ethical sanctification and the primacy of love and mercy.¹⁰

Wealthy foreigners who received tax-collecting contracts often hired tax collectors; many times these taxes consumed farmers’ profits, which caused them to be in debt. The tax collectors were free to add a profit for themselves in addition to the required taxes, and often engaged in corrupt practices; thus, this group was especially despised.¹¹ When Jesus commissions the seventy helpers to preach and heal (Lk 10:1–12), he insists that they remain in whatever houses accept them during their stay in various villages. Jesus’ command conflicts with the pharisaic view because it presupposes that the homes into which the disciples are welcomed, and the food served, will be clean. Further, the meals Jesus celebrates with his disciples and a variety of people considered “unclean,” anticipate the purity of the Kingdom of God; these meals become “parables of the kingdom,” with the wine drunk reflective of the *kiddush*—a festive drinking of wine done at Sabbaths and festivals—celebrating fellowship in anticipation of the joy of God’s kingdom.¹²

John Perry notes that after the Pharisees charge Jesus with eating with sinners (Lk 15:1–2), a series of parables follow—the lost sheep (15:3–7), the gold coin (vv. 8–10), and the prodigal son (vv. 11–32)—all of which end with the theme of rejoicing, with the final parable ending in the context of a feast celebrating the return of the lost son. Perry posits that Jesus probably taught these parables during the meals he celebrated with his disciples in anticipation of the kingdom. In the story of Zachaeus (19:1–10), Jesus

⁹ See *ibid.*, 24–27.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 166–73.

¹¹ Anthony J. Saldarini, *Publicans* (San Francisco: Harper, 1985), 841.

¹² Chilton, *Feast of Meanings*, 68.

recognizes his faith and tells him that he must stay at his house that day, which implies eating together; in the context of his conversion, this hopeless “sinner” is forgiven and promised salvation (v. 10), again in conflict with the prevailing views of the Jewish leaders. These meals, therefore, serve as an essential component of Jesus’ teaching in his prophetic mission, wherein he proclaimed and anticipated the coming Kingdom of God.¹³ In summary, Jesus likely used these fellowship meals for teaching and prayer, and it seems likely—based on the many instances where he takes, blesses, and breaks bread in the gospels, Acts, and 1 Corinthians 11—that it was his regular practice to offer a typical Jewish table blessing at these meals.

The Emmaus Story

Meeting the Lord on the Journey

Away from Jerusalem (Luke 24:13–16)

The story begins with two disciples dejectedly walking away from Jerusalem, the holy city of destiny, symbolic of their failure to yet understand the implications of Jesus’ death and the empty tomb. They are headed toward the unknown village of Emmaus, “about sixty stadia” or seven miles from Jerusalem; thus, though moving away in dejection, they remain within the environs of Jerusalem.¹⁴ In this context, while discussing the events of Jesus’ passion and death, they meet up with the Risen Jesus, whom they fail to recognize. The verb translated in the revised NAB as “conversing” (v. 14) is *ὁμιλουν*, which indicates an extended discussion; “all these things,” recalls for the reader the previous story (vv. 1–12) of the empty tomb. They were “discussing” (*συζητεῖν*) the events: the verb, used here and at the Last Supper (22:23), is translated “discuss” in both places, but carries the sense of inquiring or examining—that is, they are searching for meaning in light of the difficult events.¹⁵ The asking of questions also reflects the questioning that occurred at the Last Supper (22:23–24), and the questions asked at the Jewish Passover ritual (Ex 12:26).

Asking questions becomes a central element in the Passover ritual that, according to Luke, is the context of the Last Supper (Lk 22:15); the questioning here (see also the questions in vv. 17, 18, 19) connects this meal

¹³ John Michael Perry, *The Evolution of the Lord's Supper in the New Testament* (Kansas City, MO: Sheed & Ward, 1994), 11–15.

¹⁴ Joseph Fitzmyer, *The Gospel According to Luke* (New York: Doubleday, 1985), 1561–62, offers a detailed analysis of the various interpretations of Emmaus and concludes that its location is uncertain. He concludes, “Emmaus is in the vicinity of Jerusalem, and that is all that matters” (1562).

¹⁵ Luke Timothy Johnson, *Luke* (Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 1991), 393.

to the Last Supper. I also see a catechetical purpose here: Just as the Jewish Passover celebrates the deliverance of Israel from Egyptian bondage, so the Christian sacred meals celebrate a “new Passover” inaugurated by the death and Resurrection of Jesus, who becomes the host of their sacred meals done in “memory” of him. When Jesus “walks with them” (v. 15) the audience is reminded of the previous journey to Jerusalem (9:51–19:27), a key element of Luke’s gospel and the city of Jesus’ destiny.¹⁶ However, since “their eyes were kept from recognizing him,” (v. 16) their direction is *away* rather than toward Jerusalem, the place where the prophecy of Jesus’ death and Resurrection will be fulfilled (13:33–35). The disciples fail to recognize the Risen Jesus because his resurrected presence differs from how he appeared before; their clinging to his former presence and the accompanying sadness represent incomplete faith that prevents them recognizing his new, risen presence.¹⁷ Recognition of the Risen Lord requires faith and openness to transformation; to cling to past notions causes spiritual blindness.

Conversing with the Risen Jesus (Luke 24:17–24)

As Jesus asks the two men what they are speaking about, the men “stood still, looking sad.” This description adds a “novelistic touch” that vividly conveys the emotions of sorrow to the reader. Of the two men, only Cleopas is named, which may reflect actual historical tradition or inventive storytelling.¹⁸ The detail seems to me a reflection of an actual historical person. Cleopas questions Jesus’ apparent lack of knowledge of the events—ironically of the life and death of Jesus, whom they fail to recognize—with exasperation, and refers to him as a “visitor” (παροικεῖς), that is, simply one of the many pilgrims in Jerusalem for the celebration of Passover. This serves as an ironic understatement, since the audience recalls Jesus’ previous triumphal entry into Jerusalem (19:38) when he was acclaimed as a king who comes in the name of the Lord.¹⁹

Clearly, the disciples’ recognition of Jesus in his pre-resurrection form gave them some knowledge about him: “a man, a prophet, powerful in deed and word” (24:19); however, the ἀνὴρ connected to προφήτης reveals that their pre-resurrection understanding of Jesus failed to recognize his divinity. Jesus is presented as a Moses-like figure (v. 21) who will

¹⁶ John Paul Heil, *The Meal Scenes in Luke-Acts: An Audience-Oriented Approach* (Atlanta: The Society of Biblical Literature, 1999), 200.

¹⁷ Raymond Orlett, “The Influence of the Early Liturgy Upon the Emmaus Account,” *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 21 (1959): 212–19, see 215.

¹⁸ Johnson, *Luke*, 393.

¹⁹ Heil, *Meal Scenes*, 202.

redeem (λυτροῦσθαι, “set free, liberate”) Israel, reflecting the “prophet like Moses” of Deuteronomy 18:15; this same passage is quoted in Acts 7:37 by Stephen, when he speaks about God “raising up” a prophet who will be a deliverer (λυτρωτήν, Acts 7:35).²⁰ The word for “raise up,” ἀναστήσει, is the same verb used to describe the Resurrection in Luke 24:7. Jesus, therefore, fulfills Scripture as the prophet, like Moses, who brings redemption. Ironically, the disciples do recognize that it is the “third day” (τρίτην ταύτην ἡμέραν)—the day of Jesus’ resurrection, which they yet fail to recognize—and, like their counterparts in Jerusalem, they put no faith in the account of the women (24:11). They remain closed to the revelation before them, even though angels (ἄγγέλων, “messengers” from God) had reportedly appeared and the body was missing.

*Jesus Explains his Death as Fulfillment
of the Law and Prophets (Luke 24:25–27)*

Jesus begins by calling them “foolish” since they yet fail to accept and recognize Jesus as a suffering prophet/messiah—this despite his previous passion predictions (9:22; 17:25; 24:7), which allude to the Suffering Servant of Isaiah 52:13–53:12. In addition, they are “slow of heart” (βραδεῖς τῇ καρδίᾳ), which in Semitic thought is the center of moral reasoning and intellect; to have a “slow heart” emphasizes their inability to understand (Ps 95:8). His suffering “was necessary” (ἔδει, used by Luke to refer to the Divine will), just as it was “necessary” for him to stay with Zacchaeus (Lk 19:5), and to sacrifice the Passover lamb (22:7), which became a symbol of Christ, the Christian “Passover lamb” sacrificed on behalf of humanity’s sins.²¹ Jesus now explains the events of his life—though he remains unrecognized by them—as fulfilling “all the Scriptures.” This fulfillment includes *all* Scripture—a Lukan theme—and *begins* with the Torah and Prophets, but also includes the Psalms (24:44), and shows how Jesus will transcend their view of him as only “a prophet.” We already see at this point a parallel to the Eucharistic liturgy, beginning with an encounter and gathering, the presentation of Scripture, preaching, and, next, the breaking of the bread. Having the Scriptures explained in terms of God’s plan (ἔδει) prepares the disciples to recognize Jesus; however, they must first offer hospitality, an essential aspect of Christian Eucharist.

²⁰ The use of the words “powerful in deed and word” (δυνατὸς ἐν ἔργῳ καὶ λόγῳ, Lk 24:19) bolsters my view that this is a reference to the “prophet like Moses” of Deuteronomy 18:15.

²¹ Eugene LaVerdiere, *Dining in the Kingdom of God: The Origins of the Eucharist in the Gospel of Luke* (Chicago: Liturgy Training Publications, 1994), 166. For other uses of δεῖ in Luke see 2:49; 4:43; 13:14, 33; 21:9; 22:37; and Johnson, *Luke*, 395.

*Recognizing the Risen Jesus in the
Breaking of the Bread (Luke 24:28–35)*

As they near the village, Jesus “gave the impression” (Revised New American Bible [RNAB]) that he was continuing on his journey; the verb *προσεποιήσατο*, means “to pretend,” as if Jesus were testing their response. In response, the disciples “urged” him—*παρεβιάσαντο*, “strongly urged/prevailed upon”—Jesus to spend the evening with them, offering him *hospitality*, an essential element of the early Christian (and contemporary) celebration of the Eucharist.²² As with the multiplication story (9:12), it is near evening—the time when the Passover supper is celebrated and the beginning of a new day in Hebraic thinking—and they ask Jesus to “stay with us” (*Μείνον μεθ’ ἡμῶν*). This use of *μένω*, “to stay/dwell with,” recalls its use in the infancy narratives (1:56) where Mary stays with Elizabeth for “three months,” missionary hospitality (9:4; 10:7), the Zacchaeus story (19:5), and in the ministry of Peter and Paul (Acts 9:43; 16:15; 18:3, 20; 21:7, 8; 28:16)—all of which are instances of dwelling in homes with others, the context for the early Christian celebration of the Lord’s Supper.²³ Again I note that at this point in the story we have a gathering with Jesus, discussion of the Scriptures, and shared hospitality; the next logical element, then, is the breaking of the bread. While the two disciples have temporarily abandoned their faith, Jesus will not abandon them but will bring them to a renewed and deeper faith.²⁴

Now, at table, Jesus switches roles and becomes the host of the meal—reminiscent of the role of God as host of the banquet in Psalm 23—showing how their invitation of Jesus into their dwelling, symbolic of faith, will enable them to experience him in the breaking of the bread. The actions of Jesus and the words used—*took, blessed, broke, gave*—recall for the reader the multiplication story (Lk 9:16) and the Last Supper (Lk 22:19). Here Jesus “blesses” (*εὐλόγησεν*) the bread, where in 22:19 he “gave thanks” (*εὐχαριστήσαζ*): In Jewish prayer (as in the Table prayers) one blesses God; giving thanks is more reflective of Greek influence, and, here, likely reflects the convergence of traditions though the essential meaning is the same.²⁵ The text notes that “at table” (RNAB), which translates the Greek *κατακλιθῆναι*, which can be more literally translated “was reclining (at table),” which again recalls the Last Supper (22:14;

²² See Johnson, *Luke*, 396, for more comment on the specified verbs.

²³ The use of *μένω* is important in the gospel of John, and its use in Luke may reflect a relationship between the two gospels.

²⁴ See LaVerdiere, *Dining in the Kingdom*, 168.

²⁵ See Perry, *The Evolution of the Lord’s Supper*, 44–48.

ἀνέπεσεν), and reflects a formal meal or symposium.²⁶ In the giving of the blessed and broken bread, “their eyes were opened” (v. 31), enabling them to “recognize” (ἐπέγνωσαν) the Risen Jesus: The use of “recognized” instead of “see” reflects how the early Christians recognized the presence of Jesus during their celebrations of the Eucharist, though he was present in a different way from when he walked in their midst. *The early Christians recognize the presence of the Risen Jesus in Word and sacrament—the belief of Christians who today believe in the real presence of Christ in the Eucharist—not an appearance of the earthly Jesus.* This seems confirmed by the Greek text, where “he vanished from their sight” (αὐτοῦς ἀφαντοῦς ἐγένετο) literally means he “became invisible” to them; rather than “vanishing” and being “gone,” Jesus remains but is unseen.²⁷

Whereas before the disciples were accused by Jesus of having “slow hearts,” after experiencing the Risen Lord in the breaking of the bread they confess that their hearts were “burning” (καιομένην, v. 32) within them when Jesus “was opening” (διήνοιγεν) the Scriptures to them (v. 32). The verb translated “burning” often represents the emotion of love in Greek literature, and in the LXX is often used to refer to the presence of the Lord (Ex 3:2; Dt 4:11; 9:15; Ps 49:3; Sir 48:1; Is 30:27; 62:1);²⁸ here it reflects the presence of the Lord in the opening of Scripture, similar to the Hebrew concept of opening or revealing (פָּתַח) the Torah (for example, Psalm 119:18).

Now, having been enlightened through the opening of Scripture and the breaking of the bread, the disciples reverse course from the abandonment of their faith and mission—symbolized by the journey away from Jerusalem—and return to Jerusalem with new faith and zeal (Lk 24:33). There they are greeted with the news that Jesus (the Lord, κύριοις) “has truly been raised” (ὅντωις ἡγέρθη): What the two men/angels in dazzling apparel said in 24:6 (“he has been raised”) is now the belief of the community. Finally, the two disciples relate their own experience of the Risen Jesus “on the road” (ἐν τῇ ὁδῷ)—recalling the travel theme of Luke—wherein he became known to them (ἐγνώσθη) in the breaking of the bread (τῇ κλάσει τοῦ ἄρτου), the phrase found in Acts (2:42, 46; 20:7, 11; 27:35) to refer to the early Christian Eucharistic experience.

²⁶ Max Zerwick and Mary Grosvenor, *Grammatical Analysis of the Greek New Testament* (Rome: Biblical Institute Press, 1981), 282; LaVerdiere, *Dining in the Kingdom*, 169.

²⁷ Zerwick and Grosvenor, *Grammatical Analysis*, 283.

²⁸ Johnson, *Luke*, 397.

Theological Summary

The Emmaus story may be based on some actual historical occurrence—for example, Mark 16:12 (longer ending) refers to an appearance to two disciples walking in the country—but has been embellished by Luke and the postresurrection Church for apologetic and catechetical reasons. The Eucharistic community gathers together for shared hospitality and the proclamation of the Word, the fulfillment of which is found in the Risen Lord. Following Jesus' tradition with them during his ministry, and the commission at the Last Supper, the community continues to gather for sacred meals of fellowship and prayer. At such meals, the presence of the Risen Lord was experienced and needed to be communicated both catechetically to the community of believers and catechumens, and in defense of the Church's essential belief in the resurrection and the ongoing presence of the Risen Lord in Word and sacrament. This presence, we will see below in Acts, signifies the unity of the Christian community, and provides healing and strength.

The Breaking of the Bread in the Acts of the Apostles

Eating Salt with the Risen Jesus

Acts 1:4 states that the Risen Jesus was “meeting with them” (the disciples) during the forty days preceding the “promise of the Father,” that is, the Holy Spirit at Pentecost. In Greek, however, “meeting with them” is literally συναλιζόμενος, which may be translated “to take salt together,” that is, to share a meal.²⁹ In the ancient world, salt was essential as a preservative and seasoning, and would always be a part of a meal; hence, to “share salt” with others refers to a eating a meal.³⁰ Salt was used for the purification of Jewish sacrifices (Ex 30:34–35; Ez 43:23–24); in Leviticus 2:13, instructions are given that sacrifices “shall be seasoned with salt” (במלח תמלח), and mentions the “salt of the covenant of your God” (מלח ברית אלהים). Another reference to the covenant with the

²⁹ While a diversity of opinion exists on the translation of συναλιζόμενος, I follow the argument that this verb literally means “eating salt with” against “to gather together” and, therefore, is “an allusion to the fellowship meals (like that of Emmaus) in which the disciples encountered the risen Christ. Richard J. Dillon, “Acts of the Apostles,” in *New Jerusalem Bible Commentary*, eds. R. E. Brown et al. (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1991), 723, claims that the meaning “eating with” is assured by Luke 24:43, Acts 10:41 (*synephagomen*), and the singular number and present tense of the participle. G. W. H. Lampe, “Acts,” in *Peake's Commentary on the Bible*, ed. Matthew Black (Don Mills, ON, Canada: Thomas Nelson, 1962), 886.

³⁰ Eugene LaVerdiere, *The Breaking of the Bread: The Development of the Eucharist in the Acts of the Apostles* (Chicago: Liturgy Training Publications, 1998), 39–58.

Lord is found in Numbers 18:19, translated “inviolable covenant” (New American Bible [NAB]), but literally “a covenant of salt forever” (עֹלָם בְּרִית מֶלַח).³¹ Therefore the use of this expression in Acts 1:4 reflects the experience of the Risen Lord in the communal meals of the early Christian community, which celebrated the “new Covenant” (Lk 22:20; ἡ καινὴ διαθήκη). Appropriately, then, Luke’s second volume opens with notice of the continuing practice of communal meals in which the Risen Lord is “recognized.”

*The Breaking of the Bread in the Communal Life
of the Early Church (Acts 2:42–47)*

Just as at Emmaus Jesus spoke of fulfilling the Scriptures, previous to this summary of the communal life of the early Church, Peter—taking roles formerly held by the earthly Jesus, a common theme in Acts—speaks of the fulfillment of Scripture in his Pentecost speech, using references from the Prophets and Psalms (see Lk 24:44) as midrashic proof texts for the Messiahship of the Risen Jesus (Is 2:2 and Jl 3:1–5 in Acts 2:17–21; Ps 16:8–11 in Acts 2:25–28; and Ps 110:1 in Acts 2:34). The chapter then ends with a summary of the communal life in the early Apostolic Church (Acts 2:42), which includes “the teaching of the Apostles” (τῇ διδαχῇ τῶν ἀποστόλων), communal life (τῇ κοινωνίᾳ), the breaking of the bread (τῇ κλάσει τοῦ ἄρτου), and the prayers (προσευχαῖς). These actions reveal a community that engages in liturgical worship as part of its essential character. The experience of the Risen Lord at table in Emmaus and Jerusalem evidently inspired a regular practice, for the people broke bread in their homes on a daily basis (v. 46), and in the larger fellowship gatherings (v. 42; see 1 Cor 11:18–26).

Continuing the work of the earthly Jesus, the apostles performed “signs and wonders”; the people hold goods in common; and meet in the temple area and break bread in their homes. This reflects how the earliest Jewish Christians for a time continued to engage in Jewish prayer, symbolized by the reference to the temple, but also have established “house churches”—an example is seen in Paul’s description of the Eucharist in 1 Corinthians 11—for the celebration of their sacred covenant meals with the Risen Lord. From the first Passover on (Ex 12), it is clear that the family home is the typical place for the celebration of Jewish religious meals; now, the Christian home becomes the place for Christian sacred meals. Numerous similarities exist between Luke’s description of the communal life of the

³¹ See *ibid.*; James D. G. Dunn, *The Acts of the Apostles* (Valley Forge, PA: Trinity Press International, 1996), 7–8; William Neil, *Acts* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 1987), 65.

early Church and the celebration of the Eucharist in the early Church document (ca. 90?), *The Didache*.³²

In *Didache*, number 9, instruction is given for the celebration of the Eucharist. Thanks is to be given over broken bread for “the life and knowledge you have made known to us through your servant Jesus”: this reflects the knowledge and recognition of God’s truth communicated by the Risen Lord as he explained the Scriptures on the road to Emmaus. The Eucharist is described as “spiritual food and drink” that gives “life eternal”; the concluding section offers prayer for the unity of the Church. *Didache*, number 14, instructs the people to gather for Eucharist “on the Lord’s Day,” Sunday, “and break bread and offer the Eucharist.” Again, this follows the Lukan schema of equating the breaking of the bread on the Lord’s Day with the celebration of the communal Eucharist. It also calls for a prior confession of faults, “so that your sacrifice may be a pure one.” This recalls the purity that is an essential component of Jewish sacred meals and the use of salt in Jewish sacrificial meals.³³ The ideal set forth in this passage of Acts provides the background for the following two occurrences of the breaking of bread.

Paul Breaks Bread at Troas and Revives Eutychus (Acts 20:7–12)

The community is meeting “on the first day of the week”—τῇ μᾶ τῶν σαββάτων, literally “on one of the Sabbaths”—which, as at Emmaus, is Sunday, the day of the Resurrection and the celebration of the Christian Passover, the Eucharist.³⁴ The context is “after the feast of Unleavened Bread,” that is, the Passover (Acts 20:6); the service could well have occurred in the evening after 6 p.m. on Saturday, if Luke is using the Jewish concept of the Sabbath as an analogy here.³⁵

At this gathering, Paul was “speaking” (διελέγετο, literally “lecturing”) to the community, most probably explicating the Scripture texts used in the service; this parallels the presentation of Jesus on the road to Emmaus, and, as with the journey theme in the Emmaus story, Paul and his companions are in the midst of a journey. A young man named Eutychus—the name Εὐτυχοῦς means “good fortune/lucky” and may be purposefully used by Luke, in light of the healing that will occur in the

³² The references to the *Didache* in this paper are from *Early Christian Writings*, ed. Andrew Louth, trans. Maxwell Staniforth, rev. ed. (London: Penguin, 1987), 194–97.

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Dunn, *Acts*, 268, makes a similar connection and notes the parallels in evidence of this tradition in the early Church in 1 Cor 16:2 and Rev 1:10.

³⁵ Neil, *Acts*, 211.

context of this celebration—is sitting in an open window.³⁶ Apparently Paul's long-winded sermon ("he kept on speaking until midnight," RNAB) caused the young man to doze and fall to his apparent death (Acts 20:9). Paul, however, comes down and heals the boy by touching him and, reminiscent of Jesus healing Jairus's daughter (Lk 8:50, 52), tells the people, "Do not be alarmed," since he had life in him. Paul's actions also reflect those of the prophet Elijah in healing the son of the widow at Zerephath (1 Kgs 17:19–22), and of the prophet Elisha in healing the son of the Shunammite woman (2 Kgs 4:32–36).³⁷ Note that before Elijah heals the woman's son, he prophesizes that her flour and oil will not run out (this is fulfilled); after Elisha healed the Shunammite's son, he multiplied loaves (2 Kgs 4:42–44). These prophetic stories from the Hebrew Scriptures perhaps provide a source as well as a parallel for Luke's crafting of this incident.

Next, after Paul had "gone up and having broken the bread" (καὶ κλάσας τὸν ἄρτον) and spoke further before departing, the people were "immeasurably comforted."³⁸ This scene shows how Paul provided comfort and encouragement for the community by providing life in place of death, and gives an example of the encouragement he provided the churches during his farewell journey. The accompanying of his instruction with the Eucharistic breaking of the bread recalls the commitment of the believers in Acts 2:42, 46, and in this context serves as a type of farewell meal paralleling Jesus at his Last Supper.³⁹ The scene also provides an example of the healing effects of the Eucharistic celebration, wherein spiritual and even physical healing occurs as the community is nourished spiritually through teaching and sacramental participation. The actions of the community reflect typical Jewish hospitality wherein a lengthy fellowship takes place along with the provision of food and drink.⁴⁰ Finally, the story shows that "death is powerless in the Eucharistic assembly," and "the breaking of the bread is a source of life."⁴¹ We also are reminded that Jesus broke bread after rising from the dead (Lk 24:31), again presenting the life-giving effects of the Eucharist for the Christian community (see Jn 6:50–51).

³⁶ Luke Timothy Johnson, *Acts of the Apostles* (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 1992), 356.

³⁷ Neil, *Acts*, 212.

³⁸ Johnson, *Acts*, 356.

³⁹ Robert C. Tannehill, *The Narrative Unity of Luke-Acts: A Literary Interpretation*, vol. 2, *The Acts of the Apostles* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 1994), 250–51.

⁴⁰ Dunn, *Acts*, 268–69; however, I disagree with Dunn's view that to think of this meal in terms of a sermon and Eucharist is "anachronistic."

⁴¹ LaVerdiere, *The Breaking of the Bread*, 200.

Paul Breaks Bread During the Storm at Sea (Acts 27:33–38)

Now Paul is traveling to Rome, a prisoner in the hands of the centurion Julius, along with Aristarchus, a Macedonian from Thessalonica, who was with Paul when he broke bread at Troas (Acts 20:4). This section is the final “we” passage in Acts, which raises the possibility that Luke was present during this voyage. A parallel between Paul and Jesus will again be seen, not only in the breaking of the bread, but in Paul’s bravery in taking control in the midst of a terrifying storm (Lk 8:22–27). The vocabulary of salvation (σωθῆναι, Acts 27:32) and survival (σωτηρία, Acts 27:34) connect survival at sea as symbolic of Christian salvation, with the storm symbolic of the chaos that threatens salvation.⁴² In Hebraic thought the sea represents the powers of chaos that can only be harnessed by Divine intervention (Ps 107:23–32). When the sailors had threatened to abandon ship, Paul warns them that doing so will prevent them from being saved: It will only be through communal unity and sharing in the food Paul will offer when he breaks the bread that they will survive and be saved.⁴³

While they are adrift and seemingly abandoned to the elements, day breaks (Acts 27:33), reminiscent of Easter morning; Paul urges the passengers to eat, since they have gone without food for fourteen days. Paul then “took bread, gave thanks to God in front of them all, broke it, and began to eat” (RNAB, v. 35; λαβὼν ἄρτον εὐχαρίστησεν τῷ θεῷ ἐνώπιον πάντων καὶ κλάσας ἥρξατο ἐσθίειν); the words used parallel the Eucharistic formula (Lk 9:16; 22:19; 24:30). The detail that Paul ate in front of the passengers—who are presumably non-believers—recalls the Risen Jesus eating a piece of baked fish in front of his disciples (Lk 24:43). As the Risen Jesus gave an example for his disciples of the necessity of eating communally, so Paul gives thanks as a Christ-like figure and, by eating in front of them, witnesses to the life-giving presence of Christ.⁴⁴ Following Paul’s example, the rest of the passengers were encouraged (εὐθυοι) and ate (Acts 27:36–37); having followed Paul’s teaching and example, they landed safely on the shore (v. 44).

Paul’s actions here recall the importance previously placed on meal fellowship (Acts 2:42–47), and its healing, life-giving effects (20:7–12); the Eucharistic meal transforms the participants to greater faith, as it did to the disciples at Emmaus (24:30–35). Whether the participants who ate following Paul’s breaking of the bread received the blessed Eucharistic bread or other food is not clear; I argue that they received Eucharistic

⁴² Ibid., 214–18.

⁴³ Heil, *Meal Scenes*, 294–96.

⁴⁴ Ibid., 300–301; LaVerdiere, *The Breaking of the Bread*, 221.

bread, and that this reveals the gentile mission. Here the promise of salvation (Luke 21:18) is expanded to include all disciples, in fulfillment of the prophecy in Luke 3:6.⁴⁵ The meal empowers Paul for his mission, and brings faith to those who would otherwise have been in danger of perishing, and recalls the encouragement given to the people at Troas (Acts 20:12). For the reader, the story reminds us of the saving, healing, and transforming nature of the Eucharist.

Conclusion

In the breaking of the bread the Risen Lord is recognized, as at Emmaus; this reflects the experience and recognition of the presence of the Risen Jesus in the sacred meals celebrated in memory of him by the early Christians, and carries over into the “real presence” theology of sacramental groups today. Jesus’ previous meals, particularly the Feeding of the Five Thousand and the Last Supper, set the stage for the early Church’s continuation and development of his meal traditions as an essential part of community life and a source of spiritual nourishment. The development of this theme in Acts shows the importance of the ritual of the breaking of the bread in daily communal life, and the healing and saving effects of sharing in the breaking of the bread, which is Luke’s designation for what eventually becomes the Christian celebration of the Eucharist. **N-V**

⁴⁵ See Heil, *Meal Scenes*, 303–4; Tannehill, *Narrative Unity*, 336–7.

