

# “And the Angels Waited on Him” (Mark 1:13): Hospitality and Discipleship in Mark’s Gospel

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## Abstract<sup>2</sup>

*The emphasis on discipleship in Mark’s gospel, particularly in its relationship to the cross, is well researched. Little has however been made of a parallel expression of discipleship through the extension of hospitality to Jesus. Yet, beginning with Mark 1:13 where angels table-served Jesus in the wilderness, several of His followers, including the disciples, also contribute to Jesus’ mission by extending Him hospitality. After briefly reviewing the motif of table-serving God in the Old Testament and the literature of second temple Judaism, this article will examine the incidents in Mark’s Gospel in which individuals express their discipleship to Jesus through hospitality. It concludes by outlining the contemporary implications of the findings to Christian witness in the African as well as non-African contexts.*

## 1. Introduction

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Mark’s account of the temptation of Jesus, though brief (Mark 1:13), nevertheless provides a colourful setting for depicting Jesus’ ministry in the rest of the gospel. In addition to noting that Jesus was in the wilderness for forty days, where He was tempted by Satan, Mark also states that Jesus was with wild animals and *hoi angeloi diēkonoun autō* (“the angels waited on Him”, Mark 1:13 NRSV). This final clause has attracted two main categories of questions: (a) what were the actual functions of the angels? and (b) what significance did Mark attach to these functions?

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Broadly conceived, four sets of approaches have been adopted by interpreters to address these two questions. Beginning with a number of Patristic authors, a first group of interpreters consider the verse as largely theological and meant to set the context for Jesus' ministry. In this regard the *diakoneō* of the angels is considered to be symbolic of the new dispensation of God's kingdom inaugurated by Jesus. Mark 1:13, it is argued, depicts an Edenic and paradisiacal typology in which Jesus, the new Adam, peacefully interacts with angels and wild animals after defeating Satan and reversing Adam's fall (e.g., Donahue and Harrington 2002, 66; Bauckham 1994, 3-21; Marcus 2000, 168; Guelich 1989, 39; Jeremias 1971, 69-70; Schulze 1955, 280-283; Maloney 2002, 38-39). In support of this interpretation, the apocryphal Life of Adam and Eve 4 in which, following their eviction from Eden, the first couple are made to lament their loss of the "food of the angels" is often cited (cf. Isa 11:6-9; Hos 2:18).

Even though it assumes that the function of the angels was to feed Jesus, this theological interpretation nevertheless appears to strain the account of the temptation of Jesus beyond its immediate historical indicators. Significantly, Mark does not report the victory of Jesus in the verse, and in the rest of the gospel, Jesus is in constant conflict with the evil forces. This suggests that Mark 1:13 can only be interpreted as the beginning of the reversal of Satan's reign, rather than its end (cf. Lane 1974, 61).

A second set of interpreters take *diakoneō* to mean that the angels protected Jesus from the onslaught of Satan in the wilderness (e.g. France 2002, 87; Gundry 1993, 55; Stein 2008, 64-65). Psalm 91:11-13, which promises angelic protection against stumbling in a hostile environment populated by lions and snakes, is often cited in support of this interpretation. It is argued that Mark underlines the "holy war" context of Jesus' ministry in which the angels play the role of co-warriors of Jesus in the wilderness. France (2002, 87), along with Gibson (1994, 3-4), also emphasizes that this protective function of the angels is rhetorically aimed at balancing out the negative hostility of Satan to Jesus in the wilderness. However, even though the rhetorical effect of the clause on Mark's first readers may well have been the sense that Satan's negative activities in the wilderness were cancelled out by the positive

presence and protection of the angels, the use of the word *diakoneō* appears to suggest a much more practical function by the angels.

A third group of interpreters construe Mark 1:13 as part of a typological re-enactment of Israel’s forty-year sojourn in the wilderness, and the *diakoneō* of the angels as representing the guidance of the people of God (e.g., Caneday 1999, 19-36; Lane 1974, 62; Mauser 1963, 124-128; van Henten 1999, 349-366). Just as the angels guided Israel through the wilderness (cf. Exod 14:19; 23:20), it is argued, so also did they guide Jesus during His time in the wilderness. Just as God fed Israel with the “food of the angels” during their travel through the wilderness (Ps 77:19 LXX; Wis 16:20), it is stressed, so also did He send the angels to feed His only Son in the wilderness. In a recent article, John Heil (2006, 63-78), has extended this interpretation further by linking it with the Old Testament idea of Israel as God’s son or servant to argue that the function of the angels included the “training” and preparation of Jesus, God’s beloved Son, for His upcoming ministry.

As a corollary, this interpretation is sometimes also linked with the angelic feeding of Elijah in the wilderness in 1 Kings 19:4-8 (cf. 1 Kgs 17:6). This parallel with Elijah in the wilderness has some merit, even though it has to be emphasized that the One fed by the angels in Mark 1:13 is much, much greater than Elijah. In any case, there is the remaining problem that there is no consistent “Israel Christology” in the rest of Mark’s gospel. And hence, this interpretation does not demonstrate how the *diakoneō* of the angels relates to the rest of the theological emphases of the gospel.

The fourth class of interpretations takes a purely practical view and regards the *diakoneō* of the angels as providing table-service for Jesus in the wilderness (e.g., Stein 2008, 65). The angels, it is argued, extended hospitality<sup>3</sup> to Jesus in an inhospitable wilderness by keeping Him company and serving Him food and/or drink. In doing so, the angels sustained Jesus during a period of trial and ultimately aided His mission.

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<sup>3</sup> The word, “hospitality” is defined differently by various writers. It is used in this article to refer to the practice of providing food or drink and/or company to another person to whom one is not naturally obliged to do so.

There are a number of reasons for preferring this fourth approach. Firstly, by highlighting the hunger of Jesus during His temptation, Matthew (4:2) and Luke (4:2) suggest that the *diakoneō* of the angels during Jesus' sojourn in the wilderness involved feeding and refreshing Him. Mark does not mention the hunger of Jesus as part of the temptation, and so must certainly be allowed to "retain his own voice". However, even though his account of Jesus' temptation is brief, there is no reason to suppose that his description was meant to be radically different from those of the other synoptic gospels. Mark 1:13 should therefore be regarded as a synopsis of the more elaborate temptation accounts of Matthew and Luke. Hence, the meaning of *diakoneō* as practical table-service is most likely the same in all three synoptic Gospels.

Secondly, within the prologue of Mark,<sup>4</sup> John the Baptist is also said to have eaten locusts and wild honey in the wilderness (Mark 1:4-6). Since the Baptist is compared and contrasted with Jesus in the prologue, the idea that Jesus was fed by the angels appears to pair reasonably well with the statement about the Baptist's wilderness menu. Typical of the contrast, John the forerunner who baptizes with water eats the austere food of the wilderness;<sup>5</sup> whereas Jesus the Mightier One who baptizes with the Spirit (Mark 1:7-8) is implied to have been fed by the angels. The meaning of *diakoneō* as practical table-service therefore makes good sense in the context of the Jesus and John the Baptist contrast in the prologue.

Thirdly, and more significantly, where *diakoneō* and its cognates are used in the rest of Mark's gospel, and in relation to Jesus, they indicate table-service (Mark 1:31; 15:41) or at least some form of menial service (Mark 10:45; cf. Weiser 1964, 302).<sup>6</sup> Therefore, unless there is an indication in Mark 1:13 to interpret it otherwise, this first use in the gospel must also be taken to mean the same. The resolution of the problem of what the significance of the functions of the angels in the wilderness was must therefore begin by

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<sup>4</sup> Interpreters differ in how they define the limits of Mark's prologue. Some argue for 1:1-8 (e.g., Gundry 1993), others for 1:1-13 (e.g., Stein 2008, 35; France 2002, 13; Donahue and Harrington 2002, 67) and still others for 1:1-15 (e.g., Boring 1990, 43-81; Anderson 1976). A small minority of commentators argue for 1:1-20 (e.g., Myers 1988, 112).

<sup>5</sup> For a discussion on the state of current research on the wilderness menu of John the Baptist see Kelhoffer (2003, 104-127)

<sup>6</sup> *Diakoneō* is also used to indicate table service in Luke 12:37; 17:8; and Acts 6:2.

examining the possible relationship between Mark's uses of the *diakoneō* word group and its semantic and conceptual equivalents in the whole gospel. Once this is done, the significance which Mark appears to have attached to the *diakoneō* of the angels will become much more obvious.

This article aims to establish that the practical table-service of the angels in the wilderness is a prelude to several other instances in the gospel in which Jesus' followers, including the disciples, expressed their discipleship by extending Him hospitality. Since Mark's prologue provides the keys for interpreting the rest of the gospel (cf. Lane 1974, Hooker 1986, 6; Stein 2008, 38), and since the angels are functionally paralleled with the disciples in a number of unrelated passages in the same gospel, this link between discipleship to the Lord Jesus and hospitality appears to be an important aspect of the overall subject of discipleship in the gospel of Mark. Contemporary Christian witness needs to reflect on the implications of this link between hospitality and discipleship.

The article will proceed in the following fashion. After reviewing the motif of table-serving God in the Old Testament and some of the literature of Second Temple Judaism (STJ), the article will examine several instances in Mark's gospel in which hospitality is extended to Jesus as an expression of discipleship. Since the nature and importance of hospitality in any given society is significantly influenced by the society's socio-cultural protocols and practices, the article will conclude by enumerating a number of implications of the findings in the African as well as non-African contexts.

## **2. Table Serving God in the OT and Second Temple Judaism**

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The idea of extending hospitality to strangers as a religious and socio-cultural duty is a common feature of the OT.<sup>7</sup> In addition to humans extending

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<sup>7</sup> The extensive OT laws on the just and benevolent treatment of neighbours, foreigners, fugitives, refugees, prisoners of war and resident aliens ensured that despite the cultural tendency to be hospitable, the society also had explicit rules, etiquettes and protocols that enshrined hospitable ethical behaviour in its people (cf. Walton, Matthews and Chavalas 2000, 50)

hospitality to other human beings,<sup>8</sup> the OT also narrates a few instances in which hospitality is extended by human beings to God (or a divine Person who appears in a human form, and speaks and acts as God). A brief review of the significance of these OT instances and their subsequent interpretations by some of the literature of STJ will provide a useful background to appreciate how extending hospitality to Jesus in Mark's gospel ought to be regarded.

It has to be emphasized that the aim of this review is not to suggest equivalence or a particular form of continuity/discontinuity relationship between the nature of the divine-human encounters in the OT and that in the NT. Certainly, the incarnation of God in the Person of Jesus is here held to be a unique historical event. The aim of the review that follows is however to highlight how the practical habit of hospitality is closely intertwined with piety and exhibited in the manner in which those who were committed to a covenantal relationship with Yahweh table served Him.

In this regard, Abraham's hospitality towards the three "strangers" in Genesis 18 occupies the pride of place in the "table serving God" motif in the OT (cf. Arterbury 2003; 2005; Wenham 1994, 32-53).<sup>9</sup> The characterization of the visitors as "men" (Gen 18:2-3) shows that they certainly appeared to Abraham as human beings, but this should not detract from the core of the narrative that basically, as the beginning of the chapter announces, it was Yahweh who appeared to the patriarch "in the heat of the day" (Gen 18:1; cf. Thunberg 1966, 560-570). To be sure, by the end of the episode, Abraham had come to that conclusion and addressed one of the three visitors as "the Judge of the earth" (Gen 18:25). The patriarch's extension of hospitality to the "men" was therefore an indication of his deep piety as well as the closeness of his covenantal friendship with Yahweh. This closeness is evidenced by God's revelation of His intentions to Abraham and the fascinating "haggling"

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<sup>8</sup> For example Reuel/Jethro towards Moses (Exod 2:20), Rahab towards the spies (Josh 2:1-21, cf. Heb 11:31, James 2:25), Samuel towards Saul (1 Sam 9:18-27), Job towards "strangers" (Job 31:32, cf. Testament Job 10.1-3, 25.5, 53.3), the old man who received the Levite and his concubine (Jdg 19:15-18), and the Shunamite woman towards Elisha (2 Kgs 4:8-36). For a review see Arterbury (2002, 53-72).

<sup>9</sup> The motif of eating with deity is also described, often in unrestrained elaborate manner, in ancient Canaanite myths (cf. Jacobsen 1975, 65-97).

between them over justice and mercy towards Sodom and Gomorrah that followed (Gen 8:16-21).

Also manifest in Abraham's exhibition of his piety through the extension of hospitality to Yahweh are the contents of some of the food that he arranged to be prepared for the visitors. As Gordon Wenham has suggested, the "seahs of choice flour" used for preparing the cakes (Gen 18:6) is also what Leviticus 24:5 later stipulated to be used for making the shewbread laid on the table in the tabernacle. In this manner, Abraham's provision of food to Yahweh and the other visitors in Genesis 18 pre-empted the later provision of shewbread for Yahweh in His tabernacle. The detailed description of Abraham's hospitable behaviour must consequently be seen as highlighting the positive importance of hospitality in a God fearing person such as Abraham.

Bolin (2004, 37-56), along with Matthews (1992, 3-11) and Hobbs (2001, 3-30), has pointed out that underlying Abraham's behaviour in Genesis 18 were the ancient near eastern cultural protocols towards strangers that were derived from the primary values of reciprocity, patronage, honour, and shame. These authors stress that in that culture, hospitality to strangers tended to be part of a socio-cultural behavioural strategy aimed at acquiring honour at the expense of guests, and so hopefully mollifying threats from potential enemies and competitors. Hospitality in that and several other cultures was therefore a means to an end, and not an end in itself. The authors for that reason caution that Abraham's hospitality in Genesis 18 should not be thought of only as demonstrating his deep spirituality. In addition to this, the cultural and behavioural tactics inherent in extension of hospitality to strangers must also be considered.

This caution is worth bearing in mind. For, as I shall later emphasize, the socio-cultural aspects of hospitality in certain societies, such as in the traditional African setting, must be taken into consideration when applying our findings to contemporary Christian witness. That said, however, the religious nature of Abraham's hospitality, certainly in the manner in which Genesis 18 depicts it, must not be diminished. The way the account emphasizes the extraordinary measures Abraham took in his extension of hospitality to the visitors indicates that he was not merely "going through the motions", as expected of any person in that society, or using hospitality to seek rewards and

favours in return. On the contrary, Abraham is depicted as a deeply religious person willing to extend love and welcome to strangers, who in this case turned out to be Yahweh.

Indeed, the subsequent interpretations of the Genesis account by some authors in STJ and the NT affirm the deeply religious nature of Abraham’s hospitality. In the LXX, for example, the ambiguity in the Hebrew Masoretic text is lessened and the Greek makes it clear that it was God who indeed received exceptional hospitality from Abraham (cf. Sandmel 1971, 181). In Josephus’ *Antiquities of the Jews* (1.191-198), he takes the strangers to be angels, but nevertheless underlines Abraham’s hospitable behaviour as a feature of his religious piety, rather than as a reflection of the common cultural norms and protocols.

In his *De Abrahamo* 107-118, Philo similarly stressed the divine nature of the visitors, as well as Abraham’s hospitality as a reflection of the greater virtue he possessed, which was *theosebeia* (piety)—“The hospitable temper of the man, which was as it were a sort of addition to set off his greater virtue; but his virtue was piety towards God, concerning which we have spoken before, the most evident instance of which is to be found in his conduct now recorded towards the strangers” (*De Abrahamo* 114).<sup>10</sup> Thus Philo takes Abraham’s behaviour as the surest evidence of the patriarch’s piety. In addition, even though it cannot be said for certain that the statement in Hebrews 13:2 (“some have entertained angels without knowing it”) had Abraham in mind, it definitely underlines the belief that entertaining strangers was a pious behaviour worthy of emulation by Christians (cf. Arterbury 2003, 375). The possibility of cultural influences in Abraham’s actions should therefore not detract from the basic point that it was a behaviour primarily stemming from his piety and devotion to Yahweh.

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<sup>10</sup> Quotation from CD Yonge’s translation of Philo’s Works, accessed on 16 July 2009 from <http://www.deeperstudy.com/link/22-abraham.html>. Typical of his extreme allegorical interpretations of the OT, Philo proceeds to conjecture that the three divine visitors were mystical visions of God representing God’s self-existence, beneficence, and sovereign powers. Other literature of the period that comment on Abraham’s hospitality include Jubilees 16:1; Testament of Abraham; Targum Jonathan and the Talmud (BM 86b); and Tobit 5:6; 6:11, and 9:5.

There are other minor instances of table-serving God in the OT.<sup>11</sup> The cultic practice of placing the "bread of the presence" or "shewbread" on the table in the tabernacle, described as "the food of your God" (Lev 21:8, 17, 21, 22; 22:25), has already been noted (cf. Gane 1992, 179-203). Plainly, the idea of the bread as "food of God" did not mean that Yahweh needed food to sustain Him. Rather, the provision of the bread was symbolic of the covenantal presence of God among His people as their Provider. It is significant therefore that the shewbread was the only Israelite cultic object qualified by the word "presence".<sup>12</sup> Laying the bread on the table in the tabernacle was a way of extending "welcome" and hospitality to Yahweh, who was in constant presence among His people, and yet, at the same time, also as a "Stranger" from far above human comprehension and earthly containment.

Also in Exodus 24:9-11, Moses, Aaron, Nadab, and Abihu, together with Israel's seventy elders, went up to Mount Sinai at which they beheld a theophany. Exodus 24:11b then states that the leaders "beheld God, and they ate and drank". The suggestion is certainly not that God ate with the leaders. Rather, Israel's leaders ate and drank in God's presence on the mountain. In this instance, they were "let" into the presence of God, and so God in effect acted as the "host" of the fellowship meal, even though the food was most likely provided by the leaders.

Be it as it may, this passage is typical of the peace offering sacrificial system in which God "shared" in the meals that were provided by the worshipper (cf. Lev 7:11-34). At the covenantal peace offering, for example, the sacrificed animal was "shared" between Yahweh and the worshipper—the fat and kidneys of the animal were burnt as the Lord's portion, whereas the rest of the sacrifice was eaten by the worshipper and the priests (Lev 3; cf. Kiuchi 1999, 23-31; Kurtz 1980). This sacrifice therefore depicted the devotion of God's

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<sup>11</sup> The question of Lot's reception of the angelic visitors is much more complex. It is apparent that the narrative in Genesis 19 parallels Abraham's hospitable behaviour. Yet, there are significant differences—e.g., whereas it was God who visited Abraham with two other persons, in the case of Lot, two angels visited him, none claiming divine status (cf. Loader 1990; Alexander 1985, 289-300).

<sup>12</sup> The shewbread is called "bread of the Presence" in Exod 25:30, 35:13, 39:36; Num 4:7; 1 Sam 21:7; 1 Kgs 7:48; and 2 Chron 4:19. Other names include "holy bread" (1 Sam 21:5) and "regular bread" (Num 4:7).

people and, specifically, the covenantal relationship between Yahweh and the worshipper. It is this idea which also appears to have been behind the practice among the Qumran Essenes of regarding their common community meals as sharing a banquet with God (IQS 28a 2:11-22).

Another cultic example of the motif of table-serving God as part of covenantal relationship is the fact that the burnt offerings were regarded as "consumed" by God as a sign of His acceptance. Thus in the case of the Mount Carmel contest, for example, God showed His acceptance of Elijah's sacrifice when the "fire of the LORD fell and *consumed* the burnt-offering, the wood, the stones, and the dust, and even licked up the water that was in the trench" (1 Kings 18:38; emphasis added; cf. Roberts 2000, 632-644).

The theme of God "consuming" food by fire from His Presence occurs on at least one occasion in the Book of Judges. In Judges 6, the text indicates that the Visitor, described as "the angel of the Lord", was indeed God Himself, for He spoke and acted as God.<sup>13</sup> In Judges 6:12-25, "the angel of the Lord" visited Gideon at the winepress in a human form and was offered food as part of hospitality. Though from the point of view of the narrator, this Visitor was Yahweh (Judges 6:23), Gideon did not perceive this until after the angel "touched the meat and the unleavened cakes; and fire sprang up from the rock and *consumed* the meat and the unleavened cakes; and the angel of the LORD vanished" (Judges 6:21, emphasis added). It may well be that a degree of Gideon's hospitable behaviour emanated from the cultural norms rather than as sign of his piety. Even so, his actions and God's acceptance of the food illustrate aspects of the motif of table-serving God in the OT. Like Abraham before him, and despite his several flaws, Gideon is portrayed positively through his hospitable behaviour.

The above review indicates that though the human host in the OT may not always be aware of the identity of the divine Visitor, extending hospitality to God is associated with people of immense faith and piety. These people do

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<sup>13</sup> Not all interpreters regard "the angel of the Lord" who appeared in the instances recorded in Judges 6 and 13 as Yahweh. Whereas I take the angel in Judges 6 to be God, that of Judges 13 appears equivocal (see Block 1997, 353-366; Auld 1989, 257-267; White 1999, 299-305; Finestone 1938, 372-377). Be it as it may, what needs to be noted is the miraculous appearance of fire to "consume" Manoah's sacrifice.

also in turn receive special blessings from God. With this background in mind, we now examine the relationship between hospitality and discipleship to Jesus in the gospel of Mark.

### **3. Table Serving Jesus and Discipleship in Mark's Gospel**

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Mark's prologue, in which the Evangelist provides the keys for interpreting the rest of the narrative, underlines the point that Jesus is both divine and human. In the prologue, Jesus is introduced in several different ways but all in a manner to emphasize that He is indeed God incarnate. Mark himself calls Him "the Son of God" (Mark 1:1). The OT Scriptures which are merged together and quoted in Mark 1:2-3 (Isa 40:3; Exod 23:20; Mal 3:1) portray Jesus as the Yahweh of Isaiah 40:3, who sent His messenger before Him and has Himself come to fulfil His promise of comfort and execute judgement on the evil forces in the world (cf. Stein 2008, 42). Also in the prologue, John the Baptist introduces Jesus as the Mightier One who baptizes with the Holy Spirit (1:8). And the Father speaks from heaven to confirm, "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased" (Mark 1:11). Thus the prologue points unquestionably to Jesus' divinity.

Equally, the prologue of Mark underlines that Jesus, though divine, is at the same time human. Jesus, it is said, came from Nazareth (Mark 1:9) thus highlighting his human origins. He, like many others who came to John the Baptist in the wilderness, was baptized in the Jordan River (Mark 1:9). And like all other human beings, Jesus was tempted by Satan (Mark 1:13). The reader of Mark's gospel is therefore left in no doubt that what will follow is the *bios* of Jesus as God incarnate. Even though in a significant section of Mark's gospel Jesus' true identity is unrecognized, and even hidden from the human characters, the reader knows, and should bear in mind, that the Person with whom the characters interact is God in human flesh.

When the fact of Jesus' divinity and the motif of table-serving God in the preceding review are taken into consideration, table-serving Jesus in Mark's gospel should be viewed with a gravity that has hitherto not been fully accorded to it by interpreters. Specifically, for our purposes, extension of hospitality to Jesus in Mark's gospel, as we now demonstrate, is equally

associated with piety and covenantal closeness to Jesus, just as it is depicted in the OT.<sup>14</sup> Hospitality and discipleship are closely linked.

### **3.1. Hospitality and Discipleship of Peter and Andrew in Mark's Gospel**

Being among the first disciples to be called in Mark's gospel (Mark 1:16), and certainly the most prominent and apparent spokesperson of the disciples, Peter's (and Andrew's) hospitality exemplify their devotion to the Lord Jesus (Best 1978, 547-558; Brady 1979, 42-57). The evidence from Mark indicates that Peter and his brother Andrew owned a house in Capernaum which for some time served as the headquarters of Jesus' ministry in that part of Galilee (Mark 1:29; 2:1; 3:19; 9:33).<sup>15</sup> Given the emphasis on table-service in the first account of Jesus' ministry in that house (Mark 1:31-32) and other houses, it is very likely that Jesus was table served on several occasions in Peter's (and Andrew's) house.

Moreover, it is most likely that the boat which was used by Jesus and the disciples for their missions across the Sea of Galilee was owned by these gentlemen (Mark 3:9; 4:1; 4:36; 6:45). In addition to serving as a means of transport for Jesus in His itinerant ministry, the boat also served as a platform for preaching to the large crowd on one occasion (Mark 4:1). It also served as a place for Jesus to rest (Mark 4:38) and, occasionally, to separate Himself from the encroaching hysterical crowd (Mark 6:45).

The boat also served as a place of intimate interactions between Jesus and His disciples. As noted by Timothy Woodroof (1997, 232), "In the boat there is safety from the storm, camaraderie with Christ, shared work and experiences, [and] a common direction and purpose". Considering the nature of the psychological and emotional dynamics involved in sharing the limited space of a fishing boat, especially on the often dangerous and stormy Sea of Galilee,

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<sup>14</sup> It has to be observed that Jesus was not always on the receiving end of table service. Like Yahweh did in the OT, on at least three occasions, Jesus was the "host" of banquets with His followers (feedings of the four [Mark 8:1-9] and five thousand [Mark 6:35-44] and the Passover meal [Mark 14:12-26]).

<sup>15</sup> It is difficult to see Mark 9:28 referring to Peter's house since Mark 9:33 appears to suggest that Jesus and the disciples were previously in another house. Similarly, though the "house" in Mark 3:19 is most likely Peter's, the narrative is equivocal.

the boat was one of the places where the interactions between Jesus and His disciples was at its most intense and private. Indeed, on one occasion the boat served as the venue for a very significant theophanic revelation of Jesus to the disciples as He walked on the sea (Mark 6:45-61).

In making their boat available to Jesus, Peter and Andrew, if indeed the boat was theirs, served an important function of hospitality to Jesus and their colleagues. Such sacrificial generosity and hospitality should not be underestimated, for Peter and Andrew abandoned their former employment and source of socio-economic security to follow Jesus (Mark 10:28). It is clear that their discipleship and stewardship did not stop at just abandoning their jobs, but much more, putting their properties at Jesus’ disposal.

### **3.2. The Table Service of Other Members of “the twelve” in Mark**

It is likely that the other members of “the twelve” who accompanied Jesus during His ministry also extended hospitality and table service to Him.<sup>16</sup> One instance of this was during the preparations for the Passover. Mark describes how Jesus sent two of His disciples to the venue for the celebration of the Passover with specific instructions to prepare the Passover meal (Mark 14:13-16). Their obedience flowing from their discipleship to Jesus is further stated—“the disciples set out and went to the city, and found everything as he had told them; and *they prepared the Passover meal*” (Mark 14:16, emphasis added). The importance of this aspect of discipleship exhibited through obedience and table service should be noted. As we shall shortly discuss, Jesus certainly attached great emotional value to the celebration of this particular Passover festival with His intimate disciples, for it was the occasion at which He revealed the essence of His death to them. The table service of these two unnamed disciples facilitated this important occasion in Jesus’ ministry.

### **3.3. The Table Service and Discipleship of Peter’s Mother-in-Law**

The healing of Peter’s mother-in-law (Mark 1:30-31) served as the beginning of not only a very successful ministry of Jesus in Peter’s house but also of her

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<sup>16</sup> Since Levi is not explicitly named as one of the twelve in Mark, his hospitality is treated separately below.

own table service of Jesus. Robert Stein, along with a number of other commentators, has argued that Mark's statement about the woman's *diakoneō* immediately after the healing (Mark 1:31) must not be interpreted as an example of discipleship, but rather as proving that her healing was instantaneous (2008, 94; cf. Lane 1974, 78; France 2002, 108).

Yet, such a proposed dichotomy between "discipleship" and "table service" is rather drastic and unwarranted, given the manner in which service and servanthood are portrayed as important traits of discipleship in the same gospel (e.g. Mark 9:33-37; 10:43-45). At the least, her service is depicted to be a result or response to her healing, in which case it is not as inconsequential as it is assumed by such a dichotomy. It is important to note that her *diakoneō* contributed to Jesus' successful ministry in the house, so much so that "the whole city was gathered around the door" (Mark 1:32). This happened, not only because Peter extended hospitality to Jesus, but also because his mother-in-law table-served Jesus.

It is therefore also significant that the same Greek word *diakoneō* is used for the table service of Peter's mother-in-law and that of the angels in Mark 1:13. In other words, the practical table service of the angels in the wilderness was repeated by Peter's mother-in-law. Indeed, elsewhere in Mark's gospel, other parallels are made between the angels and the disciples of Jesus. In Mark 12:25, for example, Jesus notes that in the eschatological age His followers will be "like the angels in heaven", since they would not marry. Similarly, in Mark 13:27 the angels are depicted as eschatological harvesters of the elect at the end of the age, paralleling the stated functions of the disciples also as eschatological harvesters or "fishers of men" (Mark 1:17; cf. Marcus 2000, 184; Lane 1974, 67).

Moreover, in Mark 8:38 Jesus cautions that disciples who are ashamed of him in this world will receive a similar negative treatment when He returns with His "holy" angels. In so doing, Jesus contrasts the "holy" angels with the failed disciple. Given these parallels between the angels and disciples in Mark's gospel, the use of *diakoneō* to describe Peter's mother-in-law's discipleship is significant indeed, and should not be diminished. The importance that Mark attached to the *diakoneō* of the angels in the wilderness is hereby indicated.

### 3.4. The Table Service and Discipleship of Levi (Mark 2:14-17)

The call of Levi<sup>17</sup> to become one of Jesus' disciples in Mark 2:14 is immediately followed by a banquet for Jesus in his<sup>18</sup> house. The original reasons for the banquet are not stated, and it is possible that Levi was celebrating his new-found faith in Jesus. Much more likely, however, is that the occasion served as an opportunity for evangelism and teaching. Present at the banquet were many "tax collectors and sinners", that is, the religious outcasts of the contemporary Jewish system (Hooker 1991, 96; Donahue and Harrington 2002, 102). Thus Levi's hospitality was extended to Jesus and others, many of whom, Mark tells us, were Jesus' followers (Mark 2:15).

The banquet was also a very important occasion for Jesus to clarify His mission to His disciples and detractors (the Pharisees and the scribes) alike. It was at this banquet that Jesus explained, "I have come to call not the righteous but sinners" (Mark 2:15). In eating with the religious outcasts of His day, Jesus underlined the openness of the gospel to any person who would repent and believe. Levi's hospitality and table service as an expression of his discipleship therefore served as the platform from which Jesus' mission was facilitated.

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<sup>17</sup> Though he had been previously called in a manner similar to the first four disciples, Levi's name is absent from Mark's list of the twelve in Mark 3:16-19. Most commentators agree with church tradition and the other synoptics that Matthew (Mark 3:18) and Levi referred to the same person. Despite a few dissenting voices (e.g., Meier 1997, 638; Malbon 1986, 104-130), there is no evidence that this could not have been the case.

<sup>18</sup> The Greek of Mark 2:15b is ambiguous and could either mean that Levi hosted the banquet for his friends and Jesus' entourage (so Malbon 1985, 282-292) or Jesus hosted it for Levi and his friends (so May 1993, 147-149). The former is the more likely scenario given that most of those present were "tax collectors and sinners", i.e., people associated with Levi. In addition, that Jesus is said to have *katakeisthai* (reclined Mark 2:1) instead of the usual "sat" suggests a relatively well to do environment and so more likely to have been Levi's house rather than Jesus'. Note also that Luke takes it that the banquet was in Levi's "own house" (Luke 5:29).

### **3.5. The Table Service and Discipleship of Simon the Leper (Mark 14:3)**

Even though not a lot is known about Simon the Leper of Bethany,<sup>19</sup> who hosted a banquet for Jesus (Mark 14:3), his characterization as “the leper” is important for our purposes. Lepers were isolated from the society and would certainly not have been able to host a banquet at which Jesus “reclines” (Mark 14:3). This strongly indicates that Simon had previously been healed by Jesus (cf. Stein 2008, 633). In table-serving Jesus, Simon was expressing not only his gratitude, but also his discipleship. And it was at this banquet that a most extraordinary act of devotion and prophetic anointing occurred. The anointing of Jesus by the woman prepared Jesus’ body for His imminent salvific death (France 2002, 550; Stein 2008, 635; Hooker 1991, 329; Gundry 1993, 813). Her relationship to Simon the leper is unknown, but it certainly was his hospitality that provided the setting for such a profound act of love, devotion, and prophetic belief and action.

### **3.6. The Hospitality and Discipleship of the Owner of the Upper Room**

The owner of the house in which Jesus hosted the Passover meal extended hospitality to Jesus at a deep level of submission, obedience, and stewardship (Mark 14:12-16). The passage suggests that Jesus had previously arranged the venue for His special meal with the disciples. Certainly, in describing Himself as “the Teacher” (14:14), Jesus indicates a prior Teacher-pupil relationship with this owner.

Furthermore, the confidence with which Jesus makes his request for the room demonstrates His prerogative as the divine Owner of all things, for Jesus sends the assertive message—“Where is *my* guest room where I may eat the Passover with my disciples?” (Mark 14:14; emphasis added). It also underlines how this owner’s discipleship to Jesus was expressed in His extension of hospitality, since Jesus could lay claim to the guest room as His

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<sup>19</sup> There is an apparent discrepancy between Mark’s account and John’s in John 12 regarding who the host was, the discussion of which need not detain us. That Lazarus is said to recline at the table in John 12:2, could suggest that he was a guest; perhaps so regular a guest in that house that it could be described more or less as his “home” (John 12:1). On the other hand, it is possible that Simon the Leper and Lazarus were related, in which case, the home could have belonged to both of them.

own, simply because this anonymous owner had submitted himself and his property to “the Teacher”. And this spirit of submissive discipleship is also demonstrated by the owner’s obedience. True to Jesus predictions that this owner would show the messenger disciples “a large room upstairs, furnished and ready” (14:15), Mark says, the messengers “found everything” just as Jesus had predicted. In the anonymous owner’s actions, therefore, stewardship, obedience, hospitality, and discipleship intermingled to facilitate Jesus’ mission.

### **3.7. The Table Service of the Named Women of Mark 15-16**

The critical eyewitness roles of the named women in Mark 15:40 and Mark 16:1—Mary Magdalene, Mary, mother of James the younger and of Joses, and Salome—who were at the crucifixion, burial, and resurrection, certainly qualify them to be regarded as amongst the most important disciples of Jesus. The very fact that Mark names them suggests that they were prominent and well-known members of the primitive church. He was therefore identifying them as eyewitnesses whose testimonies could possibly be called upon to corroborate his account, for it was these women alone who together “see Jesus die, they see His body being laid in the tomb, [and] they find the tomb empty” (Bauckham 2006, 48). No other groups of Jesus’ followers were entrusted with such a combination of all three profound eyewitness experiences. In addition, they were the first people in Mark’s gospel to be entrusted with the post-resurrection apostolic commission—“go, tell his disciples and Peter that he is going ahead of you to Galilee” (Mark 16:7). Their critical role in early Christianity cannot therefore be overestimated.

Yet, it must never be forgotten that this pivotal role of the women started because, as Mark puts it, these women “used to follow Jesus and *diēkonoun autō* (waited upon Him)” when he was in Galilee (Mark 15:41). Thus the women initially expressed their discipleship to Jesus by extending Him table service. This serving of Jesus became the platform for further growth and eventually of their unique roles as eyewitnesses of the death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus. Like the angels of Mark 1:13, and Peter’s mother-in-law, the named women of Mark 15-16 also served great functions of facilitating Jesus’ mission through practical table service.

### **3.8. Hospitality, Humility and Discipleship (Mark 9:37)**

One of the strongest indications that hospitality is closely linked to discipleship in Mark's gospel is given by Jesus in Mark 9:37. In the context of correcting His disciples, who were jostling among themselves for positions of honour, Jesus sets a child in their midst and declares, "whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes not me but the one who sent me". This saying is in itself uncontroversial, given that "the child" to whom hospitality is extended is welcomed as an agent of Jesus. In line with the Jewish Halakhic principle of the *shaliach*, which states that "a man's agent is like the man himself" (Berakoth 5:5), extending hospitality to Jesus' agent amounted to extending hospitality to Jesus Himself, and hence to Yahweh.

What is more striking about this statement, however, is Jesus' use of the notion of extending hospitality to a child as a sign of humility of the disciple who is receiving the child. In this context, the "child" represented the unrecognized and unwelcomed intruder whom Jesus now enjoins His disciples to welcome. It takes humility on the part of the disciple to do so. As Robert Stein (2008, 444) points out, "unlike the present day idealization of children, the first century was not a child-oriented time ... [U]nable to keep the law, little children were seen in Judaism at best as 'weak' and not yet 'people of the covenant'". To welcome the child in the ancient world was therefore to welcome the unwelcome "intruder" and the undesirable visitor. The disciple of Jesus displays his humility in extending hospitality exactly to those whom he would otherwise not have welcomed. In doing so, he is extending hospitality to Jesus and His Father, Yahweh.

### **3.9. Summary: Hospitality and Discipleship in Mark's Gospel**

The above findings suggest a consistent relationship between discipleship to Jesus and its expression through extending hospitality to Him. Each of the characters discussed are portrayed in a positive manner in their devotion and relationship to Jesus. In addition, in each case their table service is shown to have facilitated Jesus' mission. Since the disciples shared in the mission of Jesus to inaugurate and spread God's kingdom (Mark 1:16-20), the key role played by their hospitality in fulfilling this function needs some emphasis.

It might be countered that the act of extending hospitality to Jesus by several of His followers need not be seen in as significant religious light as is being proposed. For example, it could be argued that, being a human being, Jesus should be expected to eat, drink, and have company; therefore, the above instances should not be seen as necessarily expressing profound religious devotion or piety by His friends. In addition, it could be disputed that since hospitality was an expected socio-cultural behaviour in the society in which Jesus ministered, the above interpretation may be making too much of the apparent link between it and discipleship. Furthermore, it could also be argued that in stating that He came to this world to serve and "not to be served" (Mark 10:45), Jesus in effect diminished the relevance of service towards him.

These objections do not, however, stand up to further scrutiny. Firstly, Mark expected His readers to see Jesus as much more than a human being. Certainly, his prologue, as has been pointed out, directs the reader to see Jesus as indeed the Son of God and God incarnate, and many "characters" in the subsequent account confirm this (Mark 1:1; 1:11; 3:11; 5:7; 9:7; 14:61; 15:59). Hence, the least that Mark's interpreters ought to do when evaluating these table-service incidents is to do so in the light of the motif of "table-serving God" in the OT. If this fact alone is taken into consideration, the table service of the disciples in Mark has parallels with that of Abraham. Furthermore, given the table service of the angels in Mark 1:13, the subsequent relationship between hospitality and discipleship in Mark should together be regarded as an important motif in the gospel.

Secondly, the blanket characterization of hospitality in ancient near eastern and Mediterranean societies as an intrinsic expression of a socio-cultural exchange phenomenon sometimes inadvertently overemphasizes the element of reciprocity. The fact that Jewish and Greco-Roman texts frequently exhorted their readers to be hospitable, and that hospitable characters in both OT and NT are portrayed positively, indicates that the culture appreciated hospitality as a virtue that needed to be pursued for its own sake by the religious faithful (cf. Arterbury 2005). Certainly, not all hospitable behaviour in those cultures was a tactical act designed and employed to achieve some other ends. In the case of the above followers of Jesus, their hospitality emanated from their devotion and piety towards Jesus, and not because they pre-calculated the gains that may be received from His patronage.

Thirdly, Mark 10:45 should be interpreted in its immediate context. The service to which Jesus referred was specific menial tasks, which servants rendered to their masters. In that case, Jesus' purpose for coming, the verse says, was not to "lord" His Lordship over His followers but to be the suffering servant who lays down His life as a ransom for many. The very fact that Jesus was actually served by others in the gospel therefore indicates that Mark 10:45 is making a specific point about the purpose of His coming, and hence the nature of His death, and not table service *per se*.<sup>20</sup> The thesis that there is an inexorable link between hospitality and discipleship in Mark's gospel is, therefore, upheld and hereby commended for contemporary Christian reflections.

#### **4. Hospitality and Discipleship: Implications and Application**

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What are the implications of this finding to contemporary Christian theology and practice? In terms of the theology of discipleship in Mark's gospel, the above findings add to the accumulating evidence that Christology and discipleship in Mark's gospel is complex and multifaceted (cf. Henderson 2006). It is perhaps right that the link between discipleship and the cross of Jesus is well known and emphasized by interpreters. However, the present study has underscored another dimension of the many-sided nature of discipleship to Jesus, this time through hospitality. That the angels pre-empted this table-serving dimension of discipleship in Mark 1:13, albeit in the wilderness, heightens its significance in the rest of the gospel.

Contemporary Christian practice must therefore take this relationship between hospitality and discipleship seriously. For example, current vigorous debates on the appropriate treatment of the homeless, foreigners, and people of different races and religions in the United States, France, Italy, and United Kingdom have, until recently, proceeded without significant contributions from sections of Evangelical communities of those countries.<sup>21</sup> Indeed, there has been the unfortunate perception that when they have joined such debates,

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<sup>20</sup> It will be worth investigating how the footwashing incident of John 13 in which Jesus links His salvific death to humble service sheds light on Mark 10:45.

<sup>21</sup> I (the author) am a black African immigrant in a developed country. Hence, this observation is possibly biased, and hopefully wrong.

many Evangelicals have been on the "wrong side" of the argument (cf. Emerson and Smith 2001; Rodríguez 2008, 76-92; Scaperlanda 2008, 14-16; Escobar and Others 2007, 96).

It is true that these debates are much more complex and certainly not exactly the same as hospitality to Jesus in Mark's gospel. However, there are significant crossovers, and contemporary reflections on Christian ethics ought to be nurtured by such strong indications in both the Old and New Testaments of a link between piety and hospitality. Indeed, it is evident from the gospels that the claim to be a disciple of Jesus on the one hand and indifference to the question of hospitable behaviour on the other hand are incompatible. In this regard, it is instructive that a model of evangelism based on banquets and table service (i.e., the Alpha Course) appears to have been one of the successful methods of evangelism in the United Kingdom in recent years. The above demonstration of the relationship between hospitality and discipleship in Mark seems to support this method. The remaining challenge is to extend this biblical understanding further to address Christian behaviour and attitudes towards "strangers".

With regard to contemporary Christian practice in traditional African societies,<sup>22</sup> it is perhaps not surprising that quite a few authors have drawn attention to several similarities between African notions of hospitality and ancient near and middle Eastern cultures (e.g. Mnyaka and Motlhabi 2005, 215-237; Gathogo 2008, 39-53; Echema 1995, 35; Olikenyi 2001; Tutu 1989, 69; Gathogo 2006, 32-36; Moila 2002, 3-5). Some of these authors have also pointed out that one of the negative effects of colonization has been the loss of the traditional ethos of hospitality within some African cultures (e.g. Gathogo 2006, 36; Tutu 1989, 69).

To the extent that this may be a helpful reminder of the dynamics of the untoward effects of acculturation, enculturation, and colonization, and their interfaces with biblical belief and practice, this factor must be taken into

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<sup>22</sup> I do not have expertise in international comparative anthropology and socio-cultural trends. Yet, it is likely that this application may well be relevant to other developing countries which frequently share similar traditional notions of honour, shame, and reciprocity as found in African traditional settings.

consideration in applying the above findings. Given the current confidence of conservative Christianity in Africa, there is mileage in examining how African traditional notions of hospitality may inform and enhance the way Christian discipleship is exhibited on the continent. For example, ethnic hatred and inhospitable attitude to people of other tribes, sometimes involving "Christians", are contrary to Christian discipleship and certainly do not honour Jesus as Lord. If it is true that the traditional African is innately hospitable, then perhaps it is time to press these notions of hospitable behaviour into Christian consciousness on the continent.

On the other hand, if these exhortations were heeded, the manner in which traditional African hospitality is practiced by Christians of the continent must be carefully nuanced. The notion of using hospitality and table-service as a socio-cultural strategy of exchange, and as a means of getting some benefits in return, is far from the nature of selfless sacrifice and discipleship that Jesus demands of His disciples.

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