

**Whither the Studies of Family in Early Christianity?:
A Critical Review and Search for the Reconstruction of the Household from a Postcolonial Perspective**

Park, Rohun*

Introduction

In the early Gospel literature, family refers to those related by blood, adoption, or marriage and also to those related to one another within the Christian community. There exists tension, however, between these two configurations. In Hellenistic Jewish and Greco-Roman society, one's home served as a center for education and piety. Distinct from it, however, the Christian movement shifted its loyalty from 'hearth' to 'extra-familial' relationships.¹ Hence, when read at face value, the "hard sayings" on the family attributed to Jesus (Luke 8:19-21; 14:26; Matt 10:37) suggest that the ties of blood are lesser important than the other ties—that is, the ties of Communion. Jesus declares those who do the will of God as "my brother and sister and mother" (Mark 3:33-35; Matt 12:46-50; Luke 2:48-49; 8:19-21). As such, Jesus' followers give no more than second place to even the closest family ties (Matt 19:29; Luke 14:26).

In this regard, the question arises whether Jesus created a substitute family. This question has been widely discussed in the studies of Christian family and household. In *Jesus and the Victory of God*, N. T. Wright argues that Jesus created a fictive kinship group among his disciples.² The creation of the fictive family was directly related to Jesus' task as an eschatological prophet who believed that the kingdom was imminent and being ushered in by his own activity.³ In this eschatological framework, loyalty to Jesus took precedence over loyalty to one's family. Its result was the formation of "fictive kinship," a surrogate family of disciples who had forsaken their natural families to follow Jesus. The family as such was open to all, including the gentiles, and manifested through the table fellowship.

John Pryor also turns to Jesus' understanding of the urgency of his task with regard to the fictive kinship among the disciples.⁴ According to Pryor, the urgency of the kingdom of God relativizes the demands and obligations of the family.⁵ Further, Dale Allison argues that Jesus' demands for the renunciation of family correspond to the approach to the family among the millenarian prophetic movements.⁶ According to Allison, the Jesus movement, like other millenarian prophetic movements, replaced traditional familial and social bonds with fictive kinship. Although the Jesus movement demanded intense commitment and unconditional loyalty, it promised redemption through a reversal of current circumstances.⁷ Hence, Allison attributes the creation of the

* He is a chaplain at Yonsei University, Korea. He completed his Ph.D. program in biblical studies with a specialization in New Testament and a minor in the Old Testament at Vanderbilt University. His teaching and ministerial experience has motivated him for methodological and theoretical issues in the study of early Christian literature, as well as cultural and ethical studies in biblical criticism. Email: rohun.park@gmail.com

¹ Daniel Patte (ed.), *The Cambridge Dictionary of Christianity* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 409.

² N. T. Wright, *Christian Origins and The Question of God*. v. 2, *Jesus and the Victory of God* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1996).

³ *Ibid.*, 78-85.

⁴ John W. Pryor, "Jesus and Family — a Test Case," *Australian Biblical Review* 45 (1997): 56-69.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 62-65.

⁶ Dale Allison, *Jesus of Nazareth: Millenarian Prophet* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1998).

⁷ *Ibid.*, 66-69.

fictive kinship to the historical Jesus and his earliest disciples.

By contrast, other scholars have argued that the formation of the fictive kinship group did not take place prior to the crucifixion. For example, Arland Jacobson argues that the fictive kinship was a later development.⁸ According to Jacobson, it is not even clear that there was a decisive break between the disciples and their families while Jesus was still alive.⁹ Bruce Malina makes a similar argument suggesting the later formation of fictive kinship among the disciples.¹⁰ For Malina, Jesus created a political faction rather than a fictive family group. In the wake of the resurrection, however, the political faction transformed itself into a domestic, fictive kin-group.¹¹

While these recent studies present either the earlier or the later formation of the fictive kinship group, their attempts inevitably point to the gravity of kinship within the Mediterranean world at large and the social, political, economic, and cultural settings of the Roman Palestine in particular. Indeed, the institution of family does not seem to be left inert or neutral by Jesus. Jesus goes into the houses because they are the places where some of the central problems of his society become evident. In this regard, a discussion of kinship in the Jesus tradition cannot be made without regard to the world at large. Hence, the questions arise: What are the early church's views or practices of the family as a cultural, social, political, and economic entity? To what extent and in what ways is the concept of fictive kinship applied to the Christian community under the Roman Empire?

This essay attempts to discover the formation of kinship for the people of God and its interrelated socio-political, economic dimensions in the Roman Empire. The purpose is not to discover a particular historical situation, but rather to reconstruct a pattern of the early Christian's way of living and interacting in the reality of empire. For this purpose, this essay calls attention to a hitherto unrecognized or unappreciated construction of household in the Gospel of Luke. Luke's Jesus not only calls his disciples to abandon their families, but also initiates a reordering of the household that is simultaneously social, political, economic, and theological.

What the Scholars Say about the Family, Home, and Household?

Unlike the modern individualistic culture, ancient Israel had a strong 'group' orientation. The Hebrew terms such as 'mishpacha' and 'beth' designated the single household unit, the wider circle of consanguinity (Gen. 24:38), the clan, the tribe, and the nation.¹² Thus, a person was not an autonomous entity, but someone's father, mother, daughter, son, grandparent, and so forth. This kind of concentric usage suggests the role of the basic family in shaping the larger community.¹³

⁸ Arland Jacobson, "Jesus against the Family: The Dissolution of Family Ties in the Gospel Tradition," in *From Quest to Q*, ed. James M. Robinson (Leuven: Leuven University Press, 2000), 189-218.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 201-210.

¹⁰ Bruce Malina, *The Social Gospel of Jesus: The Kingdom of God in Mediterranean Perspective* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2001).

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 66-75.

¹² In ancient Israel, tribe was the primary unit of social and territorial organization. The tribes bore the names of the twelve sons of Jacob/Israel, with Joseph divided into Manasseh and Ephraim. On the other hand, clan signifies something smaller than a tribe but larger than a family—precisely its intermediate role in Israel. See David F. Wright, "family" in *The Oxford Companion to the Bible*. Edited by Bruce M. Metzger and Michael D. Coogan (New York; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), 223.

¹³ The basis of the family is a covenant between the husband and wife (Prov. 2:17; Mal. 2:14), yet it also extends to other relatives such as grandparents, grandchildren, siblings as well as slaves, servants, and resident foreigners (Gen 17:23; 46:5-7, 26-27; Exod. 20:10; Judg. 9:1). In particular, the "father's house" was an extended family, comprising all the descendants of

Hence, the affairs of a household took on a public character, with the integration of private and public spheres. The formation of corporate family identity through the subscription to a larger social identity provided meaning and security that the household unit alone could not achieve. As such, ancient Israel emerged from a social system based on kinship groups, without referring to the centralized, elite power. The household affairs were mediated by the socio-religious life of the village community.

The ancient Mediterranean world also had a strong ‘group’ orientation. One’s identity was shaped with regard to the groups, among which most important was the family.¹⁴ The household in the Roman Empire signified the family, but extended beyond those related by blood lines to embrace slaves, servants, stewards, hired hands, property, house, animals, and furnishings.¹⁵

Recent studies have offered a wealth of valuable scholarship on the nature and function of the family in the Greco-Roman period. For example, Richard Saller points out that the virtue of *pietas* (dutiful respect) formed the core ideal for those members of the household.¹⁶ According to Saller, the family was not merely a private refuge, but a powerful locus of relationships and human loyalties thriving at the heart of public life. The husbands were also the fathers and the masters. They must bring their wives, children and slaves into submission. For their duty is to preserve the social order as such.¹⁷

Also, in their co-authored article, “Fathers and Householders in the Jesus Movement” Destro and Pesce point out that the life and function of the household should be seen as the counterpart of the politics, centered on the *polis*. For them, the connection between *oikos* and *polis* exists by way of patronage system.¹⁸ Thus, the focus on the household pertains not only to the primary kinship but also to the community that binds kin and non-kin people together. In her essay, “Roman Imperial Family Values,” Mary Rose D’Angelo further explores the impact of the Roman ideology of families on Jewish and Early Christian writings. She finds that the “family values” in the Pastorals represent an accommodation to Roman values, while at the same time the writings encourage resistance towards the Romans.¹⁹

On the other hand, one influential line of interpretation espoused by John Dominic Crossan and Gerd Theissen states that the group of disciples in the earliest Jesus movement formed an ‘egalitarian’ community over and against the patriarchal households.²⁰ Reversal to the patriarchal structures mounted, until the Christian groups were institutionalized. This sort of interpretation, however, was challenged by John H. Elliott, since ‘egalitarianism’ is the modern idea of equality and thereby runs the risk of

a single living ancestor in a single lineage, excluding married daughters, male and female slaves and their families, resident laborers, and sometimes resident Levites. It provides the strongest sense of inclusion, identity, protection, and responsibility. On the death of the head of the household, his sons in the next generation would become heads of their own houses, either dividing the patrimony, or possibly in some cases choosing to live on it together (cf. Deut 25:5).

¹⁴ Bruce Malina argues that in the whole Mediterranean world the centrally located institution maintaining societal existence is kinship and its set of interlocking rules. Bruce Malina, *The Social Gospel of Jesus*, 78-85.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁶ Richard Saller, *Patriarchy, Property, and Death in the Roman Family* (Cambridge; New York: Cambridge University Press, 1994).

¹⁷ The Bible also exhorts subordinate members to submit to their superiors. See especially “household codes” (Eph 5:22-6:9; Col 3:18-4:1; 1 Pet 2:18-3:7; 1 Tim 2:8-15; Titus 2:1-10).

¹⁸ Adriana Destro and Mauro Pesce, “Fathers and Householders in the Jesus Movement,” *Biblical Interpretation* 11 (2, 2003), 211-238.

¹⁹ Mary Rose D’Angelo, “Eusebeia: Roman imperial family values and the sexual politics of 4 Maccabees and the Pastorals,” *Biblical Interpretation* 11 (2, 2003), 139-165.

²⁰ John Dominic Crossan, *Jesus: A Revolutionary Biography* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1994); Gerd Theissen, *The Miracle Stories of the Early Christian Tradition* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1983).

anachronism.²¹ According to Elliott, the categories of “equal” and “egalitarian” were not defined or even discussed in antiquity.

Nonetheless, Elizabeth SchüsslerFiorenza claims that Jesus’ aim was to undermine and subvert the patriarchal society and to supplant it with the “discipleship of equals.”²² The radical demands for renunciation, coupled with the institution of a new fictive family group, constituted an attack on the ‘kyriarchal’ system, which shaped social and familial structures.²³ Jesus intended to establish an egalitarian community—that is, a discipleship community “without fathers.” In a four-page subsection entitled “Against the Patriarchal Family,” John Dominic Crossan also argues that Jesus’ primary agenda was to overthrow patriarchal and hierarchical, social structures and institute radical social egalitarianism in their stead.²⁴ According to Crossan, the unsettled nature of itinerancy in the Jesus movement represents such “unbrokered egalitarianism.”²⁵

In *The Historical Jesus*, Gerd Theissen and Annette Merz have approached the subject matter from a slightly different perspective.²⁶ They argue that in Mark’s Gospel and in Mark 3:31–35 in particular, Jesus repudiates paternal, and also parental, power and changes the status of each member of the household. This is most apparent in the changes of expression from “mother and brothers” to “brothers and sisters and mother” (Mark 3:33–34).²⁷ The term “mother” is moved from the position of primacy to the final position and thus suggests the displacement of the mother’s positional authority.

Interestingly, John W. Pryor opposes the claims that Jesus’ main goal was to overturn the patriarchal family and institute radical egalitarianism in its place.²⁸ He points out that Jesus used the ‘father-son’ terminology and other familial languages to speak of his relationship with the Father and the Kingdom of God. With regard to the ‘hard sayings’ (Luke 8:19–21; 14:26; Matt 10:37), Pryor argues that those ‘radical’ statements were not motivated by anti-familial, anti-patriarchal, or anti-hierarchical sentiments, but by a belief that the call of God should take precedence over the family obligations.²⁹ The priority of the natural family should be de-emphasized only in terms of the higher priority of the call from God. In this regard, Jesus subordinated the ‘kinship’ to the ‘discipleship’ (cf. Luke 14:26; Matt 10:37).

²¹ John H. Elliot, “The Jesus Movement was not Egalitarian but Family Oriented,” *Biblical Interpretation* 11 (2, 2003): 173–210.

²² See Elizabeth SchüsslerFiorenza, *In Memory of Her: A Feminist Theological Reconstruction of Christian Origins* (New York: Crossroad, 1983). E. S. Fiorenza claims that Jesus intended to subvert the patriarchal, hierarchically-organized society and to establish an egalitarian community for both men and women.

²³ *Ibid.*, 7. In the colonial Mediterranean culture, a father has both power and responsibility for his children. His role as a father includes instruction, discipline, and punishment. This role of the father as paterfamilias should be understood in regard to a colonial environment. The household system is one of the building blocks for ensuring the hegemonic influence of the Empire. The mainstay of the imperial order is the kyriarchal pattern.

²⁴ With regard to the view of radical social egalitarianism, see John Dominic Crossan, *The Historical Jesus: The Life of a Mediterranean Jewish Peasant* (San Francisco, CA: HarperSanFrancisco, 1991).

²⁵ *Ibid.*

²⁶ Gerd Theissen and Annette Merz, *The Historical Jesus: A Comprehensive Guide*. trans. by John Bowden (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1996).

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 78–89.

²⁸ John W. Pryor, “Jesus and Family — a Test Case,” *Australian Biblical Review* 45 (1997): 56–69.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 57–60.

Most discussions about the family in early Christianity point to the gravity of kinship within the Mediterranean world at large. In this regard, one must reconstruct kinship and its interrelated socio-political, economic dimensions in the Roman Empire. In order to explore the reconfiguration of family for the people of God, I now turn to the re(de)construction of the household in the Gospel of Luke.

The Genealogy and a Renewed Vision of the Household in the Gospel of Luke

Most discussions in the New Testament studies present the believers as God's own family. In this regard, David A. deSilva argues that the formation of the fictive kinship takes a Christ-centered focus and relates to the descendents of Abraham:

It is now attachment to this Jesus that determines whether or not a person is in the family, rather than the person's bloodline or natural lineage. Discussions in the New Testament of the formation of this family focus on determining "the true descendants of Abraham" as well as adoption into God's own family.³⁰

A person's relationship to the deity was a function of the deity's connection to his or her family. This was also the case with ancient Israel. The ancestral narratives of Genesis repeatedly use the language of family in reference to God. For example, the Song of Miriam and Moses praises the God of their lineage: "This is my God, and I will praise him, my father's God, and I will exalt him" (Ex. 15:2). Jacob also invokes the God of his lineage, "the God of Abraham and of Isaac" (e.g., Gen 31:5, 42, 53; 32:9; 46:1-2).

However, the Lukan configuration of kinship is unique in that its genealogy extends beyond the ancestors. The genealogy in Luke pushes past Abraham and goes up to Adam and, ultimately, to God (Luke 3:23-38).³¹ Most of the persons in the list up to David are otherwise unknown, and David's and Abraham's place in the genealogy are not highlighted (cf. Matt. 1:6, 17). In this regard, the genealogy in Luke stands drastically different, especially from the one in the Gospel of Matthew, and provides a unique guide for social interaction (cf. Matt. 1:1-17).

As such, Luke establishes Jesus in the line of Adam and extends his genealogy to all humankind. The most striking feature of this genealogy is that it establishes a household which consists of the divine and humanity together.³² As such, the divine kinship which is political and economic as well as cultural and religious precedes and transcends the existing institutions of the empire.³³ The household of God provides now a norm (*nomos*), whereby the self and the other(s) may live together in a manner that is both just and sustainable (cf. Luke 11:2-4, "Father, hallowed be your name, your kingdom come. Give us each day our daily bread. Forgive us our

³⁰ David A. deSilva, *Honor, Patronage, Kinship & Purity: Unlocking New Testament Culture* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 2000).

³¹ Since kin was reckoned unilaterally through the male, the mother's relatives were not counted genealogically as kin, nor given differentiated generic names. Roger M. Keesing, *Kin Groups and Social Structure* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1975), 3-31.

³² The most common Greek term *oikía* is the ordinary word for family. See David F. Wright, "Family," 224.

³³ See David Balch and John L. Stambaugh, *The New Testament in Its Social Environment*. Library of Early Christianity (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1988), 63-81.

debts...).³⁴

While recognizing and unveiling the empire's overall system of relations, Luke frees people from it or otherwise challenges it, integrating extraneous bits and pieces into a unified whole of "household." As such, Luke's creation of kinship becomes more associated with various cultural, moral, and socio-political expressions and inspires liberation today for all people.

For the People of God, this is a new constitution and a new covenant. Luke's genealogy, which serves as an audacious metaphor against the empire, informs and reforms the construction of 'life' and 'life-together'.³⁵ This vision can be drawn into three broad categories: 1) divided vs. communal, 2) hierarchical vs. egalitarian, 3) fated vs. hopeful.

1. Divided vs. Communal

The family is necessarily linked to the eucharistic community and thus becomes sacramental.³⁶ My "life" is not merely given, but gives especially to the one who receives it. Shared values of cooperation and mutual assistance are typically inculcated and perpetuated through the life of community. In this respect, Luke's genealogy reinstates the human beings in community. God creates the human beings as in community.³⁷ This does not point to the mode of reciprocity (e.g., *homo reciprocans*), nor the self-gratification (e.g., *homo oeconomicus*).³⁸ It rather points to the (comm)union (e.g., *homo communitas*). A human being must be recognized as such.³⁹

In this regard, the Parable of the Prodigal Son (Luke 15:11-32) provides a great example. The household in the first-century Mediterranean world was strictly patriarchal, with the paterfamilias wielding enormous *patria potestas* over his children.⁴⁰ Its governing ethic must focus on loyalty rather than on entitlements, on discipline rather than on rights—such as the right of the younger son to ask for premature inheritance and to return home

³⁴ Normally, the genealogy drawn from the concept of "shared blood" serves to secure trust and assure willingness to engage in mutual aid.

³⁵ The genealogies in the Old Testament weave a comprehensive fabric of kin relationships for the family households. People tend to think of themselves as kin, or use kinship language to characterize their commonality. However, the genealogy in Luke provides a different guide for social interaction. Cf. Matt 1:1-17.

³⁶ For example, the Passover, which is Israel's foundational ritual, was a family celebration (Exod. 12:2-4, 26-27).

³⁷ The ruling elites who have expropriated the produce and consume the resources of the people cannot participate in the "great" banquet, a place of *communio*, where 'self' and 'other' celebrate life and life together. To do "economics" apart from the *community* and *communion* is a grave mistake for Luke.

³⁸ With regard to *Homo Oeconomicus*, neoclassical economics has long grounded economy as a rational choice between the alternative uses of limited means. In the market system, individuals—essentially *homo oeconomicus*—respond only if the proffered benefits are attractive. Because of material "scarcity," they pursue the maximization of utility, measuring the benefits and costs of each means. This view of humanity conveys the utopian idealization of the self. The market cannot coerce since it is based on the "free choice" of individuals. With regard to *Homo Reciprocans*, Rather than placing economy in a separate and distinct social sphere, scholars such as Karl Polanyi assert that human economy is embedded in the various social institutions. Economic exchange takes place within, and is regulated by, society rather than being located in a social vacuum. The human subject is placed in relations of production, exchange, and consumption, while also equally embedded in the networks of social relationships and cultural influences. For Polanyi, by denying the role of social relations in economic life, modern economies are at risk of failure and crisis.

³⁹ On this point, see Franz J. Hinkelammert, *Weapons of Death* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1986).

⁴⁰ Since Caesar, the title of Pater Patriae was consistently conferred on the emperors, although Tiberius never accepted this title. This eloquent title was suggestive of protective but coercive authority of the paterfamilias. See the entry of Pater Patriae in Simon Hornblower and Antony Spawforth (eds.), *The Oxford Classical Dictionary* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), p. 1121.

as he is still 'prodigal.'⁴¹ However, the father in the parable does not show any interest in maneuvering possessions and maximizing profits. He is not ungenerous. He himself wastes riches for his younger son, holding a celebration and putting himself in his older son's portion of the estate.

As such, the text of Luke does not give a chance to exploit people with a sense of indebtedness, inequality, or immorality. The father's utterance, "Son, you are always with me, all that mine is yours," could only amount to saying: "You are neither indebted nor obligated to me as you think because you are part of the family whose rationale guarantees mutual commitment and liberation."⁴² Henceforth, both the shameful and the honorable are invited to participate in the celebration as the significant members of the family. The parable fosters the communion between and beyond the self and the other(s).

The family in the Gospel of Luke is not divided or discriminatory, going far beyond individual relations and exclusive motivations. It does not even allow for the division of costs from benefits, although both are interpenetrating and interdependent through the communion. The parable as such presents an alternative kinship that builds mutual commitment and creates pervasive interdependence from within and without. The reconstruction of kinship in Luke is driven by the mutual commitment under the mercy and grace of God who levels all the boundaries: "Every valley shall be filled, and every mountain and hill shall be made low, and the crooked shall be made straight, and the rough ways made smooth" (3:5).

2. Hierarchical vs. Egalitarian

In ancient Israel, the authority of the father provided the strongest cohesive power. He arranged marriages for his children, generally within the clan (Gen 24:1-9; Deut. 7:3; Neh. 13:23-25).⁴³ Children were subject to the authority of parents, often under severe penalty. They counted legally as part of the father's property. The obligation of children to honor their parents was deeply enshrined in the Decalogue and repeated with emphasis in the wisdom books (e.g., Sir. 3:1-16).

Much in the same way, the family served as a key institution in the hierarchical, patriarchal society of the Roman Empire. Strikingly, however, Jesus' anti-familial demands in Luke challenge the very foundation of society as such. For example, the Parable of the Great Dinner (Luke 14:15-23) presents the household in which the patron-client relationship comes to an end. In the beginning of the story, one of the Pharisees hosts a meal to which Jesus and a number of people are invited. From the title *archōn* (14:1) as well as from the list of guests (14:12), it seems obvious that the host is rich and prominent in the village. Similarly, the man of the parable who is located at the very top sends out invitations. For the people at the margin of society, those invitations disclose the borders, created and justified through the norms which represent the way in which people organize the human relations.

⁴¹ The household system was one of the building blocks for ensuring the hegemonic influence of the empire. Indeed, the mainstay of the imperial order was the kyriarchal pattern.

⁴² Apparently, society widely recognized certain privileges in inheritance for the firstborn son, but those privileges were not immutable. The existence of such a custom would reduce tensions within the family unit by providing a standard rule of primogeniture. Squabbling could be ended by parents who chose to invoke traditional inheritance principles. Sons alone have a right to the inheritance. Among the sons, the eldest had a privileged position and received a double share of his father's goods (Deut 21:17; cf. 2 Kng 2:9).

⁴³ The family provided one of the most commonly used analogies for the relationship between Israel and God as father (Exod. 4:11; Ps. 103:13; Prov. 3:12; Jer 31:9; Hos 11:1-14). See David F. Wright, "Family," 223.

Surprisingly, however, the people who are invited refuse those invitations because of the conflicts with their own “family” business: “The first said to him, ‘I have bought a piece of land, and I must go out and see it...’ Another said, ‘I have bought five yoke of oxen, and I am going to try them out...’ Another said, ‘I have just been married, and therefore I cannot come’ (Luke 14:18-20). In so doing, they reveal the lack of capability. This is ironically combined with the description of the poor and other physically, socially, and economically disadvantaged groups who are able to come to the banquet: the crippled, the blind, the lame and the outcasts (Luke 14:21). For the people of God, this should come as a corrective, such that Mary being aware of her pregnancy is able to “see” the salvation of the lowly and oppressed (Luke 1:46-55; 10:23, “Blessed are the eyes that see...!”). Within a “hierarchy of love”, all members, including those who are outside the system of patronage, share an equality of persons, while having distinctive roles around the table.⁴⁴ The renewed vision of solidarity as such becomes most evident in the egalitarian household (cf. John 4:53; Acts 11:14; 16:15, 31-34).⁴⁵ Hence, the story challenges the pattern of hierarchical relations and its categorical borderlines that create and legitimate insufficiency in a zero-sum colonial society.

3. Fated vs. Hopeful

In the Roman Empire and colonial Palestine, there is a forced movement—a movement from the colonizer to the colonized, from the center to the periphery, from the powerful to the powerless.⁴⁶ However, Luke's representation of genealogy like an “umbilical cord” carries human subjects into the (re)union with God. When overt ‘rebellion’ outside ordinary and everyday life seems doubtful, this genealogy “turns around” and “ratchets up” toward God (*contra* Matt 1:1-17). In so doing, it not only signifies that there is more than one direction, but also condemns the demands from the top to the bottom: “In those days a decree went out from Emperor Augustus that all the world should be taxed” (Luke 2:1).

Henceforth, Luke's formation of household empowers those from below to engage in powerful acts of imagination and contests the foundation of the present livelihood in a dynamic-creative fashion. This helps to explain the Lukan construction of the relations within the household, including masters and slaves (cf. Philem 15-16). The Parable of the Shrewd Steward (Luke 16:1-9) in particular helps to unveil the Lukan construct as such. The parable presents a steward who, faced with the loss of his employment and eventually his death (16:3, “Then the steward said within himself, What shall I do? for my lord takes away from me the stewardship: I cannot dig; to beg I am ashamed.”)

However, the steward in the parable places himself among the villagers, being subordinate and in debt vis-à-vis their creditor, that is, their rich landlord. While falling below subsistence level because of colonial exploitation, typical peasants become landless tenants and debtors. Some may have been sold into labor, or imprisoned for their debts (Luke 12:58-9). Poverty is not a virtue, but a concrete reality. In this concrete

⁴⁴ Most early Christian congregations were family or house churches, meeting in domestic buildings and led by the householders, including women and husband-and-wife joint leaders (Acts 2:46; Rom. 16:3-5; 1 Cor. 16:15, 19; Philem. 1-2). See David F. Wright, “Family,” 223.

⁴⁵ This also helps to explain the relations between the individuals, including masters and slaves (cf. Philem 15-16).

⁴⁶ F. F. Segovia, “Biblical Criticism and Postcolonial Studies: Toward a Postcolonial Optic,” in R. S. Sugirtharajah (ed.), *The Postcolonial Bible, The Bible and Postcolonialism* 1 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1998), 49-65. See also Segovia, *Decolonizing Biblical Studies* (2000): 119-144.

“material” reality, the steward reenters into relationship with his master’s debtors, while he wastes his master’s assets in order to rectify the “injustice of usury”.

If wealth is not shared with the needy, it not only perpetuates injustice and evil, but also inflicts evil on others. The steward represents a complicated position in terms of production and distribution as formally based on utility and scarcity. In a very real way, the steward participates in the economic problems of first-century Palestine. In Luke’s Gospel, however, the natural and material relationship the steward represents points further to the Jubilee tradition of debt cancellation and slave release (cf. Lev. 25). According to Luke, this relates to the transition into the “eternal homes” (16:9).

In a sense, the steward of the parable serves as a model of a person refining his own opportunities. The imperial slave *oikonomos* as the chief household slave enjoys a position of authority over other slaves and has responsibility for his master's possessions, yet he remains a slave. If he failed to discharge his duties prudently, he might be beaten, even killed. The ambiguity of the steward's position in the ancient economy and the shrewdness he exhibits in Luke’s narrative may emerge into a broader picture of success and deprivation in the empire. The steward uses his own freedom to survive rather than succumb to impending afflictions and devastation. It should be striking that Luke’s Jesus compares the *oikonomia* of God with such a character, being able to satisfy the ends he has reason to value.

The steward does raise his life to the end of the household management that creates through the narrative the discussions of the instrumental role of human beings in bringing about social, economic changes. To this degree, the steward’s freedom-based capability offers invaluable insights for the consideration of the household management. The Lukan vision and dream which is attributed to the people of God are ascribed to colonial subjects, who had formerly been reduced to monetary or quantitative measurements of Mammon (Luke 16:11). In order to be a living hope for all and for a just society, Luke’s household narrative warns against Mammon which takes a place of a “god.”⁴⁷

Conclusion

⁴⁷ James Cone observed that what people think about God cannot be divorced from their place and time in a definite history and culture. This view continues to find support. James Cone, *God of the Oppressed* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1997).

In the Gospel of Luke, Jesus not only calls his disciples to abandon their families, but also initiates a reordering of the household that is simultaneously social, political, economic, and theological. With strong political, economic, social overtones, the Gospel of Luke presents an alternative way of living and interacting under the reality of empire. The divine household Luke introduces conveys not an “incrementalist”, but a “maximalist” agenda (Luke 3:6, “and all flesh shall see the salvation of God”), involving a radically new vision of life and a living hope for the people of God.⁴⁸

Thus, Luke’s construct of the household does not simply function as an exclusive institution, as in most of the Greco-Roman world. When the family continues its usual role serving as a basis for life in Roman colonial and imperial society, Luke’s re(de)construction of the household as a project of life and for life informs the Christian community’s orthopraxis and builds a divine canopy for the otherwise uprooted, “homeless,” people. As such, while retelling Jesus and the Jesus traditions in its own time, Luke’s narrator exposes an alternative household and writes its renewed vision into the present context. Therefore, the readings of the issues of family in the Gospel cannot skirt the tensions, inherent in the reality of the empire.

Abstract

In the early Gospel literature, family refers to those related by blood, adoption, or marriage and also to those related to one another within the Christian community. There exists tension, however, between these two configurations. In Hellenistic Jewish and Greco-Roman society, one’s home served as a center for education and piety. Distinct from it, however, the Christian movement shifted its loyalty from ‘hearth’ to ‘extra-familial’ relationships. Hence, when read at face value, the “hard sayings” on the family attributed to Jesus (Luke 8:19-21; 14:26; Matt 10:37) suggest that the ties of blood are lesser important than the other ties—that is, the ties of Communion. Jesus declares those who do the will of God as “my brother and sister and mother” (Mark 3:33-35; Matt 12:46-50; Luke 2:48-49; 8:19-21).

For example, in the Gospel of Luke, Jesus not only calls his disciples to abandon their families, but also initiates a reordering of the family that is simultaneously social, political, economic, and theological. While retelling Jesus and the Jesus traditions in its own time, Luke’s narrator exposes an alternative kinship and writes its effects into the present context. When the family continues its usual role serving as a basis for life in Roman colonial and imperial society, the Lukan construction of household as a project of life and for life informs and reforms the Christian community’s orthopraxis and erects a divine canopy for the otherwise uprooted, “homeless,” people.

This essay attempts to discover the formation of kinship for the people of God and its interrelated socio-political, economic dimensions in the Roman Empire. The purpose is not to discover a particular historical situation, but rather to reconstruct a pattern of the early Christian’s way of living and interacting in the reality of empire. For this purpose, this essay calls attention to a hitherto unrecognized or unappreciated reconstruction of the household in the Gospel of Luke.

Key Words: Family, People of God, Parable, Human Beings, Roman Empire.

⁴⁸*Ibid.*

Bibliography

- Allison, Dale. *Jesus of Nazareth: Millenarian Prophet*. Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1998.
- Bailey, Kenneth E. *Poet & Peasant and Through Peasant Eyes: Literary-Cultural Approach to the Parables of Luke*. Michigan: Grand Rapids, 1983.
- Balch, David and Stambaugh, John L. *The New Testament in Its Social Environment*. Library of Early Christianity. Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1988.
- Cone, James. *God of the Oppressed*. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1997.
- Crossan, John Dominic. *The Historical Jesus: the Life of a Mediterranean Jewish Peasant*. San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1991.
- _____. *Jesus: A Revolutionary Biography*. San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1994.
- _____. "Structuralist Approach to the Parables." *Semeia* 1 (1974): 17-235.
- D'Angelo, Mary Rose. "Eusebeia: Roman imperial family values and the sexual politics of 4 Maccabees and the Pastorals." *Biblical Interpretation* 11 (2003/2): 139-165.
- DeSilva, David A. *Honor, Patronage, Kinship & Purity: Unlocking New Testament Culture*. Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 2000.
- Destro, Adriana and Pesce, Mauro. "Fathers and Householders in the Jesus Movement." *Biblical Interpretation* 11 (2003/2): 211-238.
- Donahue, John R. *The Gospel in Parable: Metaphor, Narrative, and Theology in the Synoptic Gospels*. Philadelphia: Fortress, 1988.
- Elliot, John H. "The Jesus Movement was not Egalitarian but Family Oriented." *Biblical Interpretation* 11 (2003/2): 173-210.
- Fiorenza, Elisabeth Schüssler. *Rhetoric and Ethic: the Politics of Biblical Studies*. Minneapolis: Fortress, 1999.
- _____. *In Memory of Her: A Feminist Theological Reconstruction of Christian Origins*. New York: Crossroad, 1983.
- Herzog, William R. *Parables as Subversive Speech: Jesus as Pedagogue of the Oppressed*. Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 1994.
- Hinkelammert, Franz J. *Weapons of Death*. Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1986.
- Hornblower, Simon and Spawforth, Antony., eds. *The Oxford Classical Dictionary*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003.
- Horsely, Richard. *Covenant Economics: A Biblical Vision of Justice for All*. Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2009.
- Jacobson, Arland. "Jesus against the Family: The Dissolution of Family Ties in the Gospel Tradition." in *From Quest to Q*. Edited by James M. Robinson. Leuven: Leuven University Press, 2000.
- Johnson, Luke Timothy. *The Gospel of Luke. Sacra Pagina Series*. Vol. 3. Collegeville: The Liturgical, 1991.
- _____. *The Literary Function of Possessions in Luke-Acts*. Missoula, MT: Scholars Press for the Society of Biblical Literature, 1977.
- Malina, Bruce. *The Social Gospel of Jesus: The Kingdom of God in Mediterranean Perspective*.

- Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2001.
- Moxnes, Halvor. *Putting Jesus in His Place: A Radical Vision of Household and Kingdom*. Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2003.
- _____. *The Economy of the Kingdom: Social Conflict and Economic Relations in Luke's Gospel*. Philadelphia: Fortress, 1988.
- Pryor, John W. "Jesus and Family — a Test Case." *Australian Biblical Review* 45 (1997): 56-69.
- Reid, Barbara E. *Parables for Preachers: The Gospel of Luke*. Collegeville: Liturgical, 2000.
- Saller, Richard. *Patriarchy, Property, and Death in the Roman Family*. Cambridge; New York: Cambridge University Press, 1994.
- Scott, Bernard Brandon. *Hear Then the Parable: A Commentary on the Parables of Jesus*. Philadelphia: Fortress, 1989.
- Segovia, F. F. "Biblical Criticism and Postcolonial Studies: Toward a Postcolonial Optic," in R.S. Sugirtharajah., ed. *The Postcolonial Bible, The Bible and Postcolonialism* 1. Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1998.
- _____. *Decolonizing Biblical Studies: A View From the Margins*. Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 2000.
- Theissen, Gerd and Merz, Annette. *The Historical Jesus: A Comprehensive Guide*. trans. John Bowden. Minneapolis: Fortress, 1996.
- Wright, N. T. *Christian Origins and The Question of God*. v. 2, *Jesus and the Victory of God*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1996.