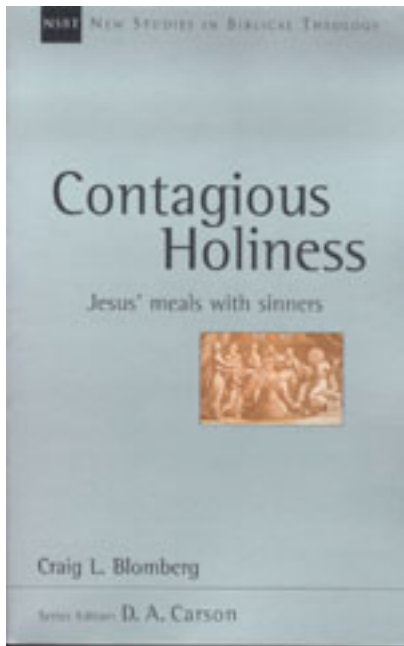


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Blomberg, Craig L.

Contagious Holiness: Jesus' Meals with Sinners

New Studies in Biblical Theology

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Chapter 1, “The Current Debate” (19–31), sensibly enough gives a critical review of contemporary scholarship. One result of this that consequently dominates the book is the importance of locating Jesus’ meals more in the context of Palestinian Judaism than in the context of the Hellenistic symposium (cf. D. E. Smith; K. E. Corley). Another key point made is against E. P. Sanders, namely, that there was the potential for conflict over purity regulation and that Jesus would have wanted the sinner/wicked to reform.

Chapter 2, “Forming Friendships but Evading Enemies” (32–64), covers a wide range of Hebrew Bible material from the Pentateuch, historical books, wisdom literature, and the Prophets. Here we find special meals for a variety of reasons, from military conquests to covenant making. Meals could include outsiders, but they often involved a preexisting relationship. The food laws set the scene for a more exclusive intra-Jewish table fellowship. We also see the first hints of a messianic or eschatological banquet. However, the Hebrew Bible does not appear to include much room for the unrepentant wicked and the enemy of Israel.

Chapter 3, titled “Contagious Impurity” (65–96), examines meals in the Apocrypha, the Pseudepigrapha, the Dead Sea Scrolls and at Qumran, and Greco-Roman symposia.

Blomberg argues that early Judaism went a step further than the biblical material in drawing boundaries, making sure the group included the right people eating the right food. Whereas impurity was a contagious threat to the elect, the idea of “a godly person’s holiness rubbing off on and transforming an unclean or unholy person scarcely seems to have been countenanced” (93). More interaction with Hellenistic symposia was to be found among the aristocracy, but in general symposia had little influence on Jewish eating habits.

Chapter 4, “Jesus the Consummate Party Animal?” (97–129), looks at Jesus’ eating with sinners in material not particular to Luke. Jesus was willing to associate with the ritually impure and the morally wicked. Jesus went even further by asking people such as Levi to follow him, as long as they showed repentance. There was even hope for those arch-outsiders the Gentiles. Blomberg also notes the linking theme of “contagious holiness” where Jesus’ purity rubs off on to sinners, even the unclean. The theme of an eschatological messianic banquet is said to be present in several traditions.

Chapter 5, “Pervasive Purity” (130–63), looks at Jesus’ eating with sinners in material particular to Luke. Jesus associates with a wide variety of people, from undesirables to purity-conscious Pharisees. Eating may well have a more prominent narrative role in Luke, but it is not the central theme in the Gospel, and Luke does not seriously tamper with “the history he inherited” (161). Once again there is anticipation of an eschatological or a messianic banquet where the wicked will be present, if they have repented and followed.

Finally, chapter 6, ‘The Potential of Contemporary Christian Meals’ (164–80), summarizes the key conclusions and gives suggestions for application in “our desperately lost and hurting world” (180).

There is more than a hint that Blomberg’s narrative guides the reader along a winding path toward the superiority of Jesus and Christianity. And of course this means Judaism comes out a poor second. If Jesus is going to be the greatest, then the major functions of the temple have to go (25–26), despite there being no evidence cited and no criticisms of Jesus acting in what would have been a scandalous way. And what is to be made of texts that say the very opposite (Mark 1:40–45; Matt 5:23)? Some similar points can be made on the issue of contagious purity, which is in some ways a development of the supposed bypassing of the temple. While this view may or may not be accurate, there remains no clear evidence cited.

On Blomberg’s reading, biblical food laws also have to go. In discussing Luke 11:37–54, he claims that “Jesus has dramatically turned the tables on his critics, setting the stage for

declaring all foods clean,” and that it is “hard to argue” that it is “not part of Jesus’ intention all along to set the stage for superseding the kosher laws” (142–43). Actually, it is very easy to argue this. Again, would someone not have raised a critical eyebrow in the Synoptic tradition? As is often pointed out, Paul could not cite the example of Jesus at Antioch (Gal 2:11–14). Blomberg’s reading would also lead to some strange results. At the very least *Luke* would have disagreed with Blomberg. Luke says Peter had to have a vision from God and had never eaten anything unclean (Acts 10:1–11:18), which would mean that the Lukan Peter had no idea what Jesus thought about this or had never heard Jesus mention this not-insignificant point.

Further, every Jesus tradition appears to be authentic here, which leads to some unusual arguments made in favor of historicity. When discussing Luke 19:10, Blomberg argues that “the tightly knit outline of the passage ... points to the integrity and thus the authenticity of the entire passage” (156). Does this approach apply to all such passages in all literature? I must also plead ignorance here: I simply do not understand how this proves anything either way. Similarly, with the feeding miracles (Mark 6:30–44; 8:1–10), we are told that the “distinction in the locations ... combined with the obscurity of the geographical references, supports the conviction that both were separate events in which Jesus was actually involved” (110). I simply have no idea how this supports Jesus being “actually involved.” Furthermore, is historical methodology pointless if everything is simply going to turn out accurate? On analogy with literature of the time, it might be expected that statistically something somewhere in the tradition might well be fictitious. If not, why not?

I have been very critical, but in fairness this book has numerous positive features. The “Jewishness” of the meals is well defended. It is surely accurate to say that there was some clash between Jesus and his contemporaries over the interpretation of purity laws at the meal table, even if Blomberg overstates the nature of the dispute. More generally, the book contains loads of helpful and conveniently collected background material. Many of Blomberg’s arguments are sound, and there is no doubt that the reader will get feel for the varied scholarly debates with which Blomberg interacts. But when the result is a historical Jesus who is greater than anyone else and who can do spectacular supernatural things, one must wonder just how the words “historical” and “authentic” are being used.