

**Luke 5:27 – 32: The Calling of Levi**  
**An Exegetical Study**  
**By Randall Edwards (11/2/2011)**

The story of Levi's call and subsequent banquet to which Jesus is invited is a key component in Luke's portrait of Jesus as the initiator of a Kingdom that brings with it a reversal of values particularly demonstrated in social and religious status and stratification. This essay will demonstrate that the sharing of a meal together in Mediterranean culture was more than simple hospitality, but that such intimacy expressed the perceived social status and acceptance of each other by those who gathered to participate. Luke utilizes this particular story to provide a specific demonstration that Jesus is the fulfilment of Isaiah 61:1 – 2, a text read by Jesus in Nazareth and highlighted by Luke's recounting of the story in Luke 4:16 – 30. This Messianic text which is more than a mere prediction of a coming messiah is used by Luke to identify the nature of the good news of the Kingdom which Jesus proclaimed. Thus, Arthur Just's summary of this passage identifies the direction of this essay:

The feast with Levi the tax collector is the first meal in Luke's Gospel and is programmatic for all other meals, introducing the major themes that will be associated with Luke's table fellowship matrix. The community invited to share in the table fellowship of Jesus is made up of the outcasts of society, the tax collectors and sinners. These sinners receive the blessings of the kingdom of God because they are poor, as Luke's first beatitude announces in 6:20.<sup>1</sup>

**The context of Luke 5:27 – 32**

The gospel of Luke is one of three gospels known as the "synoptics" because it shares much of its material with Matthew and Mark. However, all three synoptics have their unique portraits of Jesus. Luke is the only gospel that has a sequel (Acts), and therefore the story of Luke's writing is more extensive than the others. While there are numerous introductory issues that can be examined, those which are particularly relevant to this text will be identified. The first is the picture Luke paints of Jesus as a prophet who both acts within the prophetic role but also is the fulfilment

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<sup>1</sup> Arthur A. Just, *The Ongoing Feast: Table Fellowship and Eschatology at Emmaus* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1993):130-131.

of previous prophetic texts.<sup>2</sup> Moreover, Luke emphasizes God's faithfulness to Israel<sup>3</sup>, but not in the way Jews expected. Instead of supporting the religious and self-righteous, God is viewed as the patron of the poor, the outcasts and the non-elite over whom the wealthy and highly religious exercise power and superiority.<sup>4</sup> DeSilva describes the common concept of the Greek and Roman cultures where patrons provided favours (grace) for both cities and individuals, many of whom were poor and oppressed and were in need of influential assistance to gain the necessities of life.<sup>5</sup> Whether or not God is specifically described as a patron, the key is that Luke presents Jesus as a friend of sinners, the outcast, and the oppressed.

The passage under consideration occurs after Jesus' announcement at Nazareth that He was the fulfilment of the messianic hope and blessings predicted in Isaiah 61 (see Luke 4:16 – 30). What follows in Luke's gospel are specific illustrations or occurrences of these fulfilments;<sup>6</sup> these include the casting out of a demon in Capernaum (Luke 4:31 – 44), a man healed of leprosy (Luke 5:13 – 15), the healing of a paralytic (Luke 5:17 – 26) and table fellowship with a tax collector (Luke 5:27 – 32). At the same time, this text is one of five controversy stories in which the actions of Jesus raise the ire of the religious leaders of His day (see 5:17ff, 5:26ff, 5:33ff, 6:1ff and 6:6ff)<sup>7</sup> and culminate in a statement that the Pharisees and teachers of the law were discussing what they would do to Him (Luke 6:11). The discussion of new wine in old wineskins (Luke 5:33ff) might be seen as the summary statement of the conflict which reflects a new value system that is integral to the arrival of the kingdom.

The story in Luke 5:27 – 32 is paralleled in Matthew (9:9-13) and Mark (2:13 – 17). However, there are significant Lucan additions that

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<sup>2</sup> Philip Harland, "Introduction to the Gospels As Portraits of Jesus" <http://www.archive.org/details/Podcast2.1IntroductionToTheGospelsAsPortraitsOfJesus> accessed 15/11/2010.

<sup>3</sup> David A DeSilva, *An Introduction to the New Testament Contexts, Methods & Ministry Formation* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2004):316.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid, 335.

<sup>5</sup> David A. DeSilva, *Honor, Patronage, Kingship & Purity Unlocking New Testament Culture* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2000):95ff.

<sup>6</sup> Paul J. Achtemeier, Joel B. Green and Marianne Meye Thompson, *Introducing the New Testament its Literature and Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2001):162.

<sup>7</sup> Robert J. Karris, *Eating Your Way Through Luke's Gospel* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical press, 2006): 34.

assist the reader in grasping Luke's use of the story (See Appendix A for the identification of these unique features). These include the introductory phrase ("after this") which ties this story to the previous stories, the characterization of Levi as one who "left everything" (vs. 28), the description of the meal as a "great banquet" (vs. 29), the alteration of the word "sinners" to "others" (vs. 29), the questioning of the disciples as to why they (as opposed to Jesus) eat and drink with tax collectors and sinners (vs. 30), and the addition of the comment Jesus came to call sinners "to repentance" (vs. 32). These editorial alterations most likely arise out of Luke's overall purpose which may have included an apologetic to his readers who may have come under criticism for their own association with the outcasts of society. Talbert cites Origen's *Against Celsus* 3.59f where Celsus criticises the religious gatherings of Christians because they "invite anyone who is a sinner, or foolish, or simpleminded. In short, any unfortunate will be accepted in the kingdom of God."<sup>8</sup> However, in contrast to Walker<sup>9</sup>, Stein argues against those who suggest that the story was created for such an apologetic; instead, it was used by Luke to validate the church's approach<sup>10</sup> to the poor and oppressed.

### Key Concepts

In order to understand the controversy that arose because of Jesus' attendance at a meal, some discussion of the key concepts or terms is required. The first is that of the social and religious standing of tax collectors. Hyam Maccoby argues that tax collectors were not "unclean" and therefore the issue was not one of religious purity.<sup>11</sup> However, tax collectors were generally wealthy because they extorted money from tax payers by overcharging them.<sup>12</sup> Patella gives three reasons why the Jews detested tax collectors: first, they made themselves idolaters by cooperating with the Romans and thereby tacitly accepting Caesar's claim to lordship; second, they betrayed their people by working for the Romans; and third, they "could and would sell whole families into slavery

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<sup>8</sup> Charles H. Talbert, *Reading Luke: A literary and Theological Commentary* (Macon, GA: Smith & Helwys Publishing, 2002):66.

<sup>9</sup> William O. Walker, "Jesus and the Tax Collectors", *Journal of Biblical Theology* 97/2 (1978):233.

<sup>10</sup> Robert Stein, *Luke (NAC)* (Nashville: B & H Publishing Group, 1993):182.

<sup>11</sup> Hyam Maccoby, "How Unclean Were Tax-collectors", *Biblical Theology Bulletin*, 31/2 (2001):60-63.

<sup>12</sup> Arland J. Hultgren, *The Parables of Jesus A Commentary* (Grand Rapids; Eerdmans, 2000):469.

in order to meet their demands".<sup>13</sup> However, the primary issue was most likely their dishonesty which was presumed.<sup>14</sup> Thus tax collectors were considered part of the lower class who were outcasts not because of poverty but because of their reputation and practices.<sup>15</sup>

Tax collectors and outcasts are not the only people with whom Jesus shares meals in Luke's gospel. However, in the three instances where Jesus goes to the home of a Pharisee (7:36ff, 11:37ff, and 14:1ff), controversy arises.<sup>16</sup> Pharisees were highly respected by the common people of Jesus' day<sup>17</sup> although they were neither amongst the wealthiest people of the day nor a part of the priestly aristocracy.<sup>18</sup> They were perceived as the most committed to serving God, their devotion to which was expressed "through the study and observance of the Torah and by maintaining purity in all matters."<sup>19</sup> Of particular concern to them were the interpretations of the law that guided them in regards to food and meals, and, thus, they "maintained a separation from others and ate only with those who, like them, observed the laws of purity."<sup>20</sup> No doubt it is their practice, their popularity, and the presence of an every-increasing popular Jesus (note Luke's constant acknowledgement of such in chapter 4:15, 22, 32, 36-37, 40 and 42) that gave rise to their complaints about Jesus' (and his disciples') practice of eating with such "sinners" (for Luke this term is first used by the Pharisees in their question – see vs. 30).

However, the controversial meal is brought about by more than the simple contrast between Pharisee and Tax-collector. Table fellowship or the exclusion from such "functioned as a means to define boundaries between those present and the rest of the world."<sup>21</sup> It is here that social order is both identified and preserved. You only share a meal with those who are acceptable friends, and you intentionally exclude those who are unacceptable. Meals were more than simply the sharing of food, but

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<sup>13</sup> Michael Patella, *The Gospel According to Luke* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2005):38.

<sup>14</sup> Timothy A. Friedrichsen, "The Temple, A Pharisee, a Tax Collector, and the Kingdom of God: Rereading a Jesus Parable (Luke 18:10-14A)" *Journal of Biblical Literature* 1241 (2005):108.

<sup>15</sup> Jirair S. Tashjian, "Tax Collectors and Sinners" <http://www.crivoice.org/tax.html> accessed 17/11/10.

<sup>16</sup> Karris, 34.

<sup>17</sup> Friedrichsen, 110.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid, 106-107.

<sup>19</sup> R. Alan Culpepper, "The Gospel of Luke Introduction, Commentary, and Reflections" *Interpreter's Bible* (12 vol.), ed. Leander Keck (Nashville: Abingdon, 1995):9:127.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

<sup>21</sup> Hultgren, 470.

consisted of three common components: the food eaten, the discussion that takes place (teaching), and the participants (who always reveal something about the host).<sup>22</sup> In this case, Luke describes the meal as a “banquet” which would have eschatological overtones just as it does in Luke 12:36 and 14:16, although different words are used there. This is even more clear when one reads this story in light of Jesus’ proclamation of the good news of the Kingdom in Luke 4 where the outcasts of society will be the recipients of the kingdom’s blessings. Such a proclamation nearly brought Jesus to a premature death (Luke 4:28-29); how much more would the practice of such a proclamation cause animosity? In this one event Jesus has transgressed the social boundaries, just as He would do so in his treatment of lepers, women and others who lived outside the limits of social acceptability.<sup>23</sup> Thus, Just suggests that this may very well have been “one of the reasons Jesus was put to death.”<sup>24</sup> Nevertheless, for Jesus, table fellowship was indicative of the kingdom values, and his willingness to share such with the “outsiders” of society is the visible expression of the new age he was ushering in through his death on the cross.<sup>25</sup>

While not specifically mentioned in this particular story, the arrival of the kingdom of God is a key presupposition that lies beneath the surface of all that Luke writes, and it sits as the backdrop to this story as well. Matera describes the kingdom of God as the “horizon against which Jesus makes his ethical demands” and goes on to say that it is a “new age of salvation . . . in which God is effecting a reversal of fortunes.”<sup>26</sup> In this sense Jesus introduces a complete reversal of human judgment, and, as Friedrichsen indicates, “even or especially of religious judgment.”<sup>27</sup> The story of the banquet at Levi’s house is a clear expression of just such a reversal.

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<sup>22</sup> Just, 129-130.

<sup>23</sup> Friedrichsen, 119.

<sup>24</sup> Just, 128.

<sup>25</sup> Robert Doran, “The Pharisee and the Tax Collector An Agonistic Story” *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 69 (2007):270.

<sup>26</sup> Frank J. Matera, *New Testament Ethics The Legacies of Jesus and Paul* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1996):62.

<sup>27</sup> Friedrichsen, 118.

## The Text

Our attention is now turned to the actual story itself. There are two distinctive components within Luke's account of Levi's conversion. The first is his call which serves as an introduction to the second part, the controversy regarding table fellowship.<sup>28</sup> At the same time there are numerous questions which the story fails to clarify. These include the lack of explanation regarding Jesus' invitation to Levi to follow him, the lack of any miraculous event that might convince Levi to do so, the fact that Levi leaves everything but still has a house and sufficient resources to host a banquet, and why the Pharisees are actually present at the banquet.<sup>29</sup>

As indicated above, the opening phrase of verse 27 ("After this") enables Luke to link this story with that which precedes it<sup>30</sup>; in particular, this is yet another example of the people on whom God bestows His favour and forgiveness.<sup>31</sup> At the same time, the phrase is typically used in the Luke to separate stories<sup>32</sup> that probably did not occur together. Luke's description of Levi suggests that he was one of the toll collectors who sat at key places and collected tolls rather than one who collected personal taxes from individuals or families. That Jesus asks him to "follow" is a typical term to indicate the response of a disciple to his master and is found elsewhere in Luke's gospel as the response of a disciple (5:11, 18:28). Luke uses an aorist tense to indicate that the "leaving of everything" is completed, but an imperfect tense to indicate that the "following" is an ongoing activity.

The heart of the story begins with Levi holding a "great banquet" for Jesus. This probably indicates the effect of "Jesus' call to repentance" (5:32), even though the term is not specifically used of Levi. As with other disciples, the "leaving everything" appears to be indicative of the decisive break of a disciple<sup>33</sup> as they appear to have things to which they can return even though they are "forsaking all" (Luke 18:28). In this

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<sup>28</sup> John Nolland, *Luke 1-9:20 (WBC)* (Dallas: Word, 1989):242.

<sup>29</sup> Sharon H. Ringe, *Luke* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1995):83.

<sup>30</sup> Just, 133.

<sup>31</sup> Walter L. Liefeld, "Luke" *The Expositor's Bible Commentary* (12 vols), ed. Frank E. Gaebelin (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1984):8:883. See also I. H. Marshall, *The Gospel of Luke (NIGNT)* (Exeter: Paternoster Press, 1978):217.

<sup>32</sup> Fernando Méndez-Moratalla, *The Paradigm of Conversion in Luke* (New York: Continuum International Publishing Group, 2004):89.

<sup>33</sup> Marshall, 219.

case, Levi still has his wealth as is indicated by his ability to provide a large banquet. It is a banquet of joy<sup>34</sup> and celebration and the presence of tax collectors would fit the circle of friends befitting Levi, but certainly not so for the religious elite of the day. Matthew and Mark both indicate that the guests included "tax collectors and sinners", while Luke modifies the second term by simply calling them "others." This may reflect the presence of Jesus' disciples<sup>35</sup> who were actually participants in the banquet as far as Luke is concerned, but are not explicitly so in the other gospel accounts. The Pharisees may not have attended the meal but may have come later to attend the discussion which was a part of the normal table fellowship.<sup>36</sup>

It is not surprising that the Pharisees began to complain concerning the disregard for social norms when it comes to table fellowship. It is they who believe that they are "righteous", a common perspective found in Luke's gospel (see Luke 18:9).<sup>37</sup> Their objection is based on the information discussed above regarding table fellowship and its role in setting boundaries; here the boundaries have, in the opinion of the Pharisees, clearly been crossed.

Jesus' response (5:31) recalls a common proverb of the day<sup>38</sup> which would be accepted as appropriate. The connection between the medical and the moral had already been made by philosophers in the Hellenistic era,<sup>39</sup> and Jesus simply uses it to illustrate his point. However, it may be worth noting that physicians did not always have a good reputation within Judaism, and the Mishnah, in particular, uses some disparaging words to describe this profession<sup>40</sup>. Manns suggests this was because doctors often attended the rich and ignored the poor, even though it was the poor who were sick.<sup>41</sup> What this does affirm is that, in the Kingdom, those in dire straits will get the attention they need (i.e., fellowship and inclusion).

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<sup>34</sup> Nolland, 245.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid.

<sup>36</sup> Méndez-Moratalla, 97.

<sup>37</sup> Stein, 182.

<sup>38</sup> Liefeld, 884.

<sup>39</sup> Méndez-Moratalla, 100.

<sup>40</sup> *Mishnah* 4:13 (Kiddushin),

[http://en.wikisource.org/wiki/Mishnah/Seder\\_Nashim/Tractate\\_Kiddushin/Chapter\\_4/13#Explanation](http://en.wikisource.org/wiki/Mishnah/Seder_Nashim/Tractate_Kiddushin/Chapter_4/13#Explanation) accessed 10/2/2011.

<sup>41</sup> Frederick Manns, "Everyday Life in the Time of Jesus" (1998), <http://198.62.75.1/www1/ofm/mag/TSmgenB3.html> accessed 17/11/2010

Moreover, the response of the “righteous” to the “sinner” in the kingdom is not one of separation (to keep one safe from disease) but accessibility and availability on the part of the physician and those who form community as his disciples.<sup>42</sup>

Verse 32 summarizes Jesus’ mission which is to call sinners to repentance. His presence at the banquet of Levi, according to Luke, does not appear to be directly linked to Levi’s repentance. Nevertheless, the theme of joy found in Luke is often linked to repentance (15:7, 10, 22 – 27). Moreover, it would appear that the association (table fellowship) with sinners is part of the plan to call them to repentance rather than an activity dependent on repentance. Levi may have repented, as expressed in his following Jesus, but Luke does not suggest the other tax collectors have followed suit.

## **Conclusion**

The story of Levi’s call and subsequent hosting of a banquet in honour of Jesus reflects the Lucan emphasis on the arrival of a kingdom that challenges social norms, distinctives and exclusions. Having reported Jesus’ announcement in Nazareth that he was proclaiming a reversal of values as the messianic initiator of the kingdom, Luke then proceeds to show how these values are demonstrated by Jesus through healings, forgiveness and inclusion within the new community. The story of Levi rejects the exclusiveness of the religious elite, the Pharisees and any others who may view themselves as “righteous”, and in doing so generates opposition. Such is the opposition that it will eventually contribute to the crucifixion of this kingdom prophet, but such is the nature of the reversals that even this death will draw more to be included in the kingdom.

For those Christians who live in the contemporary world, there is a clear message to be heard from this story. It is a message that hints that God does not play by our rules. The rules of the Kingdom cut across the distinctions of righteous and sinner, church and unchurched, saved and unsaved. The separation, or at least withholding of social contact, on the

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<sup>42</sup> Luke Timothy Johnson, *The Gospel of Luke (Sacra Pagina)* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1991):100.



basis of moral or spiritual purity is without basis. If Christians are to mimic the Christ they proclaim, then they too will need to party with the sinners. The earliest church appears to have grasped this idea, and the inclusion of this story in Luke's gospel would have provided great encouragement for them in the midst of those who would complain that Christians were spending quality time with the outcasts (morally and socially) of society. So too this story should both encourage and challenge the contemporary church to dismantle its systems of separation and to engage daily with those whom society deems either unacceptable or socially dysfunctional. The good news of the Kingdom proclaims that the blessings of God are being poured out on those who most need them.

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## Appendix A

### Synoptic Comparison of the Call of Levi/Matthew

#### Elements unique to Luke

Matthew 9:9 – 13	Mark 2:13 – 17	Luke 5:27 – 32
As Jesus went on from there, he saw a man named Matthew sitting at the tax collector's booth. "Follow me," he told him, and Matthew got up and followed him.	As he walked along, he saw Levi son of Alphaeus sitting at the tax collector's booth. "Follow me," Jesus told him, and Levi got up and followed him.	<u>After this</u> , Jesus went out and saw a tax collector by the name of Levi sitting at his tax booth. "Follow me," Jesus said to him, and Levi got up, <u>left everything</u> and followed him.
While Jesus was having dinner at Matthew's house, many tax collectors and "sinners" came and ate with him and his disciples.	While Jesus was having dinner at Levi's house, many tax collectors and "sinners" were eating with him and his disciples, for there were many who followed him.	Then <u>Levi held a great banquet</u> for Jesus at his house, and a large crowd of tax collectors and <u>others</u> were eating with them.
When the Pharisees saw this, they asked his disciples, "Why does your teacher eat with tax collectors and 'sinners'?"	When the teachers of the law who were Pharisees saw him eating with the "sinners" and tax collectors, they asked his disciples: "Why does he eat with tax collectors and 'sinners'?"	But the Pharisees and the teachers of the law <u>who belonged to their sect</u> complained to his disciples, "Why do <u>you</u> eat and drink with tax collectors and 'sinners'?"
On hearing this, Jesus said, "It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick. But go and learn what this means: 'I desire mercy, not sacrifice.' For I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners."	On hearing this, Jesus said to them, "It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick. I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners."	Jesus answered them, "It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick. I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners <u>to repentance</u> ."