



## The Last Supper

### Peter Paul Rubens

The Last Supper, 1630 is an oil painting by Peter Paul Rubens. Rubens created it as part of an altarpiece in the Church of St. Rombout (Rumbold) in Mechelen. The painting depicts Jesus and the Apostles during the Last Supper, with Judas dressed in blue turning back towards the viewer and away from the table. Other than Jesus, the most prominent figure is Judas. Judas holds his right hand to his mouth with his eyes avoiding direct contact with the other figures in the painting creating a nervous expression.

Leonardo da Vinci's Last Supper fresco was a significant influence on Rubens who created an etching after the Davinci Last Supper.

The work, like many others from the late production of Rubens, was executed with the help of assistants: it is painted in a warm and intense style, in which bold lines shape forms framed in a composition of majestic classical equilibrium. The influence of 16th-century Italian painting, especially that of the Veneto, is evident.



## The Seven Servants

Acts 6:1–7

### Overview

The brevity and the language used in these seven short versus hints at Luke's familiarity and purpose in sharing the story. Acts 6:1–7 seems to be based on several sources of information, including the traditionalist of the Seven. Luke seems to know very little about the seven men, except for Stephen and Philip, the latter of whom is not to be confused with Philip who was one of the Twelve. In fact, Luke seems to be making a point of distinguishing the Seven from the Twelve, for this is the only text where he uses the phrase "the Twelve." This story about the interior life of the early church once again suggests that material goods were a source of both blessing and friction in the earliest Christian community. As Tannehill points out, it is not correct to say that Luke has simply idealized the inner life of the community. In fact, in addition to Acts 5 in the present text,

one could also point to 8:18–24; 9:26–28; 11:1–18; 15:1–35; and 21:20–36 as providing clear evidence that Luke does not gloss over the problems of the early Christian communities. He does not, however, dwell on these problems, but mentions briefly how they were resolved. He's apparently more interested in the external sources of problems and possibilities.

"The solution the disciples arrive at here is a rather novel one for antiquity. One commentator has called it the first example of affirmative action — 'the political power generally repressed complaining minorities: here the apostles hand the whole system over to the offended minority.' (Keener) The discussion here and the resolution of the problem should probably be seen in light of the Old Testament and early Jewish provisions for widows and other marginalized people in the highly patriarchal society. (Tannehill) In such a society, widows were often put in positions where they were entitled not to an inheritance, but merely to maintenance by their larger family, and even when they did have the possibility of inheriting, the males in the family had first claim on the inheritance. (Witherington)

"In our particular narrative there may have been a special set of circumstances. The 'Hellenist' Widows were the widows of Greek-speaking Jews, many of whom may have immigrated to Jerusalem in order to die in the holy city, women who may have been left without support when their husbands died because the family (and that of their husband's as well) may have been far away in the Diaspora, or perhaps the Greek-speaking Jewish Christians were just fewer in number and so the widows of this group had less of a natural constituency to rely on." (Keener)

### Background

Hellenism — This is the term used to describe the influence of Greek culture on the peoples the Greek and Roman Empires conquered or interacted with. Upon the Jews' return from exile in Babylon, they endeavored to protect their national identity by closely following the law. This led to the rise of the hyper-conservative Pharisees and their added, unnecessary laws. About one hundred years after the Jews returned, Alexander the Great swept across western Asia, extending his territory from his native Greece, down into Egypt, and east to the border of India. The influence of the Greek culture continued past the first century B.C., when the Roman Empire took control of Palestine. The Pharisees' rival sect, the Sadducees, welcomed the Greek influence. The Sadducees were wealthy, powerful Jewish aristocrats who openly worked with their Gentile rulers to maintain peace and ensure a measure of political clout. All Jews were influenced by Greek culture, however. The Greek language was as well known as the native Aramaic, the Jewish leadership changed from the God-ordained priesthood to the Sadducee-controlled Sanhedrin, and the law of the land more closely reflected Grecian laws than those given through Moses. Hellenism also expressed itself in minor ways, such as Saul taking the name Paul. Hellenism had a great influence during the early years of Christianity. Sometimes the influence was felt indirectly (safe roads for the missionaries) and sometimes directly (theological synergism). (gotquestions.org)

Two types of Jews made up the Jerusalem church. Some were native "Hebrews" who had lived primarily in Palestine, spoke Aramaic predominantly but also Greek, and used the Hebrew Scriptures. The others were "Hellenists" who originally lived outside Palestine (Jews of the Diaspora) but were now living in Palestine. Many of these Jews returned to Palestine to end their days in their ancestral homeland. They primarily spoke Greek, as well as the language of the area where they had lived, and they used the Septuagint translation of the Old Testament. The Apostle Paul classed himself among the Hebrews (2 Cor. 11:22; cf. Phil. 3:5), though he grew up outside Palestine. The basic difference between the Hebrews and Hellenists, therefore, appears to have been linguistic. Those who could speak a Semitic language were Hebrews, and those who could not were Hellenists. Within Judaism, frequent tensions between these two groups arose, and this cultural problem carried over into the new church. The Hebrews observed the Mosaic Law much more strictly than their Hellenistic brethren. Conversely the Hellenists typically regarded the Hebrews as quite narrow-minded and self-centered.

The Hebrews and the Hellenists had their own synagogues in Jerusalem, but when they became Christians, they came together in one fellowship. As the church grew, some of the Christians believed that the church leaders were discriminating against the Hellenists unfairly (cf. Eph. 4:31; Heb. 12:15). The conflict arose over the distribution of food to church widows (cf. 2:44–45; 4:32–5:11). Care of widows and the needy was a priority in Judaism (Exod. 22:22; Deut. 10:18; et al.). The Jews provided for their widows weekly in the synagogues along with the poor. (Constable, Witherington, Moule, Schürer, & Winter)

Charity — “In contrast with what is found in many Jewish texts, where the poor tend to be equated with the pious and deserving who are destined for happiness in the next world, if not in this, at Rome the poor are described as *leves*, *inquinati*, *improbi*, *scelerati*, etc., terms implying dishonesty.” (Hands) The modern notion of charity goes back to the Judeo-Christian concept of giving without the thought of return, of being gracious — concepts that are just the opposite of Greek and Roman notions of ‘giving and receiving.’ In Greco-Roman tradition, a gift set off a chain of reciprocity and, in general, would only gifts to achieve personal honor, and only to those one thinks can in some way reciprocate (at least with votes or vocal support, if not monetarily). (Witherington & Hands)

Nomination — The leaders of the church asked the congregation to nominate seven qualified men whom the apostles would officially appoint. Many churches today take this approach in selecting secondary church leaders, basing their practice on this model. For example, the congregation nominates deacons, and the elders appoint some or all of them. This approach was common in Judaism; it was not a new plan that the apostles devised, though it was new to the church. “Selecting seven men may go back to the tradition in Jewish communities where seven respected men managed the public business in an official council.” (Constable & Toussaint)

### People

The Seven — The list of the seven in verse five includes only men with Greek names, which is surely no accident. This seems to suggest that the community as a whole, in order to avoid even the appearance of favoritism, named mostly, if not exclusively, Greek-speaking Jewish Christians to administer the food distribution. The first two mentioned, Stephen (said to be a man full of faith and the Holy Spirit) and Philip, Luke knows a good deal more about, but apparently he knows little or nothing about the rest. (Witherington) “Stephen and Philip appear later in Acts in important roles as apologist and evangelist respectively. Luke did not mention Prochorus, Nicanor, Timon, and Parmenas again. Nicolas was a Gentile who had become a Jew by the proselyte process and then became a Christian. He came from Antioch of Syria, which Luke may have mentioned because of Antioch’s later prominence as a center of Christianity. Traditionally, Antioch was Luke’s hometown. Tradition also links this Nicolas with the doctrine of the Nicolaitans (Rev. 2:6, 15), but this connection is questionable since there is no solid evidence to support it. Many Jews lived in Syria because of its proximity to Judea, and most of these lived in the city of Antioch.” (Constable & Levinskaya)

### Key Ideas

Wait tables — *διακονέω* (*diakoneó*) literally means, “kicking up dust” because you are “on the move.” It also means caring for the needs of others as the Lord guides in an active, practical way. We understand this word to mean “wait on tables” as per the context of this passage. “Serving tables probably involved the organization and administration of ministry to the widows rather than simply serving as waiters or dispensers.” (Constable) “It is not necessarily suggested that serving tables is on a lower level than prayer and teaching; the point is rather that the task to which the Twelve had been specifically called was one of witness and evangelism. (Marshall) If the Seven were assigned the task of waiting on tables, then the Twelve according to v. 4 would be able to devote themselves completely to prayer and the serving (*diakoneó*) of the word. Both the ministries are seen as forms of public religious service, or as they would be called in the Greek world, liturgies.

### Possible Discussion Points

This passage paints a beautiful picture of the empowerment among people, especially minorities and outsiders. The Hebraic Jews might have had the mindset to ostracize the Hellenized Jews before they knew Jesus. However, now they know Jesus, and as a problem arises that is affecting someone of their own culture, the apostles empowered them to take ownership and see the solution through. Where do we stand with empowering people, and sending them to problem-solve and see justice done in their own culture and/or context?

James says, “Religion that God our Father accepts as pure and faultless is this: to look after orphans and widows in their distress and to keep oneself from being polluted by the world.” This story is a beautiful picture of the concern for the marginalized. When do we find ourselves among the marginalized and working toward a solution for them?

It could have been very simple for the Seven to compare their ministry (the waiting of tables) to the ministry of the Twelve (teaching and preaching), yet they didn’t. In what aspects of your life do you find yourself comparing yourself to others and their lives?