

Meals, identity and othering in Mark 14:12–26



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This article investigates the concept of 'othering' in the context of the Markan Jesus' Last Meal (Mk 14:12–26), examining how this pivotal event in the gospel contributes to the discourse on social constructs and identity formation in African societies. Meals hold significant cultural and social value in Africa, where they play a central role in community cohesion and identity definition. However, in diverse and complex societies, such as those found among South Africa's black Indigenous groupings, meals also bring to the fore issues of identity and belonging, often complicated by the dynamics of othering. The Markan narrative, with its depiction of Jesus' Last Supper, offers a profound lens through which to interrogate these issues. By analysing the Last Meal in Mark 14, this article explores how this event speaks to the challenges of identity formation and social cohesion in contemporary South African contexts in which divisions, discrimination, social unrest and instability are prevalent. It argues that the Last Meal understood through the framework of othering provides critical insights into the potential of communal meals to either reinforce divisions or foster reconciliation and unity in fractured societies, such as South African communities.

Intradisciplinary and/or interdisciplinary implications: The concept of 'othering' refers to the process by which individuals or groups are categorised as fundamentally different from and often inferior to the dominant group. This process is central to the construction of social identities and the maintenance of power dynamics within societies.

Keywords: Meals, Jesus' Last Meal; Passover; identity; othering; Mark 14:12–26; identity markers; inclusion; exclusion.

Introduction

Meals hold profound cultural and social significance across African societies, serving as more than just occasions for physical nourishment. In many African cultures, meals are central to the social fabric, acting as key moments for communal bonding, cultural expression and the affirmation of social hierarchies and relationships (Idang 2015:97). In South Africa, this is particularly evident in traditional ceremonies and gatherings, where sharing a meal is a deeply symbolic act that reflects and reinforces community ties. For instance, communal meals during rituals such as weddings, funerals and rites of passage are not merely about eating together but are integral to the communal expression of shared identity and collective memory (Magubane 2004). The act of sharing food is often imbued with meanings that go beyond the immediate context. It can signify reconciliation, the establishment or reaffirmation of social bonds and the demarcation of social boundaries. As Tutu (1999) suggests, the African concept of *ubuntu* – which emphasises interconnectedness and communal solidarity – is often expressed through the act of eating together. This cultural practice underlines the belief that a person is a person through others, and meals play a crucial role in manifesting this interconnectedness.

Othering can manifest in various forms, including racial, ethnic, religious and cultural distinctions, and it plays a significant role in the formation and reinforcement of social boundaries. In the context of South Africa, othering has a complex history rooted in the colonial and apartheid eras, where racial and ethnic divisions were institutionalised and used to justify social, economic and political inequalities (Mamdani 1996). These divisions continue to shape contemporary South African society, influencing how individuals and communities perceive themselves and others. Identity formation in such a context is often fraught with tension as individuals navigate the intersecting dynamics of belonging and exclusion, inclusion and marginalisation. Meals, as social practices, can both reflect and challenge these processes of othering. On the one hand, communal meals can reinforce social boundaries by excluding certain individuals or groups; on the other hand, they can serve as sites of resistance and reconciliation, where new identities and relationships are forged (Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2013). Thus, understanding the role of meals in African societies requires an exploration of how they both shape and are shaped by broader social dynamics, including the process of othering (see Güzel, Ehtiyar & Ryan 2021; Lee-Ferrand 2020). This study

explores how the Last Meal in Mark (14:12–26) can contribute to understanding and addressing the issue of othering in South African societies. By examining the Markan narrative through the lens of social theory and African cultural practices, this article aims to uncover how the Last Supper reflects and challenges the dynamics of othering. The study will consider how the symbolic significance of the meal in the Gospel of Mark can offer insights into contemporary issues of identity, community and reconciliation in South Africa. In doing so, it hopes to contribute to both theological scholarship and the broader discourse on social cohesion and justice in African contexts.

From Passover to the Last Meal of Jesus: Theological and cultural perspective

The symbolic rites carry meaning because they are performed for a reason, and they add value to people's lives (Beattie 1968:69–70). Passover is the most significant celebration in Judaism, and it represents the entire exodus journey. By celebrating the Passover, Israelites commemorate it as the only event of God's Salvation history. While Kosek (2021:1) argues that the Lord's Supper was observed by Jesus Christ and his disciples as a Jewish Paschal liturgy, it is necessary to recognise that the depiction of this meal varies across the Gospels. In the synoptic accounts, the meal is closely tied to the Passover festival, emphasising its Jewish liturgical context. However, John's Gospel does not explicitly identify the Last Supper as a Passover meal, focussing instead on its theological themes, such as Jesus' role as the sacrificial lamb (Jn 13–17). Furthermore, care must be taken not to project later Christological titles, such as 'Christ', onto Jesus during this event, as the Gospel writers present evolving understandings of his identity. Thus, the Last Supper should be explored within its historical and narrative context, resisting anachronistic readings shaped by post-resurrection theology or later dogmatic formulations. Jesus referred to the meal he would be sharing with his disciples that day as a Passover. The Bible mentions the so-called Passover feast, which was approaching. Then came the day of unleavened bread, which required the sacrifice of the Passover lamb. Jesus told Peter and John to prepare the Passover for the group so that everyone might partake in the meal. Following his instructions, they went and found it; and they then prepared the Passover. At the appointed time before His suffering, Jesus expressed His desire to share the Passover meal with His disciples, instructing them to prepare it; they followed His directions and found everything as He had said, ensuring the meal could be shared (Mk 14:12–16). When the moment was right, he joined the apostles at the table. He truly wanted to have this Passover meal with them before He suffered (Mk 14:12–16).

The Lord's Supper cannot be understood without considering the Passover as its historical context, according to Mbewe (2020:118). Exodus 12 explains the history of Passover. The Jewish holiday of Passover, or *Pesach* in Hebrew,

commemorates Israel's and the world's liberation from Egyptian slavery (Ex 12:13–14). The animal blood that was on their door frames helped the Israelites survive the death that occurred in their home. Through the blood of the Lord Jesus Christ, humankind is delivered from the wrath of God. Kosek (2021:1) again views Jesus as a Jewish Passover because Jews no longer eat lamb at Passover because there is no longer a temple to serve it in after the collapse of the temple in Jerusalem in 70 CE. Jesus reinterpreted elements of the Jewish Passover ritual within the context of His impending death, infusing it with new theological significance that would later form the foundation of the Christian Eucharist. While retaining the ritual's core structure and symbolic elements, such as bread and wine, He imbued them with a transformative meaning tied to His body and blood, signifying the establishment of a new covenant (Mk 14:22–25). The Passover or Paschal must be properly understood in conjunction with the Eucharist. The meal of the Lord's Supper symbolises reconciliation. The fact that the main theological theme of Passover is the redemption of God's people from slavery in Egypt into a new life of freedom – a redemption that is not only remembered but appropriated anew by all who celebrate the feast from generation to generation – is another factor contributing to this conclusion as argued by Routledge (2002:222). He further contends that the new life includes a relationship with God as his people, and that Passover also highlights the unity and shared identity of all who participate in it. It also contemplates their ultimate vindication in it. These aspects are made clear by both the Lord's Supper's instruction and its ritual. Jesus associated himself with the meal's traditional redemptive emblems, the lamb and the unleavened bread. His sacrifice served as the cornerstone for the creation of the new covenant community, and it contributes to the ongoing Lord's Supper celebrations by fostering participants' friendship and unity.

Exegesis of Mark 14: The Last Meal of Jesus

At this juncture, it is crucial to examine Mark 14:12–26 closely to address the exegetical issues and lay a solid foundation for the study. This passage, which details the events of the Last Supper, provides essential insights into the theological and narrative dimensions of the text. A thorough exegesis of these verses will help clarify their significance within the gospel of Mark, clarify their implications for understanding the role of meals in Markan theology and establish the context for a more significant analysis.

Dynamics of inclusion and exclusion

In Mark 14:12–26 the evangelists narrate the story of the Last Supper, an event of profound theological significance, where Jesus shares a final meal with His disciples before His arrest and crucifixion. This passage is rich with symbolic meaning and provides critical insights into the dynamics of inclusion and exclusion that are central to the concept of othering. The setting of the Last Supper is during the Feast of Unleavened

Bread, when the Passover lamb¹ is sacrificed, which places the meal within the Jewish tradition of covenant and deliverance (Boaheng 2023:556–557). The Last Supper, while exclusive in its immediate context with Jesus sharing the Passover meal only with His closest disciples, highlights a deeper theological purpose. It prepares the 12 disciples for His impending death, establishing a new covenant that, although initiated with them, extends to all believers. The meal serves as both an intimate gathering and a symbol of the inclusive salvation Jesus offers through His sacrifice, pointing beyond the disciples to the redemption of humanity. This act of selective participation highlights the dynamics of inclusion and exclusion. Jesus' choice of who participates in this meal reflects a community being formed around Him, yet it simultaneously excludes others who are not part of this inner circle. This exclusion is not merely social but carries deep theological implications, as the meal symbolises the new covenant that Jesus is establishing (France 2002).

The act of breaking bread and sharing the cup also introduces a paradox of inclusion. While the meal is exclusive in terms of participation, the symbols of bread and wine, representing Jesus' body and blood, are offered to all present, signifying the inclusive nature of Jesus' sacrifice (Marcus 2009). This duality suggests that while the community around Jesus is distinct and set apart, the benefits of His sacrificial act extend beyond this immediate group, foreshadowing the universal scope of the gospel.

Jesus' actions and words during the Last Supper in relation to othering

Jesus' actions and words during the Last Supper are both challenging and reinforcing the concept of othering. On the one hand, Jesus engages in an intimate act of service and fellowship with His disciples, which could be seen as an act of inclusion. He breaks the bread and shares the cup, saying, 'Take; this is my body' (Mk 14:22) and 'This is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many' (Mk 14:24). These actions symbolically break down barriers, offering a new form of identity that is rooted in communion with Jesus rather than traditional social or religious boundaries.

However, the narrative also highlights exclusion, particularly in the betrayal foretold by Jesus. He says, 'Truly, I tell you, one of you will betray me, one who is eating with me' (Mk 14:18). This statement introduces a profound moment of

1. The term τὸ πάσχα, which refers to 'the Paschal lamb' or 'the Passover lamb', recalls the events of Exodus 12, where God instructed the Israelites to sacrifice a young, unblemished male lamb and mark their doorposts with its blood to protect their firstborns from the angel of death. This imagery connects directly to the Last Supper that Jesus shared with His disciples before His arrest, trial and crucifixion, which is understood to be a Passover meal. Lane (1974) provides several reasons to support this interpretation. Firstly, the return to Jerusalem for the meal (Mk 14:17; cf. Jn 12:12, 18, 20; 13:2; 18:1) aligns with the command in Deuteronomy 16:5–8 that the Passover meal could only be eaten within Jerusalem's city walls. Secondly, the custom of reclining at the table during the meal (Mk 14:18; cf. Jn 13:12, 23, 25, 28) reflects the Passover practice in the Greco-Roman world, where formal and festive meals required participants to recline. Another point is the breaking of the bread after the serving of a dish (Mk 14:18–20), a practice that deviates from the usual order of breaking bread before serving food and is indicative of the Passover ritual where the bread was broken after the consumption of bitter herbs. Moreover, wine, rather than water, was consumed during this meal, a characteristic of festive occasions such as Passover, while regular meals typically involved drinking water. Lastly, the timing of the meal, eaten late at night (1 Cor 11:23; Jn 13:30), further distinguishes it from ordinary suppers, which were usually held earlier in the evening.

othering within the group, as the betrayer, although physically present, is spiritually and morally alienated from the community (Hooker 1991). The betrayer becomes the ultimate 'other', separated not by ethnicity or social status but by betrayal of the communal trust and covenant. This ethical betrayal is then condemned because it creates acts of injustice to the other and contributes to the destruction of human relations. Under betraying, the betrayer is exercising exclusion and othering the other. In other words, the betrayer is othered by the betrayer. And that has the potential to cause unrest and evoke violence that can lead to death and destruction. This is exactly what happened to the story of Jesus after being betrayed by Judas (Mk 15:21–41).

Moreover, the Last Supper serves as a moment of transition from the old covenant to the new, where the traditional markers of Jewish identity (such as the Passover meal) are reinterpreted considering Jesus' impending sacrifice. This redefinition of community and identity inherently involves a process of othering, as it challenges existing structures and calls for a new understanding of belonging (Donahue & Harrington 2002). The Last Supper, as depicted in Mark, serves as an intense moment of theological transition, where Jesus reinterprets the traditional Jewish Passover meal in anticipation of His impending crucifixion. This act is not merely a re-enactment of the Passover but a radical redefinition of the covenantal relationship between God and His people. By reinterpreting this meal, Jesus effectively shifts the focus from the old covenant, centred on the Law and the collective memory of liberation from Egypt to the new covenant, which is inaugurated through His sacrificial death.

The concept of othering is further illuminated when considering the socio-political context of Mark's gospel, which was likely written during a time of tension between the early Christian community and the Jewish authorities. In this light, the Last Supper can be seen as a symbolic act of separation, where the new community of Jesus' followers is delineated from those who reject His messianic identity. While it is true that the new community, as represented in the Last Supper and the Eucharist, is open and inclusive, particularly as it extends beyond ethnic and cultural boundaries, the process of reconfiguring identity can still involve an implicit 'othering' of those who do not accept the new definition of community. The shift from the traditional Jewish community, defined by adherence to the Law and Passover rituals, to a community defined by faith in Jesus and participation in the Eucharist, challenges existing boundaries of belonging. Even though the new community is open to all, its foundation in faith and the reinterpreted Passover meal creates a distinction between those who accept this new understanding of community and those who do not, which can result in a form of 'othering' that is based not on ethnicity or ritual but on belief and participation (Sanders 1985).

Moreover, this act of othering through the Last Supper also anticipates the broader inclusivity of the new covenant, which extends beyond the boundaries of Israel to include

Gentiles. In Mark's narrative, the Last Supper marks the initiation of a new community, one that, while intended to transcend ethnic and cultural boundaries, also inherently challenges existing social structures, highlighting both inclusion and the potential for exclusion in the process of defining who belongs to this community (Hurtado 2003). However, this inclusivity is predicated on a redefinition of identity that involves a transition from the old order, which, although not negative in itself, inherently reinforces a process of othering. This transition separates the new community from the old by establishing new criteria for belonging – faith in Jesus and participation in the Eucharist – rather than adherence to traditional Jewish rituals. In this sense, 'othering' occurs not as a form of exclusion, but as a delineation of identity, marking the shift from the old community to the new. While the new community is inclusive, it simultaneously redefines the boundaries of belonging, distinguishing those who accept this new identity from those who remain within the former paradigm. By challenging existing structures and calling for a new understanding of belonging, the Last Supper illustrates the dynamic nature of identity formation in the early Christian community and its implications for the broader socio-religious landscape of the time.

The symbolic significance of the meal in the Broader Markan narrative

The Last Supper in Mark 14 is not an isolated event but is deeply embedded in the broader Markan narrative, where it serves as a culminating moment that ties together themes of suffering, service and sacrifice. The meal symbolises the inauguration of the new covenant, which is marked by Jesus' imminent death and the establishment of a new community of believers (Evans 2001). This new community is defined not by ethnic or social boundaries but by participation in the life and death of Jesus. In the context of the early Christian community, the Last Supper would have had significant implications for how identity was constructed and understood. The early Christians, many of whom were marginalised or persecuted, would have found in this meal a powerful symbol of solidarity and inclusion in the body of Christ. At the same time, the narrative reinforces the idea that this new identity also involves a degree of othering, as it sets the community apart from the broader Jewish and Gentile worlds, calling its members to a distinct way of life and belief (Witherington 2001). In other words, the Last Supper in Mark 14 operates on multiple levels, both reflecting and subverting the dynamics of inclusion and exclusion. It provides a theological foundation for understanding how the early Christian community was to navigate the complex interplay of identity, belonging and othering, offering a model that is both inclusive in its scope and exclusive in its demands.

Social significance of meals in African contexts

In African societies, the act of sharing meals extends beyond mere sustenance, playing a crucial role in the

cultural and social fabric.² Meals are integral to various ceremonies and communal activities, reinforcing social bonds and affirming cultural³ identity. This significance is evident in the pervasive presence of food at gatherings such as funerals, *Lobola* negotiations and family meetings, where meals are essential to the event. Preparations for these gatherings often commence days in advance, involving communal efforts such as the slaughtering of livestock, culminating in a meal that embodies cultural meaning (Van der Merwe 2022). The communal nature of these meals highlights their role as rituals that enhance social cohesion and cultural expression. Traditional dishes, such as *bobotie* and *pap* in Southern Africa, symbolise cultural heritage and social unity (Reddy 2023). Sharing meals fosters social interaction and reinforces communal values, as exemplified by the Ethiopian practice of sharing *injera*, which embodies collective identity and social harmony (Taye 2020). In addition, communal meals serve to maintain social hierarchies and roles, demonstrating respect for elders and the inclusion of extended family members, which is crucial for preserving social structure (Amoah 2023). Thus, in African societies, shared meals are not only central to communal activities but also serve as a medium for expressing cultural identity and reinforcing social bonds.

Meals as identity markers in African contexts

Meals also function as significant markers of identity in African societies. They are expressions of ethnic, regional and religious identities, providing a means through which individuals and communities define and assert themselves. Specific foods and eating practices can indicate affiliation with a particular ethnic group or adherence to a religious tradition (Moyo 2022). For instance, the preparation of traditional foods during religious festivals, such as *bokks* in the Muslim community during Eid, serves to affirm religious and cultural identity (Juma 2021). Moreover, the symbolic meanings attached to certain foods contribute to the formation of collective identities. In South Africa, traditional meals such as *potjiekos* and *biltong* are emblematic of regional identities and historical experiences, reinforcing a sense of belonging and pride within different communities (Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2021). The act of preparing and consuming these foods becomes a ritual of cultural continuity, reflecting both historical legacies and contemporary expressions of identity.

2.To further illustrate the significance of meals in African societies, consider the example of Ibagwa Aka in Nigeria, where physical presence during mealtime is not crucial for establishing commensality. Anigbo (1987) highlights that what truly matters is sharing the same type of food prepared by the same person at the main evening meal. This practice allows food to be reserved for those who are absent, suggesting that social interactions outside the home can take precedence over family meals. Anigbo (1987:67) notes, 'Food can be kept for those who are absent', thus underscoring the flexibility in mealtime arrangements. In addition, in Akan culture, there exists a symbolic connection between food and sexual relations, as evidenced by the Akan verb stem 'di', which signifies both eating and sexual activity. Clark (1994:346) points out that a wife's contentment in her marriage is often reflected in her preparation of 'prompt, attractive, large meals' for her husband, a task that may involve the help of a maid. Conversely, a wife's inability or refusal to learn to cook can adversely affect the marital relationship, further illustrating the deep intertwining of culinary practices and personal relationships.

3.Taylor (2006:45) characterises culture as both a potent tool for human survival and a fragile phenomenon. It is constantly evolving and can be easily lost, as it exists solely within our minds.

Various meal sharing through cultural events in the House of Phalo⁴

In the African context when there is a wedding, friends and family gather in celebration of those who are getting married and, at the wedding, meals will be dished for the friends and families. Also, when a father of the house has a visitor in the African homes, he will be entertaining him by going to the nearest street vendor who sells braai meat or a barbecue. It is called *umbengo* in the Xhosa communities. It is a meat cooked over an open fire. This is not just anyone who receives this honour. If you received such treatment, you must consider yourself very important to the person who takes you to this place. It is a way to show entertainment or to show hospitality to your visitor. Again, when a young man gets interested in a lady and wants to ask her in marriage, there is *Lobola* negotiations. Where *Onozakuzaku* [ambassadors or the representatives] of the young man will visit this lady's uncles or representatives to make payments in cattle or cash from the groom's family to the parents of the bride. That is called *Lobola*, and afterward, there will be a nice meal that will be served to the uncles or representatives of the bride [*Onozakuzaku*]. Both families will enjoy this meal together. Then they will drink Amageu or drinks such as alcohol or other non-alcoholic beverages together as a symbol of fellowship and unity between the two families.

The significance of these meals in African culture

Marshall et al. (eds. 1996:46) assert that information about what people ate in biblical times is not only interesting but also interwoven with theological meaning. What is the significance of eating meals together in the African context and theological perspective? According to Kretschmer (2021:46), the consumption of food originates in the Bible. In Genesis 1:29–30 (and 2:16, we read about seed-bearing plants and fruit-bearing trees as constituting food for human beings, and after the fall in Gn 3) the use of the animals was included for consumption of food. African people know that having food is because of God's provision for communal enjoyment. And God said, 'See, I have given you every herb that yields seed which is on the face of all the earth, and every tree whose fruit yields seed; to you, it shall be for food' (Gn 1:29). The Bible encourages us to take care of our bodies. God gives food to us, as He does to the creatures of the animal kingdom (Psalm 147:9; 104:27; 136:25). The earth has been created to produce foods that are so vital for our consumption. Food is a gift from God; it is His provision. Another important significance of these meals in African culture is the symbol of unity.

Meals as sites of exclusion and othering

However, the inclusive nature of meals can be complicated by their potential to serve as sites of exclusion and othering. In diverse and complex societies, meals can become arenas where social boundaries are reinforced rather than

4. As noticed by Faleni (2020:1) King Xhosa, the first monarch of the amaXhosa, gave his name to the Xhosa nation. Phalo, on the other hand, was the 10th king. In this research, the terms Phalo and amaXhosa will be employed to refer to both King Phalo and his people, the amaXhosa.

transcended.⁵ Exclusion may occur in various forms, including ethnic, religious or socio-economic dimensions. For example, in South Africa, historical and contemporary practices around food can reflect and perpetuate social divisions, such as the exclusion of certain groups from communal or ceremonial meals because of historical injustices (Williams 2022). The process of othering can manifest in the deliberate exclusion of individuals or groups from communal dining settings, which serves to reinforce social hierarchies and boundaries. Such practices can marginalise certain groups and entrench social divisions, as seen in the legacy of apartheid where access to communal resources, including food, was racially segregated (Gumede 2023). This exclusion from communal meals can have profound psychological and social impacts, contributing to feelings of alienation and disenfranchisement (Chironga 2021a).

Theological dimensions of meals and exclusion

Theological perspectives on meals further illuminate their role in both inclusion and exclusion. In African Traditional Religions, meals often serve as sacred rituals that reinforce communal bonds and spiritual identities (Sharma 2023). However, these rituals can also be sites of exclusion when certain individuals or groups are deemed unfit to participate because of perceived spiritual or moral failings (Osei-Tutu 2022). Similarly, in Christian contexts, communal meals such as the Eucharist can embody theological ideals of unity and inclusion, yet the practice of Communion can also reflect exclusionary dynamics within the church (Smith 2021). Theological debates around the nature of the Eucharist highlight how religious meals can both challenge and reinforce existing social boundaries. In summary, meals in African societies are multifaceted practices that play crucial roles in cultural expression, social cohesion and identity formation. They are central to communal life, serving both as a means of inclusion and as potential sites of exclusion. Understanding these dynamics requires a nuanced exploration of how meals function as markers of identity and instruments of social structuring. The dual role of meals as inclusive and exclusive practices highlights the complexity of communal life in diverse and evolving societies.

Othering in the Last Meal: A social construct analysis

The Last Meal, or Last Supper, as narrated in Mark 14:12–26, provides a rich text for analysing the concept of othering through a social construct lens. This analysis seeks to explore how the event reflects and critiques the process of othering,

5. Meals in African societies are powerful symbols of cultural and communal identity, often fostering inclusion through broader participation, such as inviting diverse individuals, accommodating dietary needs and sharing narratives that transcend divides (Appiah 1994). They also serve multilayered purposes such as celebrating milestones, fostering dialogue and supporting the marginalised (Kimenyi 1980). However, meals can also function as tools for *othering*, particularly when access is restricted or symbolic elements emphasise exclusivity. They may delineate boundaries between 'insiders' and 'outsiders' through rituals, language or food choices that alienate non-members (Mbiti 1990). Communal feasts tied to initiation rites or clan traditions can reinforce group cohesion by demarcating social boundaries (Mazrui 1986). In addition, hierarchical practices, such as serving orders or portion sizes, can perpetuate power dynamics and societal stratification (Kimenyi 1980). Thus, meals, while often unifying, can also reinforce exclusion and 'othering' (Gyekye 1997).

focussing on the roles of Jesus and the disciples in the narrative. By applying social theory to this key biblical episode, we can better understand how identity and belonging are constructed and contested within the context of early Christian community formation.

Theoretical framework: Social constructivism and othering

Social constructivism posits that identities and social realities are constructed through social interactions and cultural norms (Berger & Luckmann 1966). The process of othering, as conceptualised by Edward Said (1978), involves the creation of an 'us' versus 'them' dynamic that reinforces in-group cohesion while marginalising those deemed as outsiders. This framework helps us to examine how the Last Meal serves as a site for constructing and contesting social boundaries and identities.

The last meal in Mark 14: A reflection on othering

In this section, the goal is to reflect on the concept of othering as it relates to the Last Meal described in Mark 14:12–26.

Construction of identity and belonging

The Last Meal is also a pivotal moment for the construction of identity and belonging. By instituting the new covenant through the symbols of bread and wine, Jesus redefines the concept of communal identity. The sharing of bread and wine becomes a ritual that signifies the formation of a new community bound together by participation in Jesus' sacrificial act (Donahue & Harrington 2002). This new identity is distinct from the existing Jewish traditions and marks a departure from previous social and religious norms. The act of sharing the meal creates a sense of belonging among the disciples, who are positioned as the recipients of this new covenant. At the same time, this redefinition of identity serves to highlight the othering of those who do not accept or participate in this new covenant. The meal thus becomes a site for the construction of a distinct Christian identity, which inherently involves a process of exclusion for those outside this new community (Witherington 2001).

Jesus' role and the concept of othering

Jesus' role in the Last Meal is central to the process of othering. His actions and words establish a new social and theological order that redefines communal boundaries. By instituting the Eucharist, Jesus reorients the traditional Passover meal into a symbol of His impending death and the new covenant (Evans 2001). This act both includes the disciples in a transformative new reality and excludes others who do not partake in this new covenant. The prediction of betrayal serves as a critical moment where Jesus delineates the boundaries of loyalty and faithfulness. The identification of the betrayer as 'other' highlights the tension between inclusion in the new community and exclusion because of betrayal (Hooker 1991). This emphasises the fragility of communal bonds and the consequences of failing to uphold them.

Critique and implications

Theological implications

Theologically, the Last Meal challenges traditional notions of inclusion and exclusion. It presents a vision of community that transcends conventional social boundaries yet also reinforces new boundaries within the emerging Christian movement. The establishment of the new covenant through the Eucharist introduces a redefined notion of community that includes all who partake in the new covenant, while simultaneously excluding those who reject it (Smith 2021).

Social critique

From a social critique perspective, the Last Meal offers a critique of existing social structures and boundaries. By redefining the meaning of communal meals, Jesus critiques the social norms and religious practices of His time, challenging the entrenched social hierarchies and exclusionary practices (Marcus 2009). This critique extends to how early Christians understood their own identity about both Jewish traditions and the broader Roman society. The Last Meal in Mark 14 serves as a powerful text for analysing the dynamics of othering and identity construction. Through the lenses of social constructivism and othering, the event reflects both the inclusive and exclusive aspects of Jesus' ministry. The roles of Jesus and the disciples in the narrative highlight the processes of constructing communal identity and delineating social boundaries. This analysis underscores the complex interplay of inclusion and exclusion in the formation of early Christian communities and offers insights into how these dynamics continue to resonate in contemporary discussions of identity and belonging.

The Last Meal and contemporary South African contexts

Constructing identity through communal meals

In Mark 14, Jesus' institution of the Last Supper as a new covenant meal signifies a transformative moment in communal identity formation. This meal redefines the traditional Passover, creating a new communal identity centred on Jesus' sacrifice (Evans 2001). The ritual of sharing bread and wine becomes a powerful symbol of unity among the disciples, marking the formation of a new community bound by shared faith and commitment (Donahue & Harrington 2002). Applying this to contemporary South African contexts, communal meals can serve as a tool for constructing and reinforcing collective identity. In a society marked by deep socio-economic divisions and historical legacies of apartheid, communal meals provide an opportunity to forge new identities that transcend past divisions. Initiatives such as community dinners and interfaith feasts can function similarly to the Last Supper, promoting a sense of unity and shared purpose among diverse groups (Moyo 2022).

The role of othering in contemporary South Africa

The concept of othering, as illustrated in Mark 14 through the prediction of betrayal, can be applied to understand social dynamics in South Africa. In the biblical narrative, the identification of a betrayer highlights the process of exclusion within the inner circle (France 2002). Similarly, contemporary South Africa grapples with issues of othering, where socio-economic and ethnic divides create barriers to social integration and cohesion. The legacy of apartheid has left enduring social scars, with certain groups experiencing marginalisation and exclusion. Communal meals, when approached inclusively, can challenge these divides. For instance, community outreach programmes that bring together individuals from different racial and socio-economic backgrounds can act as counter-narratives to exclusionary practices, promoting dialogue and mutual understanding (Gumede 2023).

Communal meals as tools for reconciliation and unity

Communal meals have the potential to foster reconciliation by providing a space for dialogue and shared experiences. In South Africa, where social unrest and violence have been prevalent, initiatives that use communal meals as a means of bringing people together can help bridge divides and promote healing. For example, programmes such as 'Breaking Bread Together' aim to address historical grievances and foster reconciliation through shared dining experiences (Chironga 2021b). While othering is often seen as negative, in the context of the Last Supper, it represents the creation of a new community with a distinct identity centred on faith and participation. Similarly, in South Africa, fostering inclusive spaces through shared meals can help heal divisions and build unity. The redefinition of community in both cases does not exclude but offers a new understanding of belonging, promoting reconciliation and healing historical wounds. These meals become symbolic acts of reconciliation, reinforcing the shared humanity and common interests that unite individuals despite their differences (Taye 2020).

Addressing social divisions

While communal meals have the potential to foster unity, they can also perpetuate divisions if not carefully managed. The exclusivity of the Last Supper, where only the 12 disciples were included, serves as a reminder of how communal rituals can reinforce boundaries (Hooker 1991). In contemporary South Africa, communal meals must be designed to include diverse voices and perspectives, avoiding the pitfalls of tokenism or exclusion. Programmes that seek to address social divisions through meals should prioritise inclusivity and representation. For instance, community kitchens and food distribution programmes that cater to marginalised groups can help address disparities and promote social equity (Williams 2022). By ensuring that communal meals are accessible and inclusive, communities can avoid reinforcing existing divisions and instead work towards creating a more

equitable social fabric. The Last Meal in Mark 14 offers valuable insights into the dynamics of identity, community and othering that are relevant to contemporary South African contexts. By examining how communal meals function as tools for constructing identity and addressing social divisions, we can better understand their potential to foster reconciliation and unity. In a society marked by historical legacies and ongoing social challenges, communal meals can serve as powerful symbols of inclusivity and shared purpose, helping to bridge divides and promote social cohesion.

Final remarks

The Markan Last Meal offers a powerful framework for addressing the challenges of othering and identity formation in contemporary African societies. The event's dual role in constructing communal identity and managing social boundaries provides a lens through which to understand both the potential for inclusion and the risks of exclusion in social practices today. In the context of South Africa, where historical and ongoing social divisions create complex challenges, the communal meal serves as a symbolic and practical tool for fostering unity. Initiatives that embrace the inclusive aspects of communal meals, while acknowledging and addressing the potential for exclusion, can contribute to building more cohesive and reconciled communities.

The Last Supper's emphasis on shared experience and communal bonding invites contemporary societies to reflect on how their rituals and practices can either bridge divides or reinforce them. As communities seek to address social unrest and violence, the example of the Last Meal underlines the importance of creating inclusive spaces that promote understanding and solidarity among diverse groups. Finally, the Markan Last Meal remains a relevant and instructive event for both theological reflection and practical social engagement. Its lessons on inclusion, identity and othering continue to resonate, offering valuable guidance for addressing the complexities of contemporary social dynamics.

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