

# Welcoming outsiders: The nascent Jesus community as a locus of hospitality and equality (Mk 9:33–42; 10:2–16)

**Author:**  
Zorodzai Dube<sup>1</sup>

**Affiliation:**  
<sup>1</sup>Department of New Testament Studies, University of Pretoria, South Africa

**Correspondence to:**  
Zorodzai Dube

**Email:**  
zorodube@yahoo.com

**Postal address:**  
Department of New Testament Studies, University of Pretoria, Office 1–47, Pretoria 0003, South Africa

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The recent global economic crisis left millions of people destitute without formal work and further alienated the poor from the rich. As a remedy, modern Neoliberalism proposes that the poor must hope and steadily work their way up the economic ladder. What is the solution to such unbridgeable social and economic chasm? This article used the contemporary situation of economic inequality to imagine events during the first century, during Jesus' time, whereby the rich increasingly amassed wealth to the disadvantage of the poor majority. In this article, Mark 9:33–42 and 10:10–16 was used to explore how Jesus developed an alternative economic system – one that contrasted itself in every respect from that of the hierarchical and patriarchal Roman Empire. This article argued that Jesus formed communities that directly responded to the economic challenges faced by the landless and the homeless majority by creating an alternative economy based on love and hospitality. This was done by proposing that Mark 9:33–42 and 10:2–16 are amongst the passages where the two rival economies were contrasted by way of two different household economies. Firstly, the economic system *outside the house* that typified the hierarchical Roman economy, and secondly, the economic system *inside the house* that referred to Jesus' alternative system whereby he taught his disciples to welcome the homeless, the landless and the poor. Before developing this further, the plausible social context of the stories was attended to.

**Insluiting en verwelkoming van buitestaanders: Die ontluikende Jesus-gemeenskap as lokus van gasvryheid en gelykheid (Mark 9:33–42; 10:2–16).** Die onlangse globale krisis het miljoene mense sonder formele werk gelaat en so die vervreemding tussen arm en ryk verder vergroot. Die moderne ideologie van neo-liberalisme stel voor dat die armes steeds hoopvol moet bly en hulleself geleidelik op ekonomiese gebied opwerk. Wat is die oplossing vir die byna onoorbrugbare sosiale en ekonomiese kloof tussen arm en ryk? Hierdie artikel gebruik die huidige situasie van sosiale polariteit om aan te dui dat 'n soortgelyke situasie reeds in Jesus se tyd bestaan het – toe rykes ryker geword het ten koste van die armes. Markus 9:33–42 en 10:2–16 word gebruik om aan te toon hoe Jesus 'n 'alternatiewe ekonomiese sisteem' geskep het wat lynreg teenoor die onderdrukkende hiërargiese en patriargale Romeinse Ryk gestaan het. Jesus het geloofsgemeenskappe gevorm wat direk op die ekonomiese uitdagings van die haweloses gereageer het deur 'alternatiewe ekonomiese sisteem' te skep, gebaseer op liefde en gasvryheid. Tekste soos Markus 9:33–42 en 10:2–16 kontrasteer op strategiese wyse die twee opponerende ekonomiese sisteme deur twee verskillende 'ekonomiese huise' uit te beeld: die ideologie van die 'die ekonomie van die breë samelewing' wat die hiërargiese Romeinse ekonomie vergestalt, en die ideologie van die 'die ekonomie van die huishouding' waar Jesus sy dissipels oproep om radikaal om te gee vir en uit te reik na armes, haweloses, weduwees en weeskinders. Voordat hierdie verder ondersoek is, is die moontlike sosiale konteks van die Skrifgedeeltes ondersoek.

## Introduction: Conflicting social ideologies

The two stories in Mark 9:33–46 and Mark 10:2–16 indicate that, amongst other traditions about Jesus, the Markan community shared and remembered stories where Jesus placed a child amongst his disciples. The context in which such stories were told, is difficult to establish, though in agreement with Joanna Dewey (2004). Because of reference to households and the strong criticism of the political status quo, it is possible to suggest that the stories may have been retold at homes as a censure or disapproval of the prevailing social system.

On face value and without much knowledge of the first century context, these stories read like any of Jesus' stories – yet, on closer inspection, they are loaded with criticism against the prevailing socio-political context. The criticisms are buried inside the 'child' metaphor. Unlike our modern notions about children, during the first century Mediterranean epoch, children (except those from royal households) symbolised irrationality, vulnerability, poverty and were regarded as social misfits. Buoyed in such a worldview, it seems possible to imagine that the disciples were

perplexed upon seeing a child in their midst and possibly interpreted the action as a violation of social hierarchies, power and belonging.

This passage has never been immune to different interpretations, and one dominant perspective suggests that Jesus used the story as a metaphor to teach humility and hospitality (Orton 2003; Patte 1983; Gundry-Volf 2000). This interpretation is mostly emphasised in churches, ascribing identity to Jesus' followers as pious and humble. Arguably, this interpretation focuses more on the comparative meaning derived from the metaphor of the child. The validity of this perspective makes sense if children were indeed regarded pious, humble and obedient. Reider Aasgaard (2007), who has done extensive research on children in antiquity, noted that children occupied the lowest social strata, were marginalised and represented the opposite construction of power and prowess during this milieu (Aasgaard *ibid*).

This article will not pursue Aasgaard's perspective, but is interested in how the 'child' metaphor functioned as a means to destabilise discursive constructions of power, space and hierarchy in this ancient context. Using social scientific perspectives and ideological criticism, this article argues that the story is concerned with space, place and boundaries (Elliott 2003). This will be done by establishing the social settings and power dynamics that are deconstructed by these narratives.

Using this perspective in this mini-drama, the story seemingly reveals delicate issues regarding who belonged inside and who remained outside. If a child who, according to the hegemonic ancient constructions and representations of sex and gender, was regarded as a social misfit was placed in the midst of male disciples, this article suggests that the story goes beyond the metaphor of humility. Arguably, it deconstructs notions of belonging, place and power, making it plausible to read the story as an ideological critic aimed at deconstructing, established social hierarchies which sidelined the poor and the weak (Spitaler 2011; Crossan 1991). In the story, the disciples were not economically rich, but being free men made them occupy a better social class than children, women and slaves. Narrated and acted out within a strong patriarchal community, conscious of hierarchy, Jesus' gesture may be understood as deconstructing the socially constructed meanings of power, place and social identity which agrees with Dominic Crossan's (*ibid*) assertion that, by accepting a child who embodied symbols of social and economic vulnerability, Jesus taught that the kingdom of God belonged to the poor.

This perspective is difficult to sustain before attending to the following questions pertaining the social context of the story:

1. What is the context of the stories?
2. What caused social fractures?
3. Through this action, did Jesus envision an alternative kingdom with different moral and ethical values than the prevailing kingdom?

This article will contribute in exploring how the story was remembered as a narrative that deconstructed hierarchy and inequality, focusing on how the story created alternative social space in which the poor were welcomed and nurtured. Arguably, these stories seemingly grapple with complex questions regarding the exclusion of outsiders. Instead of abandoning the poor, can society radically reorganise itself to accommodate the poor? Using the child as metaphor, Jesus challenged the hegemonic social boundaries and established a new system based on love, hospitality and care for the marginalised. The question of the plausible social context of the stories will now be attended to.

## The context: Disrupted livelihoods

The meaning of the stories is inconclusive without the broader economic and social background that forms the backdrop to the narratives.

### Location

As simple as it sounds, the debate around the location and the identity of Mark's community is inconclusive. Markan scholars are in a tussle over whether Rome, a traditionally preferred location, or Galilee was the location of the community. Four reasons are presented in support of Rome as the location:

1. The tradition started with Papias, Bishop of Hierapolis during the 2nd century, who asserted that Mark, Peter's disciple, composed the gospel whilst in Rome.<sup>1</sup> A majority of church fathers such as Justin (ca. 150 CE; Telford 1985), Irenaeus (ca. 130–200 CE; *Adv. Haer.* 3.1.1; *H.E.* 5. 8. 2–4), Eusebius (*Hypotyposesis H.E.* 6.14.6–7) and Tertullian (*Adv. Marc.* 4.5) support this view.
2. Furthermore, Rome is believed to be the likely location, because the content of Mark's gospel can be linked to events in Rome, especially reference to a possible situation of persecution during Nero's reign (ca. 54 to 69 CE; Incigneri 2003). If written in Rome, Mark's gospel possibly functioned as a counterclaim – that Jesus was the son of God – against Imperial propaganda that purported that Vespasian was a god – hence a subversive document.
3. Some scholars such as Guthrie (1990) and Collins (2007) further argue that it is inconceivable that the author composed the book whilst in Palestine, given the numerous internal literary inconsistencies present within the book. For example, reference to Dalmanutha (Mk 8:10), which is an unknown location, reference to Gerasenes as extending to the sea of Galilee (Mk 5:1), the description of Bethsaida as a village (Mk 8:26), as well as the incorrect description of Herod's family (Mk 6:17) which causes readers to doubt the writer's proximity to and knowledge of Palestine.
4. Furthermore, the existence of Latin words, for example *legion* (Mk 5:9) and *praetorian* (Mk 15:16), supports claims that the audience understood Latin, a language spoken in Rome – thus placing the community's location in Rome. Equally, throughout the gospel the author took

1. Papias Bishop of Hierapolis in Eusebius (*Hist.eccl.* 3.39.15).

time to explain to his audience some Aramaic words, the language spoken in Palestine, such as *Boanerges* (Mk 3:17) and *talitha cum* (Mk 5:41) which may explain that the audience had little knowledge of Aramaic and that they resided outside Palestine (Guthrie *ibid*).

On the other hand, strong arguments are presented in support of Galilee as the possible location. This article respects views that support Rome as the location, but deem those in support of Galilee seem more plausible:

1. Mark is the only gospel that took considerable time and space to detail the destruction of the Jerusalem temple and its impact on both the Jews and Christians – an explanation that makes sense if the community was close to Palestine (Mk 13:1ff.).
2. In addition, the narrative structure of Mark's gospel situates most of Jesus' activities in Nazareth, Capernaum and Gadara which are places located in the northern part of Palestine. Mark clearly showed Galilee as the location where Jesus and his disciples gathered after his resurrection in contrast to Jerusalem which was portrayed as the hostile venue where Jesus was killed. Throughout the gospel, Galilee was represented as a new emerging community after Jesus' death and resurrection (Myers 1991; Horsley 2005; Roskam 2004; Marxsen 1969; Kelber 1979).

## Timing

Whilst the anti-imperial sentiments within the gospel equally support Rome, the context is more plausible if located in Galilee after 70 CE. During the second half of the 1st century, the region was engulfed in political turmoil, partly caused by Nero's incompetence, giving opportunity for sporadic revolt throughout the empire (Tacitus 1964). The army generals revolted against the Empire which threw the region and the entire Empire into general political decay. For a while, the Empire spent considerable effort and resources fighting sporadic revolts, for example the revolt in Gaul under Vindex in 68 CE and the revolt by the Celts, led by Civilis, in 69 CE (Josephus 1968). Throughout the Empire, political instability inspired other ethnic groups to seek political freedom from the Romans.

In Palestine, especially in Galilee, the Jews were amongst the various ethnic groups that revolted against the Roman imperial rule in demand of political autonomy. A Jewish historian, Flavius Josephus (1968), though writing from the perspective of the Empire, documented that religious grievances were the main causes underpinning the Jewish revolt. In response, the Romans destroyed the temple in 70 CE, but the people's resolve did not waiver. Instead, it exacerbated their hatred against the Empire. Amongst other reasons, the Jews were enraged by the temple tax that was redirected towards the rebuilding of the temple of the Roman god, Jupiter. After the temple destruction, the Jews mostly feared that the Romans would convert the Jerusalem temple into a pagan sanctuary. In response, some prophetic movements amongst the Jews, for example in Cyrenaica, rallied people in the wilderness – promising them deliverance and miracles like those of Moses (Theissen 1991).

## Challenges on their livelihood

Besides political instability, the Galileans also faced mammoth economic challenges. Generally, the Galileans were rural peasants and land was central to their subsistence livelihood. They lived as country people in various villages scattered throughout the province (Freyne 2000b), maintaining their roots in the land and surviving through subsistence farming. The influence of Roman Imperialism coincided with the development of urbanisation and monetisation of the economy which severely affected their livelihoods. Commercialisation of land and tenancy fragmented kinship bonds and family values. A majority of city dwellers, for example in Tiberius, were retired Roman veterans and officials who served the interest of the Empire. Largely, this explains the peasants' resentment towards the elite whom they accused of buying land and forcing the peasants into feudal tenants.

Amongst other issues, Rome demanded huge amounts of tribute from peasants which negatively affected their livelihoods. Each province within the Empire was required to pay a stipulated amount of tribute and tax. Galilee was required to pay approximately 200 talents from all the territories of Herod Antipas (Freyne 2000b). The stipulated revenues were paid after every two years and a quarter of the harvest was handed over to Rome. Due to the rapid expansion of the city's population, especially in Rome, frequent food shortages and high tributes were inevitable. Tributes were paid to Rome in the form of grain such as wheat and other agricultural produce (Freyne *ibid*). Corn was demanded directly from the peasants or could be harvested from imperial estates that were established in the provinces at the expense of the peasants.<sup>2</sup> The decree to pay tributes by means of wheat to Caesar remained in effect for almost the rest of the 1st century.

The growing demand for food, due to urbanisation, led to the creation of large estates owned by feudal Lords (Kloppenborg 2006; Oakman 2008). Agricultural specialisation shifted production from small household consumption to estate farming, resulting in peasants being driven from their land to marginal lands or they were assimilated as tenants on farms. Sean Freyne (2000a) commented saying that:

In an agrarian economy, specialisation would mean a shift in land owning patterns, from small families running farms to large estates in which the tenants cultivate the estate. They often work for an absentee landowner under a manager, receiving a subsistent living in return for their labour. (p. 34)

To achieve this, the elite amassed fertile lands through forceful expropriation or default in payment of taxes by small holders. In some instances, the Empire grabbed land from the peasants to create estate farming for large-scale production. The peasants were displaced from their land in Gaba, Trachonitis and from fertile lands in the great plain,

<sup>2</sup>Freyne says that imperial corn confiscated from the peasants was stored in upper Galilee. Josephus reports that the peasants wanted to break in and steal the imperial grain. Josephus also reports that corn was stored in lower Galilee at Gaba. The corn was collected from the peasants and belonged to Queen Bernice, wife of King Agrippa II.

as well as in lower and upper Galilee to resettle veterans (Freyne 2000a).

As the need for more land for commercial cultivation grew, land displacement became widespread (Horsley 2001). From the time of Herod the Great and Herod Antipas, land ownership was increasingly concentrated in the hands of royal estates. The rich controlled most of the land and owned a large number of slaves. The majority of the peasants were displaced from their ancestral land, resulting in land alienation and tenancy being a common feature, especially amongst peasants.

### The impact of land displacement household and kinship

The repercussions were evidently seen. Intensive production made the traditional family system, based on kinship and reciprocity, collapse (Guijarro 1997). When the peasants lost their ancestral land, they also lost their livelihood and their right to subsist.

Due to land displacement, a large percentage of peasants lived as labourers or tenants on estates owned by absentee landowners. The majority of tenants were peasants who had lost their land (Kloppenborg 2006). On such farms, the absentee farmer rented his farm to tenants who would cultivate the farm on his behalf. The landlord always benefited from such arrangement since he would get half or two-thirds of the harvested crops. In the event of a poor harvest, the tenant suffered arrears from unpaid rent. One poor harvest would put the tenant into arrears which would take several years to repay (Kloppenborg *ibid*). In many instances, there were conflict and forced eviction when the tenant failed to pay back the debt. This sometimes resulted in the tenant losing all he had, including the right to subsist. The parable of the vineyard (Mk 12:1–9) illustrated the use of violence by the landowner when evicting the tenants from his farm (Kloppenborg *ibid*; Horsley 1997).

Debt was a commonly used mechanism to dispose of the peasants from their land (Oakman 2008:74). Such measures shattered the peasants' livelihood and their ability to continue with their subsistent lives. Many peasants became landless and homeless due to debt (Rajak 1983). In some instances, there was the widespread rise of banditry in the countryside, especially during the time of Governor Felix (52–60 CE; Rhoads 1976).

### Textual evidence of hierarchical social structures (Mk 9:33–46; 10:10–16)

The story in Mark 9:33–46 and 10:10–16 seemingly relates to the political situation of social hierarchies and broken kinship ties, possibly due to tenancy, landlessness and homelessness. Commentaries on the gospel of Mark concur that the stories reveal a socially and politically divided society. In his detailed commentary on Mark's gospel, Ched Myers (1991) located

the stories during a pivotal period in Jesus' ministry. Myers divided the first chapters of Mark's gospel (ch. 1–7) as Jesus' campaigns in Galilee against 'evil' through exorcisms and healing. These campaigns were an indirect repudiation of the effects of the Roman presence in the region. Myers suggests that, after the heavy rebuttal of Roman imperialism, Jesus set to reorder social relations. In Myers' divisions, Mark 9:33–46 and 10:10–16 falls under the broad section that deals with the transformation of place and society, which he entitled 'Jesus' construction of a new social order'. A recent commentary by Robert H. Stein (2008) also gives similar textual divisions by placing these stories under the heading: 'Jesus' teaching concerning Christian discipleship' (Mk 8:34–10:31).

A closer scrutiny shows that the two passages are related to each other which made some scholars suggest that the stories might have been duplicated (Evans 2001). It can be argued that, since they were told in two different geographic locations, these stories were separate. The first story happened in a Capernaum village (Καὶ ἦλθεν εἰς Καφαρναοῦμ; Mk 9:33), whilst the second story happened across the river Jordan at an undisclosed place (Mk 10:10), thus giving a progression of Jesus' counter household ideology from Capernaum to places across the Jordan. The first story happened in the village of Capernaum which was well-known for its booming fishing industry, but also for oppression and poverty amongst the poor (Reed 1999). Since the story was told from the perspective of the poor, we can imagine that the prevalence of poverty made the story resonate with many people in the village. The second story happened across the river Jordan – regions known for their fertile soils and flat lands where, according to Sean Freyne (2000b), the peasants were forcefully removed from their lands to resettle Roman veterans. It is likely that the people from these regions might have suffered land dispossession and tenancy. Instead of reading the stories as narratives that teach humility, this article suggests that the stories deconstruct established notions of power, hierarchy and space. These two separate incidents testify that the Jesus movement sought to transform social hierarchies around Nazareth and across the river Jordan.

Interestingly, a common feature can be noted in the way the stories were told, for example both stories happened within the *house* (Mk 9:33; Καὶ ἐν τῇ οἰκίᾳ γενόμενος). This is significant, because in antiquity, a *household* was the primary economic institution, connected to the larger society through kinship ties (Moxnes 2003). Halvor Moxnes (*ibid*) elaborated that, in antiquity, the term *household* included the father, mother, children, relatives and slaves – a different conception from our modern understanding of a home which is a private environment with a husband, a mother and their children or a nuclear family. Elisabeth Malbon (1986) made an interesting study regarding Mark's portrayal of a house, saying that in Mark's gospel a house is significant, because 'the actions enclosed by a house parallel those enclosed by a synagogue, which are, healing, teaching, preaching, and controversy'. In Mark, a house normally included the crowd that followed Jesus and the homeless people (Mk 3:20). Malbon (*ibid*) further argues that Jesus performed activities

that were normally done in the synagogue or temple, but now they were being carried out in the house, thereby making the house a new social space for a new emerging community. In Mark's gospel, we hear that Jesus entered the house to teach and to heal (Mk 1:33; 2:1, 2). In Mark's gospel, the synagogue is being replaced by the house where a new community has a new gathering place (Malbon *ibid*:282).

Importantly, stories happened *inside* the house – juxtaposing the teaching *inside* the house to the system *outside* the house. Arguably, by placing the child amongst the disciples, Jesus redefined belonging, space and power by revealing the story's progression from *outside* the house to *inside* the house. What happened prior going into the house (Mk 9:33) is significant. Outside the house, the disciples were discussing who was greater amongst themselves ('γὰρ διελέχθησαν ἐν τῇ ὁδοῦ τίς μείζων'). Why was this discussion a problem and how did it militate Jesus' understanding of belonging? Outside the *house* was the system of *μείζων* (Mk 9:34) – a hierarchical, feudal arrangement whereby the rulers oppressed those under them. It is a hierarchical social structure similar to the Roman households headed by the *paterfamilias*. In reality, the discussion of *μείζων*, created an unwelcomed hierarchical, patriarchal society whereby the elite and the privileged continued to enjoy wealth whilst the economically poor were being marginalised. Explicitly, the rulers possessed land, slaves and wealth, whilst the poor had their labour to sell. Besides being a political arrangement, this was a normative pattern in households whereby the *paterfamilias*, the father figure, was the domineering figure of the institution.

Using a house as a demarcating social structure, the story contrasts this system with Jesus' vision of space and social relations, established on the principle of equality (οἱ δύο εἰς σάρκα μίαν; Mk 10:8). Jesus' vision of an alternative household was demonstrated when Jesus brought a child in their midst which deconstructed social relations based on age, gender and place. In terms of age, a child was not supposed to sit together with male elders, because children were perceived as immature (Aasgaard 2007). Similarly, in terms of gender and place, a child in the midst of men would be regarded as a misfit (Aasgaard *ibid*). Far from being a motivation for humility, this story was politically loaded and contrasts the social system outside the house which, in essence, represented the Roman Empire against the emerging system inside the house.

The story shifted inside the house, being introduced by John's concern: Ἐφη αὐτῷ ὁ Ἰωάννης· διδάσκαλε, εἶδομεν τινα ἐν τῷ ὀνόματι σου ἐκβάλλοντα δαιμόνια καὶ ἐκωλύομεν αὐτὸν, ὅτι οὐκ ἠκολούθει ἡμῖν (Mk 9:38). John's question implicitly advocated for closed social boundaries which would continue to privilege a small group of people – in this case, the disciples. Vernon Robbins (1983) agrees that the disciples wanted to remain in privileged positions. Does this tell us more about Mark's own group? In essence, in this story, Mark retold the story about Jesus that happened approximately 40 years ago. Plausibly, one can assume that

Mark was not simply reminding his community about Jesus' stories. Instead, as a theologian, he was reinterpreting and reconstituting Jesus to answer penitent questions about his community. This study concurs with Koester (1978) that a possibility of internal social disunity existed when some members seemingly entertained the system of social hierarchy within the community. Revising, and possibly reinterpreting history, Mark evokes stories about Jesus to reorganise his community – expanding its social boundaries and, in the process, reprimanding hierarchical and exclusive tendencies. The dire warning against making one of the little ones stumble, would make sense if it was understood in the context of warning the community against disintegration (Myers 1991).

## Welcoming the outsiders

### Expanding the territory

Similar to the first story, when Jesus crossed over the other side of the river Jordan, he went into the house (Mk 10:10; καὶ εἰς τὴν οἰκίαν). However, unlike the first story, the specific location of the story is less known. The possibility is that, from the village of Capernaum, Jesus crossed the river Jordan to Bethabara. In this region, the peasants had experienced land dispossession caused by the resettlement of Roman veterans in the region (Freyne 2000b). This political situation formed the system outside the house. Similar to the first story, the system outside the house was contrasted to the system inside the house. The central character in both stories was a child, who can arguably be understood as representing the homeless and the landless.

Whilst in the first story the system of *μείζων* causes social and economic stratification, the focus in the second story is on the household – evidenced by the strong admonition against divorce (Mk 10:2–16). It is plausible to argue that the land displacement that took place outside the house had a direct impact on family bonds and, in particular, marriage. Landlessness and tenancy broke family ties and put pressure on marriages. In Mark 10:2ff. Jesus responded to the problem of divorce which painted a bigger social problem behind the story. If a household was a microcosm of society, then divorce precludes the challenges faced by the larger society. Amongst the peasants, marriage had social and economic benefits – it strengthened kinship ties and secured resources within subsistent households. Consequently, divorce shattered kinship ties and made people, especially children, vulnerable (Moxnes 2003).

Divorce and family fissures came in different forms. In addition to land displacement, Jesus' followers faced the problem of being rejected by their relatives. After studying the *macarisms* in the gospel of Matthew, Jerome H. Neyrey (1995) explained that some *macarisms* talk about the expulsion of persons who were disowned by their families (Mt 5:11, Lk 6:22). Neyrey (*ibid*:129) suggests that tensions within families erupted when some family members chose to identify with Jesus which resulted in them being expelled from the

household and kinship. Those who were expelled were labelled as rebellious and deviants – a reference applicable to most of Jesus' followers who had been expelled and labelled as deviant (Talbot 2008). Dire consequences awaited, expelled family members. They would suffer economic and potential destitution since they were cut off from the household which was the source of survival, unity and identity (Talbot 2008), thus finding it hard to survive (Neyrey *ibid*). Expelled members were accused of bringing shame and disrepute to their own families. The deviants were accused of crossing social boundaries – from showing allegiance to their own families to supporting Jesus' movement. Such deviants were seen as outsiders by their own families, hence they were denied access to the resources for survival from the household (Guijarro 2004). In reality, this was perilous since identity and honour were derived from being a member of a household or a clan. Family and wealth, especially land, were an expression of honour (Neyrey *ibid*).<sup>3</sup> In addition to losing one's immediate family, disowned members lost social standing which is one's place in the community (Neyrey *ibid*). Banned families were seen as shamed and their reputation was destroyed. They were completely shamed in the eyes of their neighbours. They would receive the same treatment from the rest of society which refused to engage in social and economic interaction with them (Neyrey *ibid*). The rest of the community would revile and despise them. There would be no business deals and marriage arrangements with such outcasts. They would not be able to maintain their social standing, obligations and status (Neyrey *ibid*).

The Markan story might refer to families that had suffered land dispossession in addition to being rejected by their own families due to following Jesus. The motif of unity and oneness within the household became the subject when Jesus and his disciples entered the house (*oikos*). Upon entering the house, the disciples' refusal to allow the children to come to Jesus triggered the discussion. Implicitly, refusing the weak to fellowship implied refusing them equality and dignity. Like the previous story, issues of power and hierarchy had a bearing on survival and belonging. Citing the creation narrative, Jesus responded that God created a man and a woman as the basis of a household and that the two are one flesh (καὶ ἔσονται οἱ δύο εἰς σάρκα μίαν ὥστε οὐκέτι εἰσὶν δύο ἀλλὰ μία σὰρξ). The emphasis here is on oneness and unity within the household as a social and economic institution.

### Creating an alternative new social order

From the two related stories, a house in Mark's gospel is a symbolic space for an alternative social order (Malbon 1986). Elliott (2003) poignantly stated that Jesus assembled people in homes from which he established an egalitarian movement. The common theme between the two stories is that a house offered a canopy of collective self-identification – a place of acceptance and belonging – and in the process posed as a critique against the Roman patriarchal household. This is illustrated by Jesus who said: 'Do not forbid him; for

3. Honour is the value of a person in his own eyes, but also in the eyes of society. It is the estimation of his claim to pride, but it is also the acknowledgement of that claim, his excellence recognized by the society, his right to pride. See Neyrey (1995:129).

no one who does a mighty work in my name will be able soon after to speak evil of me' (Mk 9:39). Arguably, Jesus' response blurred the demarcation between exclusivity and inclusivity by broadening the social boundary to include outsiders.

In both stories, this article suggests that the metaphor of a child emphasised vulnerability of the landless and homeless. As a radical reordering of space, power and belonging within the house, Jesus' followers represented a fictive kinship group that responded to the needs of the fellow members by giving mutual support (Talbot 2008). In terms of ethos, the stories reprimanded tendencies of exclusivity and distanced the community from following hierarchical structures of Roman households, and as Ched Myers (1991) argues, the stories were retold to entrench a radical status reversal of the kingdom.

## Conclusion

From the discussion, we can glean that Jesus' ministry did not operate in a vacuum, but it interacted with the prevailing social issues. The article revealed that Jesus formed communities that responded to the economic challenges faced by the homeless and landless peasants. Jesus' gesture of welcoming a child inside the house captures the moral ethos of the nascent Jesus movement – that of hospitality and close fictive kinship. Such moral virtues can be understood as a direct response to external social and political pressures confronted by the community.

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