

Writers or Preachers: Acts 6:1–7 and the Lukan Table Fellowship Motif

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Since the seminal work of Ferdinand Christian Baur, the account of the selection of the Seven¹ in the context of the dispute between the Hebrews and the Hellenists (Acts 6:1–7) has attracted the attention of many who are interested in the historical reality that lies behind this portrayal of the early church.² Critical discussions often focus on three historical problems: the identity of the “Hellenists” and the “Hebrews,” the ideological differences between these two groups, and the historical framework within which one should understand the caring for the widows in the early church.

On the identity of the “Hellenists” (Ἑλληνιστῆς) and the “Hebrews” (Ἑβραῖος), a majority position seems to have emerged, although a consensus has yet to be reached. Despite the protests by some,³ many consider language preference to be the

¹ Although “the Seven” (οἱ ἑπτὰ) is not used in this account, this title does appear in the narrative of Acts 21:8 describing the seven men who are chosen here.

² See, in particular, Ferdinand Christian Baur, *The Church History of the First Three Centuries* (trans. Allan Menzies; 2 vols.; 3rd ed.; London: Williams & Norgate, 1878), vol. 1. See also the discussion in Heinz-Werner Neudorfer, *Der Stephanuskreis in der Forschungsgeschichte seit F.C. Baur* (Monographien und Studienbücher 309; Giessen: Brunnen, 1983), 4–144.

³ A major dissenting voice can be found in those who see the distinction primarily in ethnic terms: the “Hellenists” represent the Gentiles, while the “Hebrews” are the Jews. See, e.g., Henry J. Cadbury, “The Hellenists,” in *Additional Notes to the Commentary* (ed. Kirsopp Lake and Henry J. Cadbury; vol. 5 of *The Beginnings of Christianity*, Part 1, *The Acts of the Apostles*; ed. F. J. Foakes Jackson and Kirsopp Lake; London: Macmillan, 1933), 59–74; Joseph B. Tyson, “Acts 6:1–7 and Dietary Regulations in Early Christianity,” *PRSt* 10 (1983): 145–61. Some have also suggested that the “Hebrews” are Samaritans; see Abram Spiro, “Stephen’s Samaritan Background,” in Johannes Munck, *The Acts of the Apostles: Introduction, Translation, and Notes* (rev. William F. Albright and C. S. Mann; AB 31; New York: Doubleday, 1967), 285–300.

primary distinguishing factor: “Hellenists’ means Greek-speaking Jews, as opposed to the ‘Hebrews’ or Aramaic-speaking Jews.”⁴

As far as the ideological differences between the Hellenists and the Hebrews are concerned, many acknowledge the contribution of Baur but refuse to follow him in seeing the contrast between the Hellenists and the Hebrews primarily as the competition between the “liberal” and “conservative” understandings of the temple and the law. Not only can this contrast lead to “an unfair stereotyping of non-Pauline Jewish Christianity as backward, severe, and legalistic,” but it also assumes a simplistic view of the history of the early church in which uniform bodies of opinion can be identified behind two groups of Jews divided by their language preferences.⁵

On the historical practices of caring for widows among the Jews of the first century, some have pointed to the relevance of the later rabbinic material,⁶ while others have pointed to parallels among the Essenes.⁷ Most would agree, however,

⁴ Ernst Haenchen, *The Acts of the Apostles: A Commentary* (trans. R. McL. Wilson; Oxford: Blackwell, 1971), 260. See also F. F. Bruce, *The Acts of the Apostles: The Greek Text with Introduction and Commentary* (2nd ed.; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1952), 151; C. F. D. Moule, “Once More, Who Were the Hellenists?” *ExpTim* 70 (1958): 100–102; E. Larsson, “Die Hellenisten und die Urgemeinde,” *NTS* 33 (1987): 205–25; Hans Conzelmann, *Acts of the Apostles: A Commentary on the Acts of the Apostles* (trans. James Limburg, A. Thomas Kraabel, and Donald H. Juel; Hermeneia; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1987), 45; Jürgen Roloff, *Die Apostelgeschichte* (NTD 5; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1988), 108–9; H. A. Brehm, “The Meaning of Ἑλληνιστής in Acts in Light of a Diachronic Analysis of ἐλληνίζειν,” in *Discourse Analysis and Other Topics in Biblical Greek* (ed. Stanley E. Porter and D. A. Carson; JSNTSup 113; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1995), 180–99. For a survey of other possible interpretations of these two terms, see Everett Ferguson, “The Hellenists in the Book of Acts,” *ResQ* 12 (1969): 159–80. While cultural differences cannot be denied, many see linguistic preference as the primary distinguishing factor; see Martin Hengel, *Judaism and Hellenism: Studies in Their Encounter in Palestine during the Early Hellenistic Period* (trans. John Bowden; 2 vols.; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1981), 1:58.

⁵ Craig C. Hill, *Hellenists and Hebrews: Reappraising Division within the Earliest Church* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1992), 193–94. Many recent commentators have followed Hill’s detailed arguments in providing significant qualifications to Baur’s thesis. Adopting a sociological approach, others have also pointed to the diversity of an early Christianity that cannot easily be divided into liberal and conservative camps; see Gerd Theissen, “Hellenisten und Hebräer (Apg 6,1-6): Gab es eine Spaltung der Urgemeinde?” in *Geschichte–Tradition–Reflexion: Festschrift für Martin Hengel zum 70. Geburtstag* (ed. Hubert Cancik, Hermann Lichtenberger, and Peter Schäfer; 3 vols.; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1996), 3:323–43.

⁶ See *m. Ketub.* 13:1–2; *m. Pesah.* 8:2–9; 10:1; *m. Šeqal.* 5:6; *m. Pe‘ah* 8:7; Joachim Jeremias, *Jerusalem in the Time of Jesus: An Investigation into Economic and Social Conditions during the New Testament Period* (trans. F. H. Cave and C. H. Cave; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1969), 132–34; Haenchen, *Acts of the Apostles*, 261–62; Ben Witherington III, *The Acts of the Apostles: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 248.

⁷ See Philo, *Hypoth.* 11.4–11; Brian Capper, “The Palestinian Cultural Context of Earliest Christian Community of Goods,” in *The Book of Acts in Its Palestinian Setting* (ed. Richard Bauckham; Book of Acts in Its First Century Setting 4; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996), 351.

that the data provided in Acts 6 are insufficient to reconstruct the detailed arrangements of the early Christian community in Jerusalem.

While scholarly attention has focused on these historical matters, most commentators also recognize a significant problem in Luke's presentation in this account:⁸ "why men chosen to allow the Twelve to preach rather than to 'serve tables' appear later only as preachers and evangelists."⁹ Although this apparent inconsistency between the assigned role of the Seven and their actual function in the subsequent narrative is not commonly the focus of scholarly discussions, most commentators feel the need to explain it. Almost all proposed explanations appear to assume, however, that this seeming inconsistency is the result of Luke's careless writing. Consequently, the significance of table service in this account is downplayed, and the literary function of this episode becomes unclear. It is the purpose of this article to revisit this apparent inconsistency and to argue that it represents an intentional strategy of the author in his presentation of the development of the early Christian movement.

I. HISTORICAL RECONSTRUCTIONS

Assuming that this apparent inconsistency represents the failure of Luke to present a coherent and sustained narrative of the development of the church, many have resorted to various forms of historical reconstruction to explain the presence of such an inconsistency. Drawing on the contributions of Baur, James D. G. Dunn detects the "residue of suspicion" behind Acts 6.¹⁰ This "residue of suspicion" finds its roots in the Maccabean revolt, in which the conservative Jews fought against their Hellenistic counterparts. Ernst Haenchen, among others, sees behind this inconsistency an intentional covering up of the deeper rift between the Hellenists and the Hebrews, who represent two different ideological orientations.¹¹ To these scholars, Luke's attempt to downplay these conflicts leads to the presence of the apparent inconsistencies in the account itself. The division of labor that appears in the final text is but a literary strategy to create space for the coexistence of the two camps.

Another kind of historical reconstruction understands the Seven as already leaders of a separate community: "The 'Seven' are in reality not men who care for the poor . . . but the leading group of an independent community, the 'Hellenists.'"¹²

⁸ In this article, I use "Luke" as the author of Luke-Acts. The actual identification of this author will not affect the arguments presented here.

⁹ Cadbury, "Hellenists," 62.

¹⁰ Dunn, *The Acts of the Apostles* (Valley Forge, PA: Trinity Press International, 1996), 82.

¹¹ Haenchen, *Acts of the Apostles*, 264–69; cf. B. Barbara Hall, "La communauté chrétienne dans le livre des Actes," *FoiVie* 70 (1971): 146–56.

¹² Martin Hengel, *Between Jesus and Paul: Studies in the Earliest History of Christianity* (trans. John Bowden; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1983), 13.

This position is embraced by many who otherwise have different evaluations of Luke as a historian. F. F. Bruce, who insists on the general historical reliability of Luke, claims that the Seven “were leaders of the Hellenistic group in the primitive church, fulfilling a much wider ministry than that of *septem viri mensis ordinandis*, to which they were appointed on the occasion described by Luke.”¹³ On the other end of the spectrum, Hans Conzelmann presents a similar explanation for the presence of “two organizations”: “Alongside the circle around the Twelve there was a group around the seven.”¹⁴ Among those who see the presence of an independent community of Hellenists, most see the different job descriptions for the Twelve and the Seven as Luke’s attempt to subordinate the Seven to the Twelve and thus maintain the picture of the unified church. Richard Pervo’s statement is representative of this position:

The perceptible dissonance between Luke’s Seven and their appointed task stems, of course, from his desire to subordinate this group to the Twelve and assign them innocuous tasks. In reality the Seven were a rival group with a different theological program. Two birds fall with a single stone: the church glows with undivided gentility, and a competing group evaporates into a group of grocery boys.¹⁵

The third solution that is often proposed points to Acts 6:1–7 as a succession narrative in disguise. The primary purpose of this account is to provide “the initial link in the transfer of authority from the apostles to other significant narrative figures.”¹⁶ The form of this succession narrative can be compared to the earlier one in 1:15–26,¹⁷ but this narrative is unique because it signifies a new stage in the development of the early church as the apostles begin to establish an entirely new group of leaders that were not instituted by Jesus himself.¹⁸ The division of labor is, therefore, simply a disguise for the introduction of a new group of leaders. As successors

¹³ F. F. Bruce, “The Church of Jerusalem in the Acts of the Apostles,” *BJRL* 67 (1985): 647. See also I. Howard Marshall, *The Acts of the Apostles: An Introduction and Commentary* (TNTC; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1980), 125; Capper, “Palestinian Cultural Context,” 354.

¹⁴ Conzelmann, *Acts of the Apostles*, 44. See also Richard I. Pervo, *Acts: A Commentary* (Hermeneia; Minneapolis: Fortress, 2009), 158.

¹⁵ Richard I. Pervo, *Profit with Delight: The Literary Genre of the Acts of the Apostles* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1987), 40. See also Nikolaus Walter, “Apostelgeschichte 6.1 und die Anfänge der Urgemeinde in Jerusalem,” *NTS* 29 (1983): 370–73.

¹⁶ Todd Penner, *In Praise of Christian Origins: Stephen and the Hellenists in Lukan Apologetic Historiography* (Emory Studies in Early Christianity 10; New York: T&T Clark, 2004), 270. See also Bernhard Domagalski, “Waren die ‘Sieben’ (Apg 6,1–7) Diakone?” *BZ* 26 (1982): 21–33; Tyson, “Acts 6:1–7 and Dietary Regulations,” 152.

¹⁷ Charles H. Talbert, *Reading Acts: A Literary and Theological Commentary on the Acts of the Apostles* (New York: Crossroad, 1997), 73.

¹⁸ Daniel Marguerat, *Les Actes des Apôtres (1–12)* (CNT 5a; Geneva: Labor et Fides, 2007), 207.

to the original Twelve, the Seven, not surprisingly, replicate the actions of the Twelve as they become involved in the ministry of the Word.¹⁹

Finally, some are content to assume that Luke's description of the purported role of the Seven is simply a partial description, since "there is no exclusive division between material care and the *διακονία* of the Word."²⁰ Therefore, the Seven who are to be involved in table service are not excluded from the proclamation of the Word.

While these historical reconstructions may help in our understanding of the reality behind the text, it remains unclear if they can fully explain the literary and theological intentions of this narrative. One cannot deny the presence of various tensions between the Hebrews and the Hellenists, and it seems clear that the Seven were leaders in their own right and that they succeeded, to a certain degree, the Twelve in the ministry. These reconstructions fail, however, to explain Luke's emphasis on table service as an area of ministry that is to be connected with the Seven. Moreover, while one certainly should not assume that table service and the proclamation of the Word are exclusive categories, this assumption does not fully explain the way this narrative is structured: "It is quite understandable that men who were in fact connected with the distribution of alms should grow into preachers and controversialists but it would be bad writing first of all to make up a job for them and then represent them as neglecting it for another."²¹ Moving beyond historical reconstructions, it is necessary to focus on the literary frameworks within which this narrative is to be understood. It will be shown that one framework in particular—the framework of table fellowship—is relevant in explaining the apparent inconsistency between the assigned role and the actual function of the Seven.

II. TABLE FELLOWSHIP IN LUKE

Several literary frameworks have been invoked to illuminate the meaning and significance of Acts 6:1–7, and each contributes at least in part to a better understanding of certain aspects of this account. First, parallels in the Hebrew Bible have often been noted (esp. Exod 18:13–27; Num 11:1–30; Deut 1:9–18), and these parallels point to the significance of the Seven as assistants of and successors to the

¹⁹ Charles H. Talbert and Perry L. Stepp, "Succession in Mediterranean Antiquity, Part 2: Luke-Acts," *SBLSP* 37 (1998): 172.

²⁰ Bart J. Koet, "Luke 10:38–42 and Acts 6:1–7: A Lukan Diptych on ΔΙΑΚΟΝΙΑ," in *Studies in the Greek Bible: Essays in Honor of Francis T. Gignac, S.J.* (ed. Jeremy Corley and Vincent Skemp; CBQMS 44; Washington, DC: Catholic Biblical Association of America, 2008), 179. See also Marshall, *Acts*, 125; Norman Nagel, "The Twelve and the Seven in Acts 6 and the Needy," *Concordia Journal* 31 (2005): 113–26.

²¹ C. K. Barrett, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Acts of the Apostles* (2 vols.; ICC; Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1994, 1998), 2:306.

Twelve.²² Second, within the writings of Luke, the relevance of Luke 10:38–42 has also been noted as it is understood to depict the contrast between the ministry of the Word and material care.²³ Third, closer to Acts 6, the mission to the Gentiles is apparently the direction of the flow of the narrative. Acts 6:1–7 should therefore be understood within this narrative development.²⁴ All three frameworks provide critical elements for an appreciation of the significance of this account, but these frameworks alone are insufficient to explain the presence of the apparent inconsistency in the text.

In a passage that focuses on table service (see *διακονεῖν τραπέζαις*, 6:2),²⁵ the relevance of the motif of table fellowship that is so prominent elsewhere in the Lukan writings should also be considered. Reading Acts 6:1–7 in light of this motif will not only highlight the function of this account in Luke's program but will also contribute to explaining the apparent inconsistency when the passage is considered within Luke's wider narrative. The general motif of table fellowship in Luke-Acts has received extensive treatment, although not specifically in relation to Acts 6:1–7.²⁶ In this section, a brief summary of the function of this Lukan motif as it is relevant for our discussion will be sufficient.

²² See, in particular, David Daube, "A Reform in Acts and Its Models," in *Jews, Greeks and Christians: Religious Cultures in Late Antiquity. Essays in Honor of William David Davies* (ed. Robert G. Hamerton-Kelly and Robin Scroggs; Leiden: Brill, 1976), 151–63. Others have also pointed to the relevance of Num 8:5–13 that depicts the consecration of the Levites; see, e.g., J. D. McCaughey, "The Intention of the Author: Some Questions about the Exegesis of Acts vi. 1–6," *ABR* 7 (1959): 27–36.

²³ Turid Karlsen Seim, *The Double Message: Patterns of Gender in Luke-Acts* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1994), 107–12; Veronica Koperski, "Luke 10,38–42 and Acts 6,1–7: Women and Dis-cipleship in the Literary Context of Luke-Acts," in *The Unity of Luke-Acts* (ed. Joseph Verheyden; BETL 142; Leuven: Peeters, 1999), 517–44; Koet, "Luke 10:38–42 and Acts 6:1–7," 163–85.

²⁴ In tracing the use of the word *διακονία* from the Jerusalem ministry of the Twelve (1:17, 25) to the Gentile mission of Paul (20:24; 21:19), John N. Collins (*Deacons and the Church: Making Connections between Old and New* [Harrisburg, PA: Morehouse, 2002], 52–57) argues that the use of the same term in 6:1, 4 points to the transitional nature of this passage.

²⁵ The exact translation of this phrase will be discussed in section III.A below.

²⁶ See, e.g., Robert J. Karris, *Luke: Artist and Theologian. Luke's Passion Account as Literature* (New York: Paulist, 1985), 47–78; Philip F. Esler, *Community and Gospel in Luke-Acts: The Social and Political Motivations of Lucan Theology* (SNTSMS 57; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), 71–109; Jerome H. Neyrey, "Ceremonies in Luke-Acts: The Case of Meals and Table Fellowship," in *The Social World of Luke-Acts: Models for Interpretation* (ed. Jerome H. Neyrey; Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1991), 361–87; Kathleen E. Corley, *Private Women, Public Meals: Social Conflict in the Synoptic Tradition* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1993), 108–46; Robert L. Kelley, "Meals with Jesus in Luke's Gospel," *HBT* 17 (1995): 123–31; Willi Braun, *Feasting and Social Rhetoric in Luke 14* (SNTSMS 85; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995); Klyne Snodgrass, "Common Life with Jesus: The Parable of the Banquet in Luke 14:16–24," in *Common Life in the Early Church: Essays Honoring Graydon F. Snyder* (ed. Julian V. Hills et al.; Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press International, 1998), 186–201; Dennis E. Smith, "Table Fellowship

The social functions of meals have often been noted, as they reveal “different degrees of hierarchy, inclusion and exclusion, boundaries and transactions across the boundaries.”²⁷ In the Greco-Roman world, banquet and symposium are often instruments through which fictive-kinship groups are defined;²⁸ for the Jews, rules surrounding meals are particularly important in delineating God’s people from the Gentiles.²⁹ Despite the difficulties involved in the move from historical reality to literary constructions, one does find the use of the motif of table fellowship in descriptions of ideal communities, with the goal of suggesting or reinforcing patterns of behavior.³⁰

In Luke’s Gospel, one finds the meal scenes in both discourse (7:31–35; 11:5–13; 12:13–21, 35–40, 42–48; 13:22–30; 14:7–24; 15:11–32; 16:19–31; 17:5–10) and narrative (5:27–32; 7:36–50; 9:10–17; 14:1–6; 15:1–2; 22:14–38) material. Among the various emphases related to such material, three connected themes stand out as significant and uniquely Lukan. First, the inclusion of the outcasts is a theme that can be identified especially in the narrative material connected with the meal scenes. While meals in the ancient world often function to consolidate the boundary of an existing community, many meal scenes in Luke aim instead at breaking such boundaries.³¹ In this Gospel, Jesus is often found in table fellowship with “tax collectors and sinners” (5:30; 7:34; 15:1). These “tax collectors” represent the outcasts of society (cf. 3:12; 18:9–14; 19:1–10), while the “sinners” are those who are considered to be unclean and impure (cf. 6:32–34; 18:13; 19:7). By participating in table fellowship with these stereotypical groups, the Lukan Jesus challenges the traditional boundaries of God’s community.

Related to the emphasis on the inclusion of the outcast is the Lukan theme of reversal. The participation of the outcasts in the community of God’s people points to the eschatological reversal brought about by the ministry of Jesus. This theme of

as a Literary Motif in the Gospel of Luke,” *JBL* 106 (1987): 613–38; idem, *From Symposium to Eucharist: The Banquet in the Early Christian World* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2003), 253–72.

²⁷ Mary Douglas, “Deciphering a Meal,” in *Myth, Symbol, and Culture* (ed. Clifford Geertz; New York: Norton, 1971), 61. For a more recent treatment, see also Maurice Bloch, “Commensality and Poisoning,” *Social Research* 66 (1999): 133–49.

²⁸ Smith, *From Symposium to Eucharist*, 13–130.

²⁹ See Shaye J. D. Cohen, *The Beginnings of Jewishness: Boundaries, Varieties, Uncertainties* (Hellenistic Culture and Society 31; Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999), 53–55.

³⁰ See, e.g., the portrayal of the eschatological banquet in the Hebrew Bible (Isa 25:6; *Sib. Or.* 7:744–46; 2 *Bar.* 29:5–8) and the provision of food in utopian communities (Homer, *Ody.* 9.108–11); cf. Richard I. Pervo, “Panta Koina: The Feeding Stories in the Light of Economic Data and Social Practice,” in *Religious Propaganda and Missionary Competition in the New Testament World: Essays Honoring Dieter Georgi* (ed. Lukas Bormann, Kelly Del Tredici, and Angela Standhartinger; NovTSup 74; Leiden/New York: Brill, 1994), 177–82.

³¹ Some, therefore, identify Luke’s meal scenes as anti-symposia; see, e.g., Willi Braun, “Symposium or Anti-Symposium? Reflections on Luke 14:1–24,” *TJT* 8 (1992): 70–84.

reversal stretches from Luke's concern for the oppressed (4:18; 6:20–22; 7:22; 14:13, 21; 16:20–22) to his emphasis on the inclusion of those who were outside the covenant people (2:34–35; 4:22–30; cf. Acts 13:46–47; 28:23–29).³² This theme of reversal is a constant element in Jesus' teachings related to table fellowship. In 13:24–30, for example, those among God's people who are unfaithful will be cast out, while others "from east and west, north and south" (v. 29) will take their places at the eschatological banquet. Although the inclusion of the Gentiles is not made explicit in this context, the redefinition of God's people is assumed.³³ In the parable of the Great Banquet in 14:15–24, this theme of reversal is symbolized by the inclusion of "the poor, the crippled, the blind and the lame" (v. 21) in the eschatological banquet. Using the language of the prophets (cf. Isa 29:18–19; 35:5–6; 42:7, 18; 61:1), this description evokes the divine promises to God's own people at the end of times while redirecting the focus to the inclusion of the outcasts. Table fellowship therefore provides one critical context in which God's eschatological reversal is to be realized (see also 14:7–14; 15:11–32; 16:19–31).

The inclusion of the outcasts together with the theme of reversal points to Luke's focus on the formation of God's eschatological community. While the breakdown of the traditional boundaries is symbolized by Jesus' participation with the outcasts in table fellowship, the establishment of God's eschatological community is also symbolized by this motif of table fellowship. In evoking the paradigmatic event of the exodus, Jesus' feeding of the five thousand (Luke 9:10–17) signifies the formation of God's restored people.³⁴ The climactic moment can be found in the Lukan account of Jesus' Last Supper with his disciples before the cross (22:1–38). Luke's portrayal of this event clearly points to this as a covenantal meal modeled after the Passover meal.³⁵ Equally important is the discourse given over the table

³² See, in particular, John O. York, *The Last Shall Be First: The Rhetoric of Reversal in Luke* (JSNTSup 46; Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1991).

³³ While those "from east and west, north and south" can refer to the return of the exile, in light of the description of God's unfaithful people in the previous verse (Luke 13:28), the inclusion of the Gentiles who are traditionally excluded has to be the primary reference in this context. See Michael F. Bird, "Who Comes from the East and the West? Luke 13.28–29/Matt 8.11–12 and the Historical Jesus," *NTS* 52 (2006): 441–57.

³⁴ See Wilson C. K. Poon, "Superabundant Table Fellowship in the Kingdom: The Feeding of the Five Thousand and the Meal Motif in Luke," *ExpTim* 114 (2003): 224–30. For the significance of this account in light of the prophetic paradigm in the Hebrew Bible, see also François Bovon, "The Role of the Scriptures in the Composition of the Gospel Accounts: The Temptations of Jesus (Lk 4:1–13 par.) and the Multiplication of the Loaves (Lk 9:10–17 par.)," in *Luke and Acts* (ed. Gerald O'Collins and Gilberto Marconi; trans. Matthew J. O'Connell; New York/Mahwah, NJ: Paulist, 1993), 26–31.

³⁵ See Anthony J. Saldarini, *Jesus and Passover* (New York: Paulist, 1984), 59–61; Dennis E. Smith and Hal E. Taussig, *Many Tables: The Eucharist in the New Testament and Liturgy Today* (Philadelphia: Trinity Press International, 1990), 22–23.

where the Twelve are to assume the role as judges of “the twelve tribes of Israel” (22:30). Taking on the role traditionally assigned to the sons of Jacob (*T. Jud.* 25:1),³⁶ the Twelve become the foundation for this new community. This designation of the new leaders also evokes the memories of the Passover meal: “A Passover meal confirms membership in the covenant people of Israel, even as it bolsters the role of the head of the clan who presides over the meal (Exod 12:3–4, 26–27).”³⁷

These themes of the inclusion of the outcasts, the eschatological reversal, and the establishment of God’s eschatological people will be relevant as we examine Acts 6:1–7 in light of Luke’s motif of table fellowship.

III. ACTS 6:1–7 AND TABLE FELLOWSHIP

A. Acts 6:1–7 as a Meal Scene

Before assuming that Acts 6:1–7 is dealing with table fellowship, two issues must be resolved: the meaning of ἐν τῇ διακονίᾳ τῇ καθημερινῇ in v. 1 and of διακονεῖν τραπέζαις in v. 2. Beginning with the reference in v. 2, τράπεζα (“table”) can refer to the banker’s counter (Luke 19:23; cf. Plato, *Apol.* 17c). Διακονεῖν τραπέζαις would then refer to the financial managements involved in providing for the poor.³⁸ Τράπεζα is, however, more commonly used as “dining table” (Luke 16:21; 22:21; Acts 16:34; cf. Homer, *Od.* 17.333; Herodotus, *Hist.* 5.20.4; *Did.* 11.9). In light of the use of the verb διακονέω together with τράπεζα in the Lukan account of the Last Supper (Luke 22:21, 26, 27, 30), διακονεῖν τραπέζαις in Acts 6:2 most likely refers to the act of “waiting on tables” as recognized by the majority of commentators.³⁹ Moreover, while διακονέω and τράπεζα rarely appear together in the same context in ancient literature,⁴⁰ one notable exception should be mentioned—*T. Job* 12:1–2:

³⁶ Christian Grappe, “Le logion des douze trônes: Eclairages intertestamentaires,” in *Le Trône de Dieu* (ed. Marc Philonenko; WUNT 69; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1993), 204–12.

³⁷ Neyrey, “Ceremonies in Luke-Acts,” 363. See also Jonathan Brumberg-Kraus, “Not by Bread Alone . . .: The Ritualization of Food and Table Talk in the Passover Seder and in the Last Supper,” *Semeia* 86 (1999): 179–80.

³⁸ Kirsopp Lake and Henry J. Cadbury, *English Translation and Commentary* (vol. 4 of *The Beginnings of Christianity*, Part 1, *The Acts of the Apostles*, ed. F. J. Foakes Jackson and Kirsopp Lake; London: Macmillan, 1933), 64.

³⁹ See, e.g., Haenchen, *Acts of the Apostles*, 262; Barrett, *Acts of the Apostles*, 2:311; Joseph A. Fitzmyer, *The Acts of the Apostles: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* (AB 31; New York: Doubleday, 1998), 348–49; Pervo, *Acts*, 159; cf. Marguerat, *Les Actes des Apôtres*, 209.

⁴⁰ Most of the results produced by a search in the *Thesaurus Linguae Graecae* (online: <http://www.tlg.uci.edu> [accessed July 11, 2009]) come from post–New Testament documents, many of which are directly dependent on Acts 6:2 (e.g., Clement of Alexandria, *Paed.* 2.57; John Chrysostom, *Hom. Act. XXXI* on Acts 14; *Hom. 1 Cor.* 3.6). See, however, the fourth-century author John Chrysostom, who discusses “angels serving at the table” (ἄγγελοι διακονούμενοι τῇ τραπέζῃ) in the context of a royal meal (*Hom. Eph.* 3.5).

And if a man cheerful in heart ever would come to me saying:
 I have nothing available to help the poor.
 Nevertheless I wish at least to serve the indigent
 at your table.

And when he received permission, he would serve and eat.

Καὶ εἴ ποτέ μοι ἤρχετο ἀνὴρ ἰλαρὸς τῆ καρδία λέγων
 οὐδὲν ἐγὼ εὐπορῶ ἐπικουρῆσαι τοῖς πένησιν·
 βούλομαι μέντοι κἂν διακονῆσαι τοῖς πτωχοῖς
 ἐν τῇ σῆ τραπέζῃ
 καὶ συγχωρηθεῖς ὑπηρέτει καὶ ἤσθιεν.⁴¹

Though not an exact parallel, this passage, which mentions “to serve” (διακονῆσαι), “table” (τῆ . . . τραπέζῃ), and “eat” (ἤσθιεν) in the discussion of “the poor” (τοῖς πτωχοῖς; cf. τοῖς πένησιν), points to a similar context within which Acts 6:2 can be read. In this passage, διακονεῖν τραπέζαις must be understood as serving tables in the context of a meal, and this indirectly reaffirms our understanding of the context of Acts 6:2.

The meaning of τῆ διακονία τῆ καθημερινῆ in v. 1 is also open to various interpretations, two of which surface in many modern English translations: “the daily distribution of food” (NIV, NRSV, NET [New English Translation], TNIV [Today’s NIV]; cf. “the daily distribution,” KJV, ASV, NAB, REB, NJB, NKJV, ESV [English Standard Version]), and “the daily serving of food” (NASB).⁴² The major difference between these two groups of translations is whether τῆ διακονία should be understood in the sense of “distribution” or “(table-)serving.” Despite the overwhelming support in translations for the former rendering, the latter is to be preferred. First, the word διακονία when followed by the reference to “table” most likely refers to the sharing of food in a meal setting. Second, “[d]istribution’ is not one of the attested meanings of this abstract noun.”⁴³ If “distribution” were the intended meaning of the phrase, one would expect word groups that appear already in the first section of Acts: διαμερίζω (2:45) and διαδίδωμι (4:35).⁴⁴ Third, although καθη-

⁴¹ Text and translation are based on the S and V texts and are taken from Robert A Kraft, ed., *The Testament of Job according to the SV Text* (SBLTT 5; Pseudepigrapha Series 4; Missoula, MT: Society of Biblical Literature and Scholars Press, 1974), 34–35. The P text provides no significant difference that would alter our reading in this case; see R. P. Spittler, “Testament of Job,” *OTP* 1:844.

⁴² Another possible translation is “daily distribution of funds” (GNB). Despite possible parallels in later rabbinic sources (see n. 6 above), this is the least likely meaning of the phrase because of the difficulties in explaining why “funds” have to be distributed “daily.”

⁴³ John N. Collins, *Diakonia: Re-interpreting the Ancient Sources* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990), 230–31.

⁴⁴ Reta Halteman Finger, *Of Widows and Meals: Communal Meals in the Book of Acts* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007), 155. See also her earlier article “Table Fellowship: The Spirituality of Eating Together,” in *Vital Christianity: Spirituality, Justice, and Christian Practice* (ed. David L. Weaver-Zercher and William H. Willimon; New York/London: T&T Clark, 2005), 193.

μερινός is a *hapax legomenon*, this word recalls 2:46–47, where the daily growth is experienced in the context of constant table fellowship:

Day by day [καθ' ἡμέραν], as they gathered together in the temple courts, they also broke bread in their homes and shared their food with glad and sincere hearts, praising God and enjoying the favor of all the people. And day by day [καθ' ἡμέραν] the Lord added to their community those who were being saved.

Therefore, rather than the imagery of the “soup kitchen,”⁴⁵ τῆ διακονία τῆ καθημερινῆ is best understood to refer to “the common sacred meal,”⁴⁶ as already noted in 2:46. The complaint of the Hellenists is therefore that their widows “were not allowed to participate in the daily meal.”⁴⁷

As to the nature of the meal from which the widows are excluded, some have suggested that this is a reference to the eucharistic meal.⁴⁸ This reading is built on the reference to the Eucharist as “the Lord’s table” (τραπέζης κυρίου) in 1 Cor 10:21, but in Luke–Acts the “table,” especially in the plural, does not acquire this specific sense. Although this reading does rightly point to the significance of the Lukan account of the Last Supper (Luke 22:14–38), these various meal scenes, together with Acts 2:46–47, should be considered within the wider context of the Lukan motif of table fellowship.⁴⁹

B. Waiters as Preachers

Specific details in Acts 6:1–7 confirm the relationship between this account and other Lukan meal scenes. First, γογγυσμός (“grumbling,” v. 1) evokes two important passages. The first passage is Numbers 11, where one finds the note on grumbling (v. 1) in the context of the shortage of food supply (vv. 4–6). Other parallels include the appointment of the seventy (v. 16) and the note on the spirit (v. 17). This passage in the exodus tradition confirms the significance of the meal context behind Acts 6:1–7.⁵⁰

Although often overlooked, the second passage is perhaps more significant for the reading of Acts 6:1–7 since it points to Luke’s own appropriation of the

⁴⁵ Luke Timothy Johnson, *The Acts of the Apostles* (SP 5; Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1992), 106.

⁴⁶ Pervo, *Acts*, 159.

⁴⁷ Tyson, “Acts 6:1–7 and Dietary Regulations,” 158; see also Lake and Cadbury, *English Translation and Commentary*, 64.

⁴⁸ Neudorfer, *Der Stephanuskreis*, 92–94; Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *In Memory of Her: A Feminist Theological Reconstruction of Christian Origins* (New York: Crossroad, 1983), 165–68.

⁴⁹ In a similar way, the eucharistic overtones in other Lukan meal scenes (esp. Luke 9:10–17; 24:30; Acts 27:35) should not be downplayed. Rather than identifying them as eucharistic meals, however, it seems best to read these accounts within the wider Lukan motif of table fellowship. In Luke’s narrative, they are all sacred meals, although the Last Supper represents the defining climax of such gatherings.

⁵⁰ See Daube, “Reform in Acts and Its Models,” 152–53.

grumbling tradition of Israel. The word *γογγυσμός* (6:1) appears only once in Luke-Acts, but its cognate verb *γογγύζω* appears in Luke 5:30 in a passage that is critical for the reading of Acts 6. In Luke 5:29–31, in the context of a banquet hosted by Levi, the Pharisees and the scribes are “complaining” (*ἐγόγγυζον*) to Jesus’ disciples: “Why do you eat and drink with tax collectors and sinners?” (Luke 5:30). In both Luke 5:29–31 and Acts 6:1–7, therefore, one finds the act of grumbling in the context of a meal. Moreover, being the first of a series of accounts of Jesus’ participation in table fellowship with the outcasts (cf. Luke 7:34; 15:1), the paradigmatic significance of Luke 5:29–31 should be recognized. This connection between “complaining” and table fellowship with the outcasts is confirmed by the use of a related term of the same word group in 15:2 (“The Pharisees and the teachers of the law complained [*διεγόγγυζον*], ‘This man welcomes sinners and eats with them’”) and 19:7 (“When all the people saw this, they complained [*διεγόγγυζον*]: ‘He has gone to be the guest of a sinner’”). It becomes clear, therefore, that when the *γογγύζω* word group is used in Luke, it is in connection with Jesus’ act of including the outcasts.

In Acts 6, the complaint centers on whether the “widows” (*αἱ χήραι*) can participate in the table fellowship. In the Lukan writings, the status of these “widows” is comparable to that of the “tax collectors and sinners” who are despised by the Pharisees and the scribes. In Luke 20:46–47, for example, the widows are the objects of the oppressive acts committed by the “scribes.” The adjectival modifiers *πενιχράν* (“poor”) and *πτωχῆ* (“poor”) that are attached to the widow of Luke 21:2 also identify this group as the lowly outcasts who are expected to experience the eschatological reversal proclaimed by Jesus (Luke 4:18; 6:20; 7:22; 16:19–31), and “the poor” (*οἱ πτωχοί*) are specifically promised to be able to participate in the eschatological banquet (Luke 14:13, 21). In light of Luke’s portrayal of the widows, the connection between Luke 5:29–31 and Acts 6:1–7 becomes clear. In both contexts, the issue of complaint focuses on whether the outcasts can be included in the table fellowship of Jesus and his disciples. Moreover, in the case of Acts 6, these widows are doubly marginalized, as they are not only “widows” but also widows of “the Hellenists,” who are outside of the center of power. The critical difference is, of course, that in Luke 5:29–31 the complaint centers on Jesus’ act of inclusion, but in Acts 6:1–7 it centers on his disciples’ act of exclusion. Jesus’ statement in Luke 5:31 that his inclusive mission is to focus on the outcast becomes a critique of those who neglect the widows in Acts 6:1.

In response to such neglect, the Seven were chosen “to wait on tables” (*διακονεῖν τραπέζαις*).⁵¹ This phrase again evokes the imagery of table fellowship. As noted above, the appearance of these two terms together in Luke’s Last Supper account (Luke 22:21, 26, 27, 30) again links this passage with the Lukan motif of table fellowship. Not only is this Last Supper account the climax of the Lukan por-

⁵¹ For the translation of this phrase, see section III.A above.

trayal of the meal scenes, but it also points to the disciples as participants in the eschatological kingdom: “I confer on you a kingdom, just as my Father conferred on me, so that you may eat and drink at my table in my kingdom” (Luke 22:30).⁵²

The preceding discussion does not aim at pointing to Luke 5:29–31 and 22:14–38 as two key passages to unlock the meaning of Acts 6:1–7. It does, however, offer clues to the context of this passage by connecting it to the wider Lukan motif of table fellowship. This connection is relevant for a proper interpretation of Acts 6:1–7 in its narrative context. As the motif deals with issues of identity, reversal, and community, these are also issues at the center of Acts 6:1–7. The struggle between “the Hellenists” and “the Hebrews,” the problem of caring for the “widows,” and the relationship between the Twelve and the Seven point precisely to the significance of these issues. For our purposes, this interpretation also contributes to resolving the apparent inconsistency between the assigned role and the subsequent function of the Seven. In light of the motif of table fellowship, the call to the Seven “to wait on tables” (v. 2) should no longer be considered simply a summons to the menial task of serving as waiters. Instead, “to wait on tables” is to provide the setting where table fellowship with the outcasts and the oppressed becomes possible.⁵³ The fact that the label “the evangelist” (ὁ εὐαγγελιστής) is applied to the ministry of one of the Seven later in the narrative (21:8) further confirms his significant role as “the one who proclaims the glad tidings, the εὐαγγέλιον” (cf. 8:12, 35, 40).⁵⁴ The Seven therefore are to continue the ministry of Jesus, who was accused of eating and drinking with “tax collectors and sinners” (Luke 5:30; 7:34; 15:1).

C. *Acts 6 in Context*

This role of the Seven in continuing the ministry of Jesus is confirmed by the account of their subsequent activities. Not only do they preach the Word; they pave the way for the Word to be preached beyond the Judeans. Just one aspect of Stephen’s speech in Acts 7 can illustrate the point. In reciting the acts of God in Mesopotamia (v. 2), Haran (v. 4), Egypt (vv. 9–29, 35–36), the wilderness around Mount Sinai (vv. 30–34, 44), and Mount Sinai (v. 38), Stephen challenges the spatial consciousness of the Judeans and points to the possibility of the renewal of the

⁵² For a further discussion of the significance of the Lukan Last Supper account for the reading of Acts 6:1–7, see section III.D below.

⁵³ The significance attached to the word *διακονία* is well documented by Collins, *Diakonia*, 73–191. Less convincing, however, is the conclusion of his subsequent study (*Deacons and the Church*, 57–58) that 6:2 refers simply to preaching. This move recognizes the significance of *διακονία*, but it fails to recognize the significance of table fellowship in the Lukan writings.

⁵⁴ Gerhard Friedrich, “εὐαγγελιστής,” *TDNT* 2:737. This function is confirmed by the use of this title in 2 Tim 4:5 for one who is explicitly called to “proclaim the word” (κήρυξον τὸν λόγον, 2 Tim 4:2).

acts of God outside Jerusalem.⁵⁵ The scattering of the believers “throughout the regions of Judea and Samaria” (8:1) represents the beginning stages where the gospel moves beyond the center of the land of the Judeans.⁵⁶ The accounts of the work of Philip, one of the Seven, in Samaria (8:4–25) and with the Ethiopian eunuch (8:26–40) likewise depict the ministry of the Seven as reaching beyond the confines of Judea.

This reading is confirmed by the placement of the first of the three summary statements in 6:7 (cf. 12:24; 19:20). The function of these statements as delineating the different stages of the development of Acts has long been recognized.⁵⁷ Significantly, the first statement appears immediately before the actual account of the ministry of the Seven. This positioning points to the unique function of the Seven as those who are advancing the gospel beyond the ministry of the Twelve.⁵⁸ The activities of Stephen and Philip in particular introduce a significant era in the movement of the gospel.

The connection between table fellowship and the spread of the gospel in Acts is further supported by the narrative of Peter and Cornelius in Acts 10:1–11:18. The depiction of the acceptance of the Gentiles by an impartial God (10:34–35) is preceded by a lengthy account of Peter’s vision (10:1–23), which involves the question of unclean food. This vision reaches its climax in 10:15 with the following declaration by a voice: “What God has made clean, you must not call profane” (ὃ ὁ θεὸς ἔκαθάρισεν, σὺ μὴ κοίνου). Despite the problems in the connection between this vision and the subsequent account of the conversion of Cornelius,⁵⁹ what is clear is that the unclean food symbolizes the Gentiles and the call to consume the

⁵⁵ Martin Dibelius, *Studies in the Acts of the Apostles* (trans. Mary Ling; London: SCM, 1956), 168–69; J. Julius Scott, Jr., “Stephen’s Defense and the World Mission of the People of God,” *JETS* 21 (1978): 133.

⁵⁶ See also 11:19, which again points to “the persecution that took place over Stephen” as the impetus for the spread of the gospel beyond Judea.

⁵⁷ See Jerome Kodell, “‘The Word of God Grew’: Ecclesial Tendency of Λόγος in Acts 6,7; 12,24; 19,20,” *Bib* 55 (1974): 505–19; Leo O’Reilly, *Word and Sign in the Acts of the Apostles: A Study in Lucan Theology* (Analecta Gregoriana 243; Rome: Pontificia Università Gregoriana, 1987), 82–83; David W. Pao, *Acts and the Isaianic New Exodus* (WUNT 2/130; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2000), 167–71.

⁵⁸ The placement of the call of Paul (Acts 9:1–30) between the ministry of the Hellenists and the conversion of Cornelius may also be significant. The account of the call of Paul focuses on his subsequent ministry among the Gentiles (9:15). This may then pave the way for the account of the conversion of a Gentile. Some have also pointed to the possible historical connections between Paul and the Hellenists; see Clayton K. Harrop, “Stephen and Paul,” in *With Steadfast Purpose: Essays on Acts in Honor of Henry Jackson Flanders, Jr.* (ed. Naymond H. Keathley; Waco: Baylor University Press, 1990), 200; John J. Pilch, *Stephen: Paul and the Hellenist Israelites* (Paul’s Social Network; Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2008), 67–70.

⁵⁹ See, in particular, François Bovon, “Tradition et rédaction en Actes 10,1–11,18,” *TZ* 26 (1970): 22–45.

unclean food becomes a call to accept these Gentiles. Through the mouth of Peter, the issue of purity, which functions as one of the primary identity markers of the Jewish community, is obviated by this vision: “God has shown me that I should not call anyone profane or unclean” (καὶ μοι ὁ θεὸς ἔδειξεν μηδένα κοινὸν ἢ ἀκάθαρτον λέγειν ἄνθρωπον, 10:28).

Beyond the mere acceptance of the message embedded in this vision, Peter’s actual table fellowship with the Gentiles is recognized by those who are displeased by his action: “You entered the house of the uncircumcised and ate with them” (εἰσῆλθες πρὸς ἄνδρας ἀκροβυστιαν ἔχοντας καὶ συνέφαγες αὐτοῖς, 11:3). Peter does not deny this accusation; instead, he explains the vision he has received and concludes that this is under the direction of God (11:17). Issues of food and table fellowship again are intimately connected with the spread of the gospel beyond the community of the Jews.⁶⁰ In light of the development of the narrative in the few chapters after Acts 6:1–7, the understanding of the Hellenists as those extending table fellowship to those beyond the traditional community should no longer be surprising.

D. *The Hellenists as Successors of Jesus*

The parallels between the Lukan portrayal of Stephen in Acts 6:8–7:60 and that of Jesus have often been noted.⁶¹ These include the portrayal of Stephen as one “full of grace and power” (6:8; cf. Luke 4:14, 22; 24:19) who performs “great wonders and signs” (6:8; cf. Acts 2:22), and the narrative of his trial (6:12–13; cf. Luke 22:54, 66) and his death (7:56–60; cf. Luke 22:69; 23:26, 34, 46).

Less noticeable are the parallels between Jesus in Luke and the Hellenists in Acts 6:1–7, except for the requirements of these Hellenists to be “full of the Spirit and wisdom” (πλήρεις πνεύματος καὶ σοφίας, 6:3; cf. Luke 2:40, 52; 3:22; 4:1). Returning to the connection between Acts 6:1–7 and the Lukan account of the Last Supper (Luke 22:14–38), one significant parallel also needs to be noted. In the Last Supper narrative, not only does Jesus, who is sharing a meal with his disciples “on the table” (ἐπὶ τῆς τραπέζης, 22:21), identify himself as “the one who serves” (ὁ διακονῶν, 22:27); he also calls the disciples to be “like the one who serves” (ὡς ὁ διακονῶν, 22:26) as he himself is.

⁶⁰ Commenting on Acts 10:1–11:18, Esler rightly notes that “[t]he central issue in this narrative is not that the gospel has been preached to Gentiles, but the far more particular fact, of great ethnic and social significance, that Peter has lived and eaten with them” (*Community and Gospel in Luke-Acts*, 93).

⁶¹ See, e.g., Marcel Simon, *St. Stephen and the Hellenists in the Primitive Church* (Haskell Lectures 1956; London: Longmans, 1958), 20–26; Abraham Smith, “Full of Spirit and Wisdom: Luke’s Portrait of Stephen (Acts 6:1–8:1a) as a Man of Self-Mastery,” in *Asceticism and the New Testament* (ed. Leif E. Vaage and Vincent L. Wimbush; New York: Routledge, 1999), 97–114; Andrew C. Clark, *Parallel Lives: The Relation of Paul to the Apostles in the Lukan Perspective* (Paternoster Biblical and Theological Monographs; Carlisle: Paternoster, 2001), 264–67.

Luke does not record that this role of serving at the table was assumed by the Twelve, but he does point to the Seven as the ones who are “to wait on tables” (*διακονεῖν τραπέζαις*, 6:2). The assigned role of the Seven therefore takes on added significance as they follow the model of Jesus and carry out his mission of table ministry. The dichotomy between the ministry of the Word and the ministry of the table cannot be found in the accounts of Jesus, nor can it be found in the ministry of the Seven. In becoming powerful messengers of the Word, therefore, they have fulfilled their assigned role as those who are “to wait on tables.”

IV. THE TWELVE AS AMBIGUOUS CHARACTERS

The above conclusion forces one to reconsider Luke’s evaluation of the Twelve, who set up the contrast between the call of the Seven “to wait on tables” (*διακονεῖν τραπέζαις*, 6:2) and their own duty to focus on “the ministry of the Word” (*τῆ διακονίᾳ τοῦ λόγου*, 6:4). Does the narrator approve of the action of the Twelve?

Certain elements in this account suggest that Luke affirms the action of the Twelve. The note that the solution “pleased the entire community” (*ἤρεσεν . . . ἐνώπιον παντὸς τοῦ πλήθους*, 6:5) implies that a satisfactory resolution is reached, and the fact that the Twelve “prayed and laid their hands on them [i.e., the Seven]” (*προσευξάμενοι ἐπέθηκαν αὐτοῖς τὰς χεῖρας*, 6:6) restores the unity of the community as emphasized in the previous chapters (cf. 2:44–47; 4:32–37; 5:12–16). Moreover, no reader would assume that the Twelve should “neglect the Word of God” (*καταλείψαντας τὸν λόγον τοῦ θεοῦ*, 6:2), nor do the concluding remarks on the spread of the Word of God (6:7) provide any hint of disapproval by the narrator.

Read in light of the wider narrative, however, the actions of the Twelve seem less flattering. First, a constant focus is placed on the widows in Luke’s narrative, as they represent those who witness and experience the mercy of God (see Luke 2:36–38; 4:25–26; 7:11–17; 18:1–8; 21:1–4). In neglecting the widows, therefore, the Hebrews and presumably the Twelve find themselves “in an unholy alliance with unjust judges (Luke 18:1–8), hypocritical scribes (20:45–47), and an exploitative temple system (21:1–6).”⁶² The insistence on proclaiming the Word while assigning the role of the care of the widows to another group seems a less than satisfactory arrangement. Moreover, the dichotomy between caring for the outcasts and proclaiming the Word is not one that can be found in the ministry of Jesus.⁶³ The ministries of the Twelve prior to this episode also point to their ability to be engaged in both ministry of the Word and table fellowship within their own community (cf.

⁶² F. Scott Spencer, “Neglected Widows in Acts 6:1–7,” *CBQ* 56 (1994): 715–33.

⁶³ See the discussion of the significance of Jesus’ sharing the table with the “tax-collectors and sinners” in section II above.

Acts 2:42, 46). Some have therefore concluded that “Luke may be more critical of the Twelve here than is usually noted.”⁶⁴

Considering both the positive and negative elements embedded in this account within its wider narrative, it seems best to view the Twelve as ambiguous characters. Luke apparently sees these apostles as reliable and faithful witnesses who “were all filled with the Holy Spirit and spoke the Word of God with boldness” (ἐπλήσθησαν ἅπαντες τοῦ ἁγίου πνεύματος καὶ ἐλάλουν τὸν λόγον τοῦ θεοῦ μετὰ παρρησίας, 4:31). Nevertheless, one also finds notes on the development in their ability to understand the mission that they received from Jesus. Their partial understanding is reflected already in the question they raise in 1:6, one that indicates their failure to understand fully the mission of their master.⁶⁵ More important for our discussion is the account of Peter’s vision in 10:1–23. Despite being called to be witnesses “to the ends of the earth” (ἕως ἐσχάτου τῆς γῆς, 1:8),⁶⁶ Peter and the other apostles still need to be convinced that the inclusion of the Gentiles is part of the mission that they should undertake. Again, while not intended as a critique of his failure to understand his call, the repeated command to consume the unclean food (10:13, 15, 16) highlights the need of Peter, as a representative of the Twelve, to become better informed about the work of God among other communities. Some commentators, therefore, have considered Acts 10:1–11:18 to be an account of the “conversion” of Peter.⁶⁷

In light of this wider development of the narrative of Acts, therefore, one should not be surprised that the solution proposed by the Twelve is not to be considered the final word on the matter. Although he relegates the task of “wait[ing] on tables” (6:2) to the Seven, Luke shows that the act of waiting on tables is precisely the means through which the Word of God can be proclaimed among other marginalized communities.⁶⁸ It is not until the account of the conversion of Cornelius that the connection between table fellowship and the proclamation of the Word can be understood.

⁶⁴ Finger, *Of Widows and Meals*, 266.

⁶⁵ Jesus’ response points to their lack of understanding, but the fact of the restoration is not denied and the disciples are not rebuked for their question. The disciples are therefore portrayed not as negative characters but as ambiguous ones whose question provides the occasion for Jesus to outline their mission; contra Robert Maddox, *The Purpose of Luke-Acts* (FRLANT 126; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1982), 106.

⁶⁶ In light of earlier passages (cf. Isa 8:9; 48:20; 49:6; 62:11; Ps. Sol. 1:4), this phrase is best understood as a reference to the nations/Gentiles and not necessarily to a particular geographical locale.

⁶⁷ See Joel B. Green, “Doing Repentance: The Formation of Disciples in the Acts of the Apostles,” *ExAud* 18 (2002): 18–19.

⁶⁸ Outside of the Lukan corpus, the failure of Peter to understand the significance of table fellowship in the mission to proclaim the Word can be found in the controversy recorded in Gal 2:11–14. While this Pauline reference may not inform our reading of the characterization of the Twelve in Acts, it does at least point to a similar concern expressed by a first-century writer.

V. CONCLUSION

Reading Acts 6:1–7 in light of the Lukan motif of table fellowship, one is able to reconsider the apparent inconsistency between the assigned role and the actual function of the Seven. Rather than an example of a glaring gap in narrative logic, the assigned role of the Seven as those who are to serve at the table provides the context in which they can reach beyond the Hebrews who reside in Jerusalem. It is their status as “waiters” that allows the Seven to continue the mission of Jesus in becoming “preachers” to the outcasts and the oppressed. Through this examination of only one aspect of this difficult account, it becomes clear that Acts 6:1–7 does function as a transitional account that bridges the Jerusalem ministry and the one that reaches “to the ends of the earth.”

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