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Tasting the Reign of God: The Meal Ministry of Jesus and its Implications for Christian Worship and Life

THIS ESSAY WILL PROCEED in four sections of diminishing length. First, with the help of social history and anthropology, I will explore Greco-Roman and Jewish meal customs in the first century C.E., asking who ate what with whom; when and how they did so; and what it meant to them. Second, with the assistance of historical-critical biblical study, I will examine the meals associated with Jesus of Nazareth, posing the same questions, to discover what his meal ministry might have signified. Third, with the aid of liturgical theology, I will suggest how Jesus' meal ministry founds and critiques contemporary Christian worship, with a concentration on Roman Rite Eucharist. Finally, with the guidance of liturgical spirituality, I will propose ways in which sharing the Lord's Table at Eucharist exemplifies and challenges Christian life.

1. "You are what you eat"

Historical and Social-Scientific Perspectives on Ancient Meals

Human consumption of food and drink involves both biological and socio-cultural elements. Mirroring this insight, the German language distinguishes between *essen* and *fressen* as verbs for nourishment. *Essen* denotes the nourishment habits of human animals and could be translated "to dine," while *fressen* characterizes the nourishment habits of other animals and could be translated "to graze." While both human hostesses and healthy halibut ingest vitamins, proteins, fats, and carbohydrates to stay alive, the finned animal doesn't worry about who to invite to the dinner party, who among the guests is vegetarian, what color the table-flowers should be, and how much the caviar will cost; the frocked animal does that. Hostesses *ess*; halibut *fress*.

Since human eating demonstrates distinctively human characteristics, both social

historians and cultural anthropologists find it a fertile field for study. The ways in which food production, distribution, commerce, and consumption change over time, as well as the customs by which humans feed at table, tatami, or tent, fascinate social historians.¹ These historians trace some of the power relations among individuals, societies, and cultures by chronicling who ate what with whom, where and why. Sociologists² and cultural anthropologists,³ in turn, posit that human meal practices can be understood as a kind of language system, articulating various dimensions of social organization in a given culture. Deciphering meals discloses both social systems and cultural worldviews.

Now let me give some examples to illustrate these rather abstract ideas. First, one can explore who eats with whom in a given culture. It's not for no reason that a major focus of the United States civil rights movement in the 1960s was the integration of public eating-places. At that time southern U.S. culture treated blacks who dared to sit at the "whites only" lunch counter at their local Woolworth's with sanctions ranging from verbal abuse and spitting, through beatings and expulsion from town, to lynching. Taking a place at the public table clearly involved something more than simple nourishment for these integrationists; it symbolized and embodied the radical equality of all American citizens regardless of race. As twenty-first century First Worlders we might be amused by the Victorian custom of having men conclude their meal by moving to the study for brandy and cigars while the women repair to the drawing room for sweets and gossip, but any female executive can attest to the gender-coded status games at the typical "power breakfast" or "deal-closing" steak supper.

Next, one might investigate what occasions call for what type of dining in a given culture. Working-class Americans tend to seek three square meals a day while yuppies seem to prefer power snacks and tapas bars. Life's milestones all seem to call for a heightened dining experience: the family buffet spread at baptism or bris, the romantic restaurant picked for prom, the retirement bash with cash bar and formal speeches, the deluge of casseroles and covered dishes that show up at the homes of relatives of the recently deceased. Each social event carries its own sense of propriety: a stag dinner at Hooters probably wouldn't raise many eyebrows, but taking one's prospective in-laws there might

scuttle the potential marriage.

Third, one can consider how a culture categorizes solid foodstuffs as edible or inedible, liquid foodstuffs as potable or non-potable. In a classroom thought-experiment I share with my undergraduates, I ask them to characterize their preferred diets. Rib-eyes, T-bones, sirloin steaks and hamburgers are all categorized as edible; even strict vegetarians concede that these meats can be eaten, although they might choose to forgo eating them. More "exotic" foods, such as frogs' legs, horseflesh, sweetbreads, and sushi, are categorized as edible, but on the boundary. When I mention a Middle Eastern lamb's eye hors d'oeuvres, Scottish haggis (a dish of oatmeal cooked in a sheep's stomach), Polish duck-blood soup, or Indonesian monkey-brain dessert, the class begins to make vomiting noises; clearly these foods are perceived to be inedible. Interestingly, cultural categorization of edible and inedible foods may spill over into cultural judgments about the people who eat them: "barbarians" feast on roast grubs, while "sophisticates" consume steak tartare. Linguistic euphemisms exhibit these categorizations, as well: I doubt that many of you would want to tuck in to a morning repast of desiccated hog gristle combined with congealed chicken embryos, unless it's called "bacon and eggs."

Fourth, one might examine how the culturally categorized edible foodstuffs and potable liquids are prepared, arranged, matched, displayed, consumed, and preserved in the ritual structure we call a meal. The proverbial expression "from soup to nuts" hints at a meal structure with which we English-speakers might be most familiar. Italian menus present *antipasti* (snacks served "before the pastas"), *primi piatti* ("first plates" usually of pasta, rice, or soup), *secondi piatti* ("second plates" of meat or fish accompanied by vegetables and/or salad), *dolci* ("sweets," such as fruit, cheeses, or pastries), all medicated by the concluding *digestivi*—alcoholic beverages designed to settle the stomach. There are elaborate rules about which foods are eaten at which times of day (as anyone who has faced a Japanese breakfast of pickles and fish flakes has discovered), which foods are eaten in which order (as anyone who has attempted to drink the finger bowl presented after a sticky course can attest), and which liquids are eaten with which foods (as anyone who has ordered a Diet Coke to accompany pâté de foie gras can aver). Of course these

ritual niceties can only be developed when cultures move from a cuisine of subsistence to a cuisine of abundance.

Fifth, one might investigate the social lore associated with eating. The combination of mythic initiation and social enculturation is well-illustrated for me by my Polish grandmother's celebration of Thanksgiving. When I inquired why we ate roast turkey, ham, sweet potatoes, and pumpkin pie on the fourth Thursday of November, Grandma told me that it was because "our Pilgrim forefathers ate these foods with the Indians as a sign that we should all live in peace and harmony, helping each other." This explanation bewildered me as a child since I knew that Grandma and Grandpa Narog had come to the United States around the time of the First World War, that they had no "Pilgrim forefathers," and that the only Native Americans with whom they had had contact inhabited the silver screen. Not only that, her statement still didn't explain why we also ate Polish sausage and pirogi at our Thanksgiving meal.

But, upon mature reflection, I decided that keeping the American Thanksgiving feast with the rustic foods of seventeenth-century European immigrants positioned twentieth-century European immigrants in a larger story: the "American dream" of religious liberty, civil tolerance, and economic betterment.

1.1. Greco-Roman Meals from the 1st Century B.C.E. to the 1st Century C.E. ⁴

We turn now to an examination of the eating patterns in the Greco-Roman and Jewish worlds of Jesus' day, presuming that he and his early followers as Galilean Jews would have been shaped in their meal practices by these cultural structures. We are immediately confronted with problems of data and interpretation. Non-written data for reconstructing these practices include examination of deposits of seeds and animal bones close to eating sites, archeological recovery of dining vessels and rooms, and pictorial representations of ancient meals in wall paintings, reliefs, mosaics, etc. Written data are gleaned from cookbooks and treatises on meal etiquette as well as from incidental remarks in diaries, dramas, parables, and poetry.

Interpreting these data is problematic since they may represent the practices of social

elites rather than commoners, idealized rather than actual dining experiences, and/or customs deriving from diverse places and times. Acknowledging these difficulties, there is still much that can be discovered about Greco-Roman and Jewish meals celebrated in the first centuries B.C.E. and C.E.

1.1.1. Who ate and drank with whom?

The primary and most frequent dining group for any individual would be the members of one's household, but since Greek and Roman households were structured quite differently from contemporary United States households we need to indicate more carefully who shared the household table. To quote the noted social historian, Florence Dupont:

Family in its Latin sense, *familia*, covered every member of the household subject to the power of the father of the family, the *paterfamilias*: children, slaves, and sometimes (depending on the type of marriage she had contracted) the wife. A house consisted of a family and a father, joined together in the veneration of the *lar familiaris*.... The model family assembled under one roof three generations of men all of whom remained subject to the authority of the great-grandfather. Upon his death, the family would split into as many new families as there were men of the subsequent generation. Ideally a house was inhabited by all the sons, grandsons, and great-grandsons, along with their wives, of a common surviving progenitor.⁵

Households had their own set of feasts, especially marking birthdays of family members.

Second, beyond the familial household one might dine with the other members of one's district, class or *collegium*. One dined with others of the same social origins: freeborn Romans, for example, did not normally dine with former slaves. The heads of the aristocracy invited other aristocrats to a banquet each year at the time of the Games of the Great Mother. Priests' colleges dined together each time they met to officiate or to welcome a new member.

Third, one might dine on the occasion of a state-sanctioned festival. The Roman calendar distinguished between a working day (called *dies profestus*) and a feast day (called *dies festus*). The latter was a public holiday celebrated by the entire populace in honor of a particular god; no work was to be done on a feast day, since they were considered

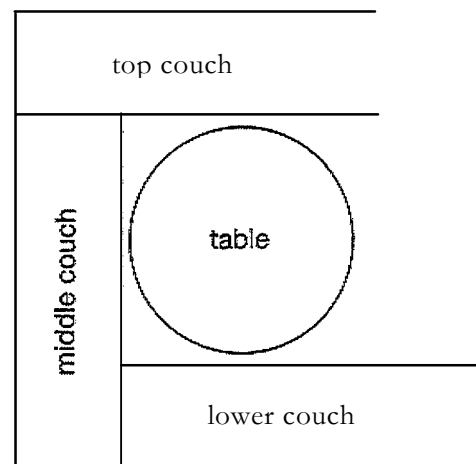
"unlucky" (*nefasti*). With prayers and sacrifices as enticement, the god or goddess was invited to mingle with the worshipers as they shared a common table.

1.1.2. When and where did they eat and drink?

Determining when Greco-Roman households ate is problematic, since most of our information deals with festive meals, normally beginning between three and four in the afternoon and lasting through sunset into nightfall. Greek terminology for meals includes: the *ariston* (a breakfast taken after sunrise or a light lunch), the *deipnon* (a main meal, originally taken at midday, but gradually repositioned to the evening), the *dorpon* (a light evening supper taken when the *deipnon* was eaten at midday), and the *akratisma* (breakfast proper, introduced when the *ariston* became a light lunch). A *symposion* was a drinking party succeeding a *deipnon* held in the evening.

Roman terminology paralleled this Greek system. Soon after rising, one might eat one's *ientaculum* (a tiny breakfast, often consisting of a single piece of bread). The main meal—a *cena*—was originally eaten at midday, but eventually came to be repositioned at the evening. The original light evening meal was called *vesperna*. When the main meal was instead taken in the evening, a light lunch called *prandium* was eaten at midday. The Latin parallel to the Greek *symposion* was a *convivium*, although the term could be used to refer to the complex of yoked main meal and drinking party.

Meals in Greco-Roman households of enough means to afford them were taken in separate dining rooms, either found within the family dwelling, established in a garden setting, or hired at an inn or temple. There were two fundamental arrangements. The first and more common consisted of an irregular number of couches made of wood or stone, provided with cushions and draperies for comfort and concealment. The couches were normally arranged on three sides of a central couch forming a U-shape with one side left open for serving food and drink and giving visual access to entertainment.



So common was this arrangement that the usual name for a Roman dining room was *triclinium* or "three-couch room," even though rooms of seven or eleven couches were not uncommon. Each couch could comfortably hold three male diners who reclined for the meal, propping themselves up by their left elbows and using their right hands to convey their nourishment from small portable tables placed before each couch. Female and child diners did not recline at Greek festive meals, but sat at the end of the men's couches, on chairs, or on benches; that high-ranking women might recline with men at Roman festive meals was considered scandalous by the Greeks.

A second dining arrangement employed a large semi-circular couch called the *stibadium* on which diners reclined before a D-shaped table. Each *stibadium* would normally hold seven guests, although the number could range from five to nine. The *stibadium* arrangement probably arose from informal garden dining where there was less concern for hierarchy and protocol, especially since the number of diners guaranteed a more intimate gathering than the *triclinium* arrangement.

Although reclining at table was the normal posture for male elites at festive meals, most people ate seated at table. For lower-status persons reclining at table indicated status elevation, while elites might signal proletarian sympathies by sitting to eat.

1.1.3. What did they eat and drink?

English-language groups tend to categorize edible food and drink as liquids or solids, although a mediating category of semi-solids for food like yogurt or oatmeal might also appear. Although Greco-Roman culture also used these categories, it was more likely to categorize nourishment as "staples," "relishes," or "drinks."

Staples were cereal grains, primarily wheat and barley. Wheat was the preferred staple, ground into flour and formed into leavened or unleavened loaves, but it also appeared as a paste ("pasta"). Barley was less preferred, usually formed into biscuits or wafers. Legumes such as lentils, chickpeas, and fava beans were sometimes ground to make flour and were sometimes dried and cooked like vegetables.

Relishes provided flavoring for the staples. Fresh and dried fruits marked the cuisine of various regions. Figs, dates, grapes, apples, plums, pears, quinces, and pomegranates were known in varying proportions throughout the Mediterranean basin. Of the vegetables, olives were probably the most important, eaten fresh, pickled, or made into oil, which served both as a cooking medium and a sauce. Other fresh and dried vegetables included brassicas (like cabbage), root vegetables (like carrots), leafy greens (like lettuces), and cucurbits (such as squash). Onions and garlic were probably the most common vegetable relishes.

The usual drinks of the ancient Greco-Roman culture were water and wine. Water was probably the normal drink for most people, especially in larger cities where the Roman system of aqueducts made access to water common. Contrary to popular opinion, wine was not a luxury item, but affordable by all but the most destitute in Roman society. However, the methods of production and standards of preservation and flavor familiar to twenty-first century First Worlders should not be retrojected into the first century. The best wine (*vinum*) was reserved for the wealthy; it could be flavored with herbs and honey. The middle classes frequently drank an "afterwine" (*lora*) made by mixing the residue remaining after the first pressing of the grapes with water. The poorer classes drank "wines" notable for their sour character, concoctions created by mixing grape pulp with vinegar and/or salt water as preservatives. (The varying qualities of wine may be a reason for the varying types of symbolism associated with wine: from paradisaical inebriation to the dregs of the cup of God's wrath.) Though such liquids as milk and beer were known, they were culturally assigned to special groups: infants in the case of milk and barbarians in the case of beer.

Note that neither fish nor meat has been mentioned. That is because these foods were rarely accessible to the poorer classes and only occasionally to the middle classes. Not only were fish and meat not daily "staples," they were associated with cuisine of sacrifice employed in *collegia* and state-sanctioned meals.

Perhaps the most important conclusion to draw from this consideration of what Greeks

and Romans ate and drank is that a meal could consist simply of bread (the staple) and water or wine (the drink); one added relishes to this foundational meal as inclination or finances allowed.

1.1.4. How did they structure their eating and drinking?

As mentioned above, Greco-Roman festive meals occurred in two major segments: the *deipnorn/cena* or meal proper, and the *symposion/convivium* or post-meal drinking party. The main meal tended to fall into three segments: the *gustatio* (hors d'oeuvres), the *prima mensa* ("main course"), and *secunda mensa* ("dessert"). The Latin proverb *ab ovo usque ad mala* ("from the egg to the apples") reflects this festive meal structure.

Unlike contemporary customs of providing "finger foods" to accompany alcoholic aperitifs before calling guests to the table, Greco-Roman hors d'oeuvres were served at table and might include olives, eggs, celery, herbs, lettuce, and small song-birds. From our point of view these tasty morsels seem an odd mixture of salad, salt, and savory, but like contemporary hors d'oeuvres, they served to stave off hunger and prepare the palate for the main course to come.

The norm for the main course at a festive meal, usually entitled the *prima mensa* or "first table," was three entrees or casseroles and two roasts accompanied by various relishes. A particularly splendid course, such as roast suckling pig, was termed the *caput cenae* ("head of the meal").

Dessert was called *secunda mensa* or the "second table" because the tables used for the hors d'oeuvres and main course were removed (or at least wiped down) so that fruits, nuts, and/or cheeses might be offered to the diners. When dessert was concluded, the tables were removed or tucked underneath the couches, the guests washed their hands and utensils, servants swept the floors, and any women or children present (unless they were part of the after-dinner entertainment) departed. Those remaining donned perfumes and wreaths thoughtfully provided by their host as they prepared for the drinking party to follow.

The ensuing *symposion/convivium* developed an elaborate social lore. Though guests at the *symposium* stretched beyond blood kin, the language of family bonds was used to describe their relationship. Far from being considered a drunken blast, the educational aspect of the *symposium* was emphasized, so much so that older male children were considered appropriate attendees.

The *symposium* had its own ritual structure. First the *symposiarch*, the "master of the revels," poured wine from the storage vessel into a mixing vessel called a *krater* and diluted it with cold or warm water in common proportions of five parts water to two parts wine or three parts water to one part wine. The normal festive meal would include at least three *kraters*, but as many as ten are recorded.

The *symposiarch* then offered a short prayer dedicating the *krater* to the appropriate god. Plutarch asserts that the normal three *kraters* should be dedicated to the Olympian deities, to heroes, and to Zeus the Savior in turn. An example of one of these short and formulaic prayers appears in one of Menander's plays (late 4th century B.C.E.): "For this [offering], grant us safety, health, and many blessings; and for all of us here, enjoyment in the good things before us."⁶

All the *symposiasts* offered a libation by spilling a small amount of the mixed wine-and-water from a shallow saucer onto the ground before them to signify communion with the gods or heroes honored.

Entertainment during the drinking party ranged from philosophical speculation, dramatic recitations, and hymn singing, through the telling of jokes and riddles and the playing of communal games, to festivities of a more orgiastic and erotic character. The conclusion of the *symposium* might involve burning incense for ritual purification, further prayers, and a concluding libation accompanied by a traditional hymn to the goddess of health:

Health, most honored of the blessed ones, may I dwell with you for the rest of my life, and may you be gracious to me and live with me. For, if there is any joy in wealth or children or kingly power that makes humans

godlike, or in the passions we pursue with Aphrodite's secret nets, or if any other divine delight or surcease of toil has been revealed to humankind, it is by you, blessed Health, that everything thrives and shines in converse with the graces. Apart from you, no one is blessed.⁷

Hand-washings, shared wishes, and fond embraces marked the guests' departure at the conclusion of the *symposium*.

1.1.5. What did they think their eating and drinking meant?

As the foregoing descriptions suggest, it would be difficult to find a single meaning for communal dining held by all Greeks and Romans in this era. It would be safe to say, however, that dining held powerful connotations of communion and conversation for them. Bonds of fellowship among humans of the same or differing social classes and between humans and their gods were forged and expressed in common eating and drinking.

1.2. Jewish meals from the 1st Century B.C.E. to the 1st Century C.E.⁸

Reconstructing ancient Jewish meal patterns involves many of the same problems as those noted for Greco-Roman meals. Contemporary scripture scholarship has established, however, that the earlier conceptualization of the Judaism of Jesus' day being hermetically sealed off from Greco-Roman cultural patterns is not faithful to the data. Not only was Galilean Judaism strongly influenced by Hellenistic patterns, Judean Judaism also absorbed many Greco-Roman patterns. The Judaism of Jesus' day was hardly monolithic, being composed of competing movements or sects, such as the Pharisees, Sadducees, Herodians, Zealots, Essenes, and Therapeutae, in addition to the *am-ha-aretz*, the largely undocumented "people of the land" who made up the numerical majority of first-century Jews.

Nevertheless we have both written and non-written remains which can give us some hints about the distinctive character of at least some Jewish meal practices during the time of Christ.

1.2.1. Who ate and drank with whom?

Like Greeks and Romans, Jews would most frequently eat with the members of their own familial households. Unlike Greeks and Romans, however, Jews found dining with other social groups and at state-sanctioned festivals problematic. Unless the social groups consisted entirely of Jews (and Jews who shared common understandings of purity at that), sharing a common table was out of the question. Dining at the state-sanctioned festivals would not only involve sharing food and drink with gentiles, but would also involve Jews in idolatry, since the food consumed would have been formally offered in sacrifice to one of the pagan pantheon of gods and goddesses.

Even determining which of their co-religionists to eat with was problematic for Jews of this era. Rules of commensality mirrored the sectarian structure of first-century Judaism. Deciding who could eat with whom was a life-and-death matter. Gillian Feeley-Harnick summarizes the situation well:

It was logical...that Jewish sectarians would choose to express and maintain their doctrinal differences through food. Although the details of their disputes with one another are sometimes obscure..., it is clear that they ate very different meals. The Sadducees seem to have been associated with the Jerusalem temple and its sacrificial observances, organized by the priests around the altar. But throughout Israelite history the prophets had railed at the priests for "despising the table of the Lord" with their improper offerings....

One alternative was the fasting traditionally associated with prophets.... The Essenes...removed the table of the Lord to its place of origin in the desert.... Although their meal seems to have had eschatological significance, like the meals of the temple priests and the Baptists..., it was organized very differently. The altar of the community was their own dinner table. The sacrifice was their own food, consumed daily under circumstances designed to ensure perfect purity.... Although... dietary rules were enjoined on all Israelites, the Pharisees seem to have been primarily associated with their elaboration.... Where they seem to have differed most was in the inclusiveness of their community. Every Jew, every Jewish home, every Jewish table, possessed the sanctity of the priest, the temple, and the great altar, provided Levitical laws of cleanliness were observed....

In practice, the Pharisees still seem to have distinguished themselves not only from the temple priesthood and isolationists like the Essenes and the Baptists, but also from the *am ha-are[t]z* who, because of their indisposition to learning[,] were virtually gentiles. Even at their most

inclusive, the dietary rules distinguished Jews from gentiles.... Pious Jews refused to eat gentile food as they refused to eat with gentiles, for both were taken as a sign and means of assimilation to the gentile way of life.⁹

1.2.2. When and where did they eat and drink?

We have far less information for the non-festive meals eaten by ancient Jews than we do for those of ancient Greeks and Romans. Most of our data concerns Jewish festive meals: the domestic meal initiating and concluding the Sabbath, the new moon festivals involving special sacrifices (and therefore a change in dining patterns), the pilgrimage festivals of Passover/Unleavened Bread (associated with roast lamb and unleavened barley bread), Weeks (associated with the wheat harvest), and Booths (associated with the ingathering of produce, especially grapes and new wine), the tribe or clan festivals at particular sanctuaries (e.g., Shiloh), and the occasional public ceremonies involving feasting: at the dedication of sanctuaries, when crowning kings, while marking military victories, etc.

Unlike the Greco-Roman pattern of three meals a day, with the main meal taken either at midday or in the evening, the ancient Israelite pattern was of two meals a day, a light meal in late morning or at midday and a more substantial meal in the evening around sunset.

We also have less information about the places in which ancient Jews dined than we do for Greco-Roman culture. Archeological excavations in Eretz Israel and its environs have unearthed dining rooms in domestic architecture and banqueting halls in larger public buildings, whether temple, sanctuary, or synagogue. Most probably in ordinary homes meals were served on a mat laid upon the floor; those dining would squat around the mat. However, what evidence we have suggests that Greco-Roman dining arrangements of *triclinia* and *stibadia* were widespread among wealthier Jews in the era under investigation.

1.2.3. What did they eat and drink?

The normal diet for Jews in Eretz Israel had bread as the chief staple; in fact, so important was bread in the Jewish diet that the Hebrew word for bread (*lekhem*) can refer not only to food made from milled and baked grain, but can also stand for food in general, meat

offered in sacrifice, and manna, the "bread from heaven." Other staples included cooked or parched grain (wheat, barley, millet), cheese and curds (primarily from goats' milk), figs or fig cakes, grapes and raisins, dates, olives, wild honey, beans and lentils, melons, and cucumbers. Onions, leeks, and garlic supplied seasoning; olive oil was used for cooking. Poultry and eggs became common only relatively late in this era. Perhaps surprisingly, considering the topography of Eretz Israel, fish was a common food for Jews in Jesus' day. Except among the wealthy, meat eating was not common, being reserved almost exclusively for special occasions or sacrifices. When meat was eaten, sheep and goats were the main sources, with the tail of the sheep being considered a special delicacy. Wine and water were the normal drinks; beer was shunned as a reminder of the presumed diet of Israelite slaves in the work crews of Egypt.

The most important thing to remember about Jewish eating and drinking is the detailed list of which things may or may not be eaten, alone or with other food/drink, as found, e.g., in Leviticus 11 and Deuteronomy 14. Passages like Deuteronomy 12:23, Genesis 9:4, and Leviticus 17:14 stress that blood must be entirely drained from meat if it is to be eaten, for "the blood is the life" and therefore sacred to God.

1.2.4. How did they structure their eating and drinking?

Jewish daily domestic meals opened and closed with particular prayer-forms called *berakoth*. A freestanding *berakah* begins with the stereotyped phrase: "Barukh atah Adonai Elohenu melek ha-olam" ("Blessed are you, LORD our God, Sovereign of the Universe"). It then offers reasons for a prayerful acknowledgement of God: God's attributes, God's actions in history, God's evidences of favor. The *berakah* normally ends with a shortened reprise of the opening praise. When individual *berakoth* were yoked in a series, the stereotyped opening appeared only before the first *berakah* in the chain.

The short *berakah* recited at the beginning of the meal was called the "birkat ha-motzi," the "benediction of that which makes to go out:" "Blessed are you, O Lord our God, King of the universe, who brings forth bread from the earth."

The lengthier and more important *berakoth* recited at the end of the meal, titled the "birkat

ha-mazon," grafted Jewish dining explicitly into a Jewish religious worldview. The first *berakah* in the series, the "Birkat hazan" ("Benediction for food") praises God for the *lekhem* that nourishes humankind but situates its blessing in the context of God's provident care for all creatures. The second *berakah*, the "Birkat ha-aretz" ("Benediction for the land") thanks God for God's unique relationship with his people the Jews forged in history, covenant, and Torah. The third in this series, the "Boneh Jerushalaim" ("You who rebuild Jerusalem"), petitions that God might fulfill the covenant promises made to his people, showing mercy to Israel, Jerusalem, and Zion. Thus, at every main daily meal, observant Jews would yoke the present (blessing for what sustains life), the past (thanksgiving for covenant promises), and the future (petition for restoration and fulfillment) into the on-going story of their relationship with the God who "spreads the table before them in the sight of their foes."

We know almost nothing about the structuring of the Shabbat and New Moon meals in Jesus' day. Most scholarly research has examined the history and structure of the Passover Seder (the word itself means "order") with some attention directed to the institution of the *chavurah* meal. Scholars seem to have reached the consensus that the Passover Seder is almost certainly a rabbinic adaptation of the symposium structure, while *chavurot* dined in social groupings parallel to Roman *collegia*. As the leading Jewish liturgist Lawrence A. Hoffman summarizes:

The seder is a rabbinic symposium, its topic of discourse being the Exodus.... As we now have it, the seder looks less like a symposium than we might expect—the meal occurs at the end of the proceedings, rather than at the beginning, for instance. But the origin of the seder in the tableship rites of late antiquity is rather firmly established.... Spirituality at meals is crucial elsewhere, especially within the institution known as a *chavurah* (pl. *chavurot*).... A whole chapter (chapter 8) of *B'rakhot* (the Mishnah's tractate on prayer) is devoted to mealtime matters debated by Hillelites and Shammanites, the two rabbinic schools of thought that dominated the first century, and two more of its chapters (chapters 6 and 7) provide detail regarding table-blessings before and after eating.... Table prayer was obviously central to rabbinic religion, and the seder was a particular example of table prayer. The *chavurah* was the milieu in which table prayer proceeded....¹⁰

According to Joseph Tabory's reconstruction of the earliest stratum of the Passover Seder

in chapter 8 of the Mishnah,¹¹ the Seder meal consists of an initial *berakah* blessing the feast day, offered over the first cup of wine. Then the major foodstuffs of the meal are brought to the head of the household: lettuce and fruit, as might appear at any meal, but unleavened bread and roast lamb, as a mark of the unique character of the paschal meal. Sharing a second cup of wine leads to a homiletic reflection on a biblical creed-narrative. The meal proper concludes with a third cup of wine, followed by a prayer closing the meal and opening what would have been a *symposion/convivium*. The fourth cup of wine is positioned within the *symposion*, during which psalms of praise are sung and a blessing recited. In contrast to the distinct separation found in the Greco-Roman festive meal between the meal proper (with its emphasis on slaking hunger and thirst) and the drinking party (with its overtones of education and entertainment), the Passover Seder interweaves eating, drinking, prayer, common singing, and uplifting reflection in the course of the meal.

1.2.5. What did they think their meals meant?

As for the Greeks and Romans, meals for the Jews of Jesus' day were much more than obligatory pauses for nutrition and hydration. Eating and drinking together bound participants to one another by quasi-kinship ties and mutual obligation. Covenants established between persons, states, and God-and-the-Jewish people all employed meal symbolism. Among Jewish sectarians, meals bore special meanings as identification rituals and statements of eschatological longing. Both Greco-Roman and Jewish meal patterns will be confirmed, contested, transformed, and re-interpreted by the meal practices of Jesus of Nazareth.

2. "Dining in the Kingdom of God:" The Meal Ministry of Jesus of Nazareth¹²

There are significant difficulties in determining the meal practices of Jesus of Nazareth. We have no non-written data whatsoever: no food remains definitely associated with Jesus and his first-century followers, no dining and drinking vessels touched by their hands (although the legends of the Holy Grail bespeak an interest in finding such a vessel), no dining areas incontestably established for Jesus' use (although legendary sites such as the houses of Peter, Martha and Mary, and the Upper Room in Jerusalem all are shown to present-day pilgrims), and no visual representations contemporary with the

historical Jesus. Therefore, we must rely completely on written records: for our purposes, the New Testament.

But there are problems in using New Testament documents as historical records. Contemporary Catholic scripture scholarship agrees that these documents have been shaped by the literary traditions, cultural presuppositions, and faith expressions of their generating human authors and communities; they do not present us with a neutral set of snapshots of what took place nearly two millennia ago. Nevertheless, with appropriate precautions, we can use these documents to explore what the first two to three generations of Christians believed their founder and Lord to have said and done.

What becomes immediately apparent from examining the canonical scriptures is how frequently Jesus is portrayed at table—eating, drinking, and discoursing. References to food and drink, to meals and dining abound in his parables and teaching. A saying contrasting John the Baptizer as one of ascetic eating and drinking patterns with Jesus as a glutton and drunkard (Matthew 11:18-19 and parallels) probably reflects a hostile contemporary judgment on his pattern of behavior.

Exploring such a massive amount of data would be impossible in the limits of this short essay. I will adopt Eugene LaVerdiere's division of scriptural data about Jesus' meal practices for my own exploration. LaVerdiere contrasts meals at the table of Jesus the prophet (Jesus' dining in Galilee and on the road to Jerusalem), the meal at the table of Jesus the Christ (what we call the Last Supper), and meals at the table of Jesus the Lord (meals shared by the Risen Christ with his followers). Although this framework was developed specifically for the Gospel of Luke, I find it easily adaptable for exploring the meals presented in the other Synoptics and, with some modifications, applicable to the Gospel of John as well. I will pose the five questions addressed earlier to ancient Greco-Roman and Jewish meals to the meals associated with Jesus the prophet, the Christ, and the Lord, to discover what may be distinctive about Jesus' meal ministry.¹³

2.1. With whom did Jesus eat and drink?

2.1.1. Jesus the prophet

Jesus the prophet consistently violated the strictures his culture had established about who could eat with whom. Remember that 1st century C.E. Jews had a rigidly structured social life. They would never attend state-sanctioned festival meals because that would involve eating food offered in sacrifice to pagan gods and/or goddesses, libation prayers offered to these pagan deities, and meat that had not been prepared according to the norm of kosher dietary laws. They could attend collegial dinners called *chavuroth*, but only with Jews who shared the same ideas of proper religious observance in dining. Thus fully initiated adult Jews would not dine with converts, such as proselytes and God-fearers. Sadducee Jews, members of the priestly aristocracy, ate with other Sadducees. Baptist Jews, sectarians calling for personal-repentance in the light of the impending fiery judgment, ate with other Baptists. Pharisee Jews, concerned about the careful observance of Torah (and therefore exceedingly interested in kosher regulations, proper ablutions before, during, and after meals, and prescribed prayer texts), ate with other Pharisees. Zealot Jews, who advocated the violent overthrow of the existing order, would never sit at table with Jews (like the Sadducees) who collaborated with the occupying Roman forces. Essenes and Therapeutae, quasi-monastic communities of Jews who shunned contact with those beyond their own communities, celebrated their communal meals to which members of the movements already mentioned would not be welcome.

Only the *am ha-aretz*, the laxly observant "people of the land" who made up the numerical majority of 1st-century Jews, could tolerate commensality with each other. Their tables would have been open to those in the other Jewish movements, but most of those sectarians would have preferred to starve rather than to grace the table of the "common rabble." So the portrait the New Testament offers of Jesus' table companions tells us something important about the reach of his ministry.

First of all, the New Testament hardly ever mentions Jesus dining with his blood kin. Mark 3:31-35 (Matthew 12:46-50; Luke 8:19-21) suggests that Jesus replaces the commensality established by blood relationships with a new table bond between himself

and his disciples, forged by a mutual commitment to the Reign of God as revealed in his person and preaching. Note that among the disciples who share Jesus' table are at least four members of the *am ha-aretz* (Peter, Andrew, James, John), a tax collecting collaborator with the hated Roman occupying force (Matthew/Levi), and Zealots (Simon, Judas Iscariot)—all Jews who would normally never share a common meal.

Regarding Jesus' dining habits with Jews other than his disciples, we do not have direct evidence for Jesus eating and drinking with Sadducees, Essenes, or Therapeutae. It is likely that Jesus had extensive contact with John the Baptizer's prophetic movement, which probably involved commensality. However Mark 2:18-22 (Matthew 9:14-15; Luke 5:33-39) presents a group of Baptists asking Jesus why his eating habits did not include the fasting characteristic of their own movement and that of the Pharisees.

The Gospel of Luke records three instances of Jesus being hosted at Pharisees' tables. At a dinner in the house of Simon the Pharisee (Luke 7:36-50), Jesus rebukes his host's judgmental stance toward a female disciple who bathes Jesus' feet with her tears, anoints them with oil, and wipes them with her hair; in John's Gospel this unnamed woman is identified as Mary of Bethany (John 12:3). At a noon meal in the house of an unnamed Pharisee (Luke 11:37-54), Jesus criticizes his host's ability to equate the demands of Torah with mere etiquette. Finally at a Sabbath meal in the home of a leading Pharisee (Luke 14:1-24), Jesus cures a man suffering from dropsy and justifies such Sabbath work, challenges the guests' inclination to seek favored status at table, and intimates that Kingdom hospitality involves table fellowship with those whom society marginalizes. Jesus enacts just such Kingdom table-fellowship when he dines with the *am ha-aretz*. He dares to dine at Levi's house (Matthew 9:10-11; Luke 5:29-32), thus establishing commensal bonds with "tax collectors and sinners," an action severely criticized by his Pharisee interlocutors. He invites himself as house—and therefore dinner—guest to Zacchaeus' *oikos* (Luke 19:1-10), a term that could stand for physical house, family, household, or stream of ancestry. The disapproval Jesus received for dining at Levi's house, that of a mere tax collector, is here magnified as Jesus associates himself with the chief tax collector of Jericho, a man who admits how much of his present wealth is the

result of shady business practices.

Perhaps the greatest examples of Jesus' indiscriminate dining pattern occur in the narratives of the multiplication of the loaves found in all four gospels (Matthew 14:14-21; Mark 6:31-44; Luke 9:10-17; John 6:1-13; Matthew 15:32-38; Mark 8:1-10): the bands of 5,000 and/or 4,000 men "in addition to women and children" who partake of the miraculous meal (with its overtones of God's care for the Jews during their post-Exodus desert wandering) do so without reference to sectarian status. Jesus encourages women to violate the gender-coded norms of proper dining when he commends Mary for choosing the "better part" as a disciple positioned at his feet rather than confining herself to kitchen and "details of hospitality" as does her sister Martha (Luke 10:38-42).

Finally, there are no unambiguous records of Jesus eating and drinking with non-Jews, but some intriguing interchanges suggest that he may have been willing to transgress this fiercely maintained socio-cultural boundary. When Jesus volunteers to enter a centurion's home (presumably Gentile and polytheist because of his status in the imperial army) in order to cure the centurion's servant, the centurion politely fends him off (Matthew 8:5-13; Luke 7:1-10; John 4:46-53). According to the usual New Testament pattern, the healing that Jesus brought the centurion's home would have demanded commensal hospitality from the centurion.

In an interchange with a Canaanite or Syro-Phoenician woman, Jesus seems to have his own cultural boundaries challenged (Mark 7:24-30; Matthew 15:21-28). When the presumably Gentile and polytheist woman importunes Jesus to cure her demon-possessed daughter, Jesus rebuffs her request with the statement: "Let the children be filled first, for it is not good to take the children's bread and throw it to the little dogs." Undaunted, the woman replies: "Yes, Lord, yet even the little dogs under the table eat from the children's crumbs." The woman's remark, which the gospels record Jesus approving for its insight, uses a commensal image to plead for a new relationship between Jews and non-Jews.

With characteristic insight and felicitous phrasing, Nathan Mitchell

summarizes the New Testament portrait of Jesus' table fellowship as follows:

He sat at table not as the charming, congenial, ringleted centerpiece of a Rembrandt painting, but as a vulnerable vagrant willing to share potluck with a household of strangers. Normally, a table's prime function is to establish social ranking and hierarchy (by what one eats, how one eats, with whom one eats). Normally, a meal is about social identification, status and power.... But the very randomness of Jesus' table habits challenged this system of social relations modeled on meals and manners.

It wasn't simply that Jesus ate with objectionable persons—outcasts and sinners—but that he ate with anyone, indiscriminately! Hence his reputation: He has no honor! He has no shame! For Jesus, healing (the gift he brings to a home) calls forth hospitality (those healed offer refreshment, food and drink, a place at the table).

The table companionship practiced by Jesus thus recreated the world, redrew all of society's maps and flow charts. Instead of symbolizing social rank and order, it blurred the distinctions between hosts and guests, need and plenty. Instead of reinforcing rules of etiquette, it subverted them, making the last first and the first last.¹⁴

2.1.2. Jesus the Christ

In contrast to the promiscuous table fellowship practiced by Jesus the prophet during his earthly ministry, Jesus the Christ, on the night before he died, shared a meal with a more restricted group of humans. Determining the attendees at the Last Supper is probably impossible since it is difficult to establish whether or not this evening meal was a Passover Seder (as presented in the Synoptics: Matthew 26:17-19; Mark 14:12-16; Luke 22:7-13) or a meal anticipating the Passover (as stated in John 13:1; 18:14). Traditionally Christians have assumed that the only people sharing Jesus' final meal were the Twelve, members of his inner circle of disciples symbolically constituting the new Israel. This would suggest that the Last Supper was a *chavurah* meal of some sort.

But if, in fact, the Last Supper was a Passover Seder, then, according to Philo, its 1st-century ritual format would have permitted the presence of women and children (over the age of twelve). It is just possible that "women who accompanied Jesus" emphasized in the Gospel of Luke may have attended the Last Supper.

In any event, it should be clear that the Last Supper contrasts with the dining practices of

prior periods in Jesus' life insofar as it restricts commensality to those who are specifically ranked among his disciples.

2.1.3. Jesus the Lord

The same restricted commensality appears in the meals shared by the Risen Lord. The breaking of bread on the road to Emmaus (Luke 24:13-35; cf. Mark 16:12) places Jesus at table with Cleopas and another unnamed disciple, possibly Simon or Cleopas' wife. Luke 24:36-53 (cf. Mark 16:14) records a later meal shared with "the Eleven and their companions" gathered in Jerusalem. John 21:1-13 recalls a breakfast of bread and grilled fish prepared by the Risen Lord for Simon Peter, Thomas, Nathanael, James, John, and two more unnamed disciples (among whom presumably was the Beloved Disciple) on the shore of the Sea of Galilee/Tiberius. In none of the post-resurrectional meals are the bonds of table fellowship extended beyond the group of Jesus' disciples.

2.2. When and where did they eat and drink?

2.2.1. Jesus the prophet

The New Testament does not comment on the daily eating and drinking shared between Jesus and his blood kin or initial followers. Most of the references simply indicate that Jesus "reclined at table" without giving a particular time of day, but if the technical Greek vocabulary for meals employed is any indication, Jesus eats and drinks both at midday (Luke 11:37) and/or in the evening (Luke 9:12; Luke 14). Though there is no mention of New Moon meals, the New Testament records Jesus sharing Sabbath (Luke 14:1) meals. If the witness of John's Gospel is to be trusted historically, Jesus would have dined with the Jerusalemite crowds at the great Pilgrimage festivals of Passover/Unleavened Bread (twice before the time of the Last Supper), Tabernacles, and possibly Pentecost (John 2:13, 5:1, 6:4, 7:2), as well as the feast of the Dedication of the Temple (John 10:22).

The places in which Jesus and his friends ate and drank likewise vary. Sometimes they eat in the open air, as in the narrative of Jesus' disciples nourishing themselves on grain left in fields already gleaned (Matthew 12:1-8; Mark 2:23-28; Luke 6:1-5). He apparently feels comfortable sharing commensality at a village wedding feast in Cana, probably held in the synagogal equivalent of a town hall (John 2:1-12). If the text of Mark 2:15-17 is

translated grammatically rather than contextually, Jesus himself owned a home and provided hospitality for others at least on one occasion. But as a rule, Jesus seems to have eaten in other peoples' homes: the houses of disciples, such as Peter (Matthew 8:14-15; Mark 1:29-34; Luke 4:40-41), Levi (Matthew 9:10-13; Luke 5:29-32), and Martha (Luke 10:38-42; cf. John 11:1-2); the establishment of the chief tax collector in Jericho (Luke 19:1-10); and the households of Simon and other unnamed Pharisees (Luke 7:36, 11:37, 14:1). In Greco-Roman terms, Jesus would have been considered a "parasite;" in Jewish terms, he was a vagrant.

2.2.2. Jesus the Christ

The Synoptic accounts of the Last Supper agree on locating the dinner in a room in Jerusalem (Matthew 26:17-19; Mark 14:12-16; Luke 22:7-13). Matthew's account presents the locale provided for Jesus and his band of followers by an anonymous donor chosen by Jesus; Mark's and Luke's account describe it as a large, upper room furnished with couches but suggest that the room was hired for the occasion. All accounts describe the Last Supper as an evening meal.

2.2.3. Jesus the Lord

The meals the Risen Lord shares with his disciples occur at a variety of times and places. Luke 24:29-30 presents a supper with Cleopas and his companion in the evening of the "first day of the week" on which the Resurrection occurred. In the Lucan narrative this supper is probably held indoors because all are seated at table; the narrative further declares that it was eaten in the evening. What is unclear is whether or not the location of the supper was a room at an inn on the way to Emmaus or actually in the home of Cleopas and his companion. (If one does not assimilate Mark 16:12-13 to the Lucan account of the supper on the road to Emmaus, one could also imagine Jesus' self-revelation in the open air and not necessarily connected with a meal.) The appended story in Luke 24:36-43 narrates an appearance by Jesus to "the Eleven and their companions" later the same evening as the supper in Emmaus; presumably the grilled fish shared with Jesus on that occasion was meant to be interpreted as a remnant from their evening meal. (The presumably parallel version of this story in Mark 16:14-18 states that the Eleven were reclining at table together when the Lord appeared to upbraid them, but does not say when

or where this meal took place.) The meal of bread and grilled fish shared between the Risen Lord and some disciples on the shore of the Sea of Tiberius in John 21:9-14 is held in the open air shortly after sunrise.

2.3. What did they eat and drink?

2.3.1. Jesus the prophet

While the New Testament records Jesus reclining at table in a variety of venues during his earthly ministry, it does not concentrate on the food and drink served at those meals. The narratives of the multiplication of the loaves and fishes mention these two comestibles but do not specifically state that Jesus himself consumed them. Nevertheless we presume that Jesus ate and drank whatever was set before him without regard for ritual purity. This presumption is supported by the instructions he gives to the Twelve (Matthew 10:1-16; Mark 6:7-13; Luke 9:1-6) and the Seventy/Seventy-Two (Luke 10:1-12) for their missionary journeys, as well as his comments that it is what comes out of human beings, not what goes in, that establishes their purity (and therefore their commensal status) (Mark 7:14-23; Matthew 15:10-20).

The only food mentioned in the Last Supper narratives is bread, and the only drink, wine (although it was probably mixed with water, since drinking unmixed wine was considered uncouth). Although other foodstuffs and drinks were probably present and consumed—roast lamb, salt water, fruit puree, leafy greens and bitter herbs, if the Last Supper was a Passover Seder—the scriptural authors are most interested in recording what was unusual about Jesus' treatment of the comestibles and potables that evening. They concentrate only on the texts transforming the meaning of the blessed-broken-and-shared bread and the blessed-poured-out-and-shared wine rather than providing a keepsake menu. Remember that in both Greco-Roman and Jewish cultures of Jesus' day, an entire meal could consist simply of bread and wine; this fundamental staple and most common potable appeared in the eating and drinking of slaves, freedmen, commoners, aristocrats, and the imperial family alike. Thus Jesus' transformation of the eating and drinking of these foundational elements does not bind the ritual to food and drink shared only by members of particular social classes.

2.3.3. Jesus the Lord

Perhaps surprisingly, the New Testament seems more concerned about the diet of the Risen Lord than his earlier nutrition and hydration patterns. While eating grilled fish may have symbolic import in these narratives, it is probably a narrative detail inserted to stress the reality of the bodily resurrection of Jesus for the reader.

2.4. How did they structure their eating and drinking?

2.4.1. Jesus the prophet

It may be surprising to discover just how often the symposium meal structure appears in the New Testament accounts of Jesus' dining. The meal in the/his/Levi's house (Matthew 9:10-19; Mark 2:13-14; Luke 5:29-32) provides an opportunity for Jesus to defend his dining and fasting habits against his Baptist interlocutors, much as a *symposiarch* might take the customs of the festival as a pretext for his philosophical remarks. The banquet in the house of Simon the Pharisee (Luke 7:36-50) also follows the *deipnon/symposion* framework. The sinful woman's gesture of bathing, drying, and anointing his feet as Jesus reclined at table may have been a remedy for the proper marks of hospitality omitted at the beginning of this particular *deipnon*, but also could be seen as part of the panoply of rituals beginning a *symposion*—here perfuming feet rather than hair.

In either case, Jesus acts as a *symposiarch* in remarking on the deeper meaning of a meal custom. This is likewise the case with the noon meal at the house of an unnamed Pharisee (Luke 11:37-50); here Jesus as *symposiarch* discourses on another meal custom—ritual washing before eating—as a challenge to Pharisaic piety. Finally at a Sabbath dinner in the home of a leading Pharisee (Luke 14:1-24), Jesus discourses on the healing he performs, giving a challenging message to the guests and his host alike, leading one of the guests to cry out: “Blessed is the one who will dine in the Kingdom of God!” If the multiplication of the loaves and fishes is considered historically factual, one would not imagine it fitting the structure of a Greco-Roman *deipnon/symposion*, yet Luke 9:14 does just that. Literally translated Jesus' command reads: “Have them recline on dining couches by fifties” (“*kataklinete autous klisias [osei] ana pentekonta*”). Jesus' actions of taking, blessing, breaking, and distributing the foods may then reflect a kind of *symposiarch's* symbolic discourse at an extremely large formal banquet.

2.4.2. Jesus the Christ

The Synoptic Gospels and 1 Corinthians present the Last Supper as a transformation of Jewish dining practices. I already have noted the difficulties involved in determining whether or not the Last Supper was a Passover Seder. There are similar difficulties involved in establishing whether a Haggadah that would have accompanied a Passover Seder shared by a group of Galileans, associated either as a joint household or a *chavurah*, in a furnished room in Jerusalem in the early decades of the first century C.E., and, if so, what it would have contained. At the very least the various bread and cup sayings enshrined in the Synoptics and 1 Corinthians connect Jesus' final meal to the feast of this Pilgrimage Festival.

John's gospel, however, presents the Last Supper on the *deipnon/symposion* model, even picking up some of the literary character of a symposium in which a dying *symposiarch* hands on his "last will and testament" to tablemates. Note that John 13:33-17:26 can be read as a lengthy discourse at the conclusion of the meal proper. At the very least, the foot washing described in John 13:2-11 followed by an explanation for the gesture given in response to the question "Do you know what I have done to you?" in John 13:12-20 bespeaks a classic symposium discourse.

2.4.3. Jesus the Lord

The meals with the Risen Lord are more varied in structure. In a certain sense the supper on the way to Emmaus (Luke 24:13-35) reverses the pattern: Jesus as *symposiarch* offers a lengthy discourse on the meaning of his own death "on the road" as he and his two companions approach Emmaus; he disappears before sharing in the meal proper. The appearance and discourse to the Eleven and their companions immediately after this as narrated in Luke 24:36-49 more easily fits the symposium pattern. Although Jesus does not share their *deipnon*, he appears for their *symposion*, manifesting his presence and discoursing on the meaning of his appearance in their midst. The strongest sense of a *deipnon/symposion* structure appears in John 21:9-23. It is specifically "after the meal" that Jesus enters into conversation with Simon Peter about his future ministry; this entire discourse could be read as a *symposiarch's* commentary on the rehabilitation offered Peter in re-established table fellowship.

2.5. What did they think their eating and drinking meant?

To summarize this lengthy examination of the dining patterns of Jesus the prophet, Jesus the Christ, and Jesus the Lord, I once again call on Nathan Mitchell's insights:

[I]t is no longer plausible to think of Jesus and his earliest companions as a bunch of country bumpkins who couldn't tell a baked squash from a roast leg of lamb. They were well aware of the way meals functioned both within Jewish family life and within the larger context of Hellenized Mediterranean culture. They understood the table's power to include or exclude, to create debts and obligations, to symbolize dominance and power. In short, they understood that to change dining habits was, quite literally, to change the world. For at table, everything that creates a world is present: economics, politics, the potential for rivalry and competition, bonds among friends, boundaries against enemies.... Jesus' table ministry was, in fact, a strategy for rebuilding human community on principles radically different from those of his surrounding social and religious culture—different from the ideology of honor and shame, of patrons, clients and brokers, of "us" against "them."¹⁵

3. "When We Eat This Bread and Drink This Cup:"

Implications for Christian Worship¹⁶

What implications does this investigation have for Christian Eucharistic worship in the twenty-first century? I believe each of the five questions posed in organizing the data about Jesus' eating and drinking practices presents challenges for contemporary celebrations of the Eucharist. For reasons of length and competence, I will limit my remarks to the Eucharist celebrated by Roman Rite Catholics, but perhaps similar issues may arise in the Eucharistic celebrations of other Christian communions.

3.1. Who eats and drinks with whom in Christian worship?

In responding to the question "Who eats and drinks with whom?" we noticed two different eating and drinking patterns in the meal ministry of Jesus. During the earthly ministry prior to the Last Supper, indiscriminate table fellowship seems a deliberate strategy by which Jesus symbolized and inaugurated his vision of radical human equality before God. This pattern stands in fierce judgment on any culture—secular or religious—which deliberately excludes certain classes or races of human beings from potential fellowship. All must have a place at the table. Yet the second pattern, exemplified by the Last Supper and the meals shared with the Risen Lord, restricts table fellowship to those who share Jesus' vision of life and commitment to the already-present-and-yet-to-come Reign of God. The Betrayer Judas abandons the table fellowship of the Last Supper, while

the Betrayer Peter is rehabilitated and welcomed back into discipleship at a breakfast on the shore of the Sea of Tiberius.

We have evidence that Christians of the first few centuries C.E. continued these two patterns of eating and drinking under differing names. The fellowship meal was called an *agape*.¹⁷ Who was welcome to attend the *agape* is unclear, but it seems a celebration of Christian *koinonia* wider in range than that of a formal Eucharist, marked by a minimum of hierarchical differentiation of roles. The meal shared between the Risen Lord and his committed followers was called a *eucharistia*. As far as we can tell, attendance at the *eucharistia* was limited to those who had been water-baptized; it was a sacramental evocation of the Lord's continued presence in the midst of his followers as they shared common eating and drinking in his Spirit. Relatively quickly however, the *agape* disappeared, leaving the Eucharistic meal to serve both functions. Over the centuries, churches have developed elaborate criteria for determining when, where, and for how long various categories of humans could share the Lord's Supper.

So, two issues seem to face Christians today with reference to their table fellowship: how do we enact Jesus the prophet's indiscriminate dining as a sign of the radical equality of all human beings and how do we enact Jesus Christ the Lord's restrictive dining as a sign of conversion to and discipleship in his way of life? I would first suggest re-establishing the *agape* meal as a frequent element in the repertoire of Christian behaviors. Preferably the *agape* would be a meal hosted by the Christian community for those of other or no faiths; at the very least it would be a meal shared by members of different Christian denominations who do not share formal Eucharist with one another.

Second, I think we need to re-commit ourselves to inter-denominational Eucharistic hospitality (i.e., what we used to call "inter-communion.") I find Kenan Osborne's remarks on this controversial topic both telling and credible:

In the Roman Catholic Church today there is indeed a regulation that Protestants cannot indiscriminately receive from the Catholic Eucharist; there is not "open Eucharist" on the part of the Roman Catholic Church. Theological reasons for this are difficult to sustain if mutual acceptance of

baptism is acknowledged. One can only say that this is an issue of Church law, but not of theological prohibition.¹⁸

Finally we also must reconsider the Eucharistic disciplines excluding members of a particular denomination from the Lord's Table because of issues such as marital status. Perhaps the Orthodox custom of offering *antidoron* (blessed bread) to those who, for whatever reason, consider themselves cut off from full Eucharistic communion, may provide a pastoral model for such reconsideration.

3.2. When and where do we eat and drink in Christian worship?

Historical studies have clarified the distinctively domestic character of primitive Christian Eucharists. This was not a ritual celebrated in the civic architecture of antiquity, whether at Greco-Roman or Jewish temples; it was celebrated at the cultural equivalent of the family table. Older historical studies posit that the Christian word service and table service, though yoked to form a single act of worship by mid-2nd century C.E., arose from different environments in Judaism: the Liturgy of the word from the Bible study carried on in the synagogue, the Liturgy of the Eucharist from the table prayers gracing Jewish daily, weekly, monthly, and yearly religious dining.

These historical considerations suggest two implications for contemporary Roman Catholic Eucharistic worship. First, without a grounding in domestic ritual, the stylized dining of the Eucharist will become less and less meaningful. If Christian households *fress* rather than *ess*, they cannot communicate to their members the deep human interchanges that take place at table. If Christian households do not regularly join in a common sharing of food and drink accompanied by conversation in all its danger and depth, the Lord's Table will hold little appeal. (I have sometimes wondered if there is a connection between our "fast food" culture and the desire to find 15-minute "no-frills" Masses.)

Second, common Christian practice prior to the Edict of Milan was for some of the consecrated elements to be brought into Christian households so that the members might commune themselves and their Christian housemates when no communal Eucharist was

celebrated. Parts of the First World are now experiencing a crisis in Eucharistic practice around the so-called shortage of priests. Some Christian communities are bereft of the celebration of Lord's Day Mass because, even with the best of intentions, priests are physically capable of presiding over only a limited numbers of Masses in a single day. Sunday services led by deacons or lay ministers during which pre-consecrated hosts are distributed to the faithful have been officially proposed to meet this pastoral need. However, these "Sunday Celebrations in the Absence of a Priest" have had some unexpected consequences: the faithful, uncatechized about the profound difference between a celebration of the Mass and a communion service, state a preference for "the deacon's Mass" or "sister's Mass" to the detriment of the full celebration of the Eucharist. (After all, they still get to receive the Blessed Sacrament and they don't have to "put up with" that long priestly monologue we call the Canon or Eucharistic Prayer.) It seems to me that it would be preferable to designate members of individual Christian households to attend Sunday Eucharist and take home enough of the consecrated elements to commune themselves and other members of their households later that day and perhaps until the next communal Eucharist can be shared. The restoration of the family table as an appropriate setting for Eucharistic liturgy seems both well supported by history and responsive to present pastoral need.

3.3. What do we eat and drink in Christian worship?

It is clear that the long-standing dispute between Orthodox and Catholics about whether or not Eucharistic bread must be leavened or unleavened does not apply to the validity of the sacrament confected, only to its liceity. But other questions about which foods and drinks are appropriate and/or necessary for Eucharistic worship do arise from the foregoing reflections.

First, the present Code of Canon Law for the Western Roman Catholic churches decrees that Eucharistic bread must be "made of wheat alone and recently made so that there is no danger of corruption" (CIC1983 can. 924 `2). Such specification of the Eucharistic food seems to me historically indefensible, medically questionable, and culturally insensitive. First of all, while wheat bread was certainly preferred in Greco-Roman and Jewish culture of the 1st century C.E., the common bread was made of barley or emmer; barley cakes

were most probably the primary staple at the Last Supper. Thus, even if one employs the categories of scholastic sacramental theology, one cannot argue that Jesus in instituting the sacrament decreed that its matter must be specifically bread made from wheat.

Second, there are individuals who are severely allergic to the gluten in wheat: are they to be excluded from participative eating at the Lord's Table because of their medical condition? One might argue that they need only consume the Eucharistic species under a single form (in this case, wine) but, while this practice could appeal to the principle of concomitance, it still violates the Lord's command to eat and drink and dilutes the power of the Eucharistic symbol.

Third, while bread from grain is a food staple in the cultures of the Mediterranean basin, it can hardly be considered a universal. The cultural codes devolving upon bread in the Jewish culture of the 1st century C.E. may be carried by rice in contemporary Asian cultures, taro root in Oceanic cultures, etc. While the use of unleavened wheat bread may be an attempt to connect present Eucharistic worship to the scandal of particularity of the historical Jesus of Nazareth, its perception as "foreign food" may actually vitiate the symbolism intended by the sacrament.

According to the 1983 Code of Canon Law, the Eucharistic wine "must be natural wine of the grape and not corrupt" (CIC1983 can. 924 `3). I would raise the same issues concerning the specification of grape wine as the only proper matter of the sacrament as I have for wheat bread. Historically, it is likely that the wine drunk at the Last Supper was derived from grapes, but whether it was the *vinum* ("wine proper") flavored with honey and herbs drunk by the elite, the *lora* ("afterwine") made by mixing the residue remaining after the first pressing of the grapes with water, or the dregs the poorer classes drank—concoctions created by mixing grape pulp with vinegar and/or salt water as preservatives—is unclear.

Thus, the actual drink employed by the historical Jesus at the Last Supper may have ranged from what we would call a fortified wine all the way to vinegar. There are

chemically dependent persons who cannot consume even a tiny bit of alcohol without threat to their sobriety. Are they to be deprived of sacramental drinking at the Lord's Table? Roman Rite practice seems to recognize this difficulty by prescribing *mustum* (a reduced-alcohol wine) for chemically dependent priests to use, but this concession, originally extended to non-clerics as well, has been withdrawn from the laity. Again, one might argue that chemically dependent people need only to receive sacramental communion under one species, but the same response as above could be given: it violates the eating and drinking command of the Lord and enervates the sacramental symbolism. It also must be admitted that while grape wine is a common drink for the lands of the Mediterranean basin, it is not at all common in other parts of the world. Perhaps the cultural codes residing in wine for these countries are borne by rice wine in Asia or beer in parts of Africa. In these circumstances not only will wine be perceived as a "foreign import," but communities may be deprived of the Eucharist when they cannot import grape wine nor have the facilities to preserve it.

Finally, even conceding that wheat bread and grape wine may remain the specified Eucharistic species for the Roman Rite, I must raise the question of sacramental access to both. Customs in which only priests, clerics, or public ministers are invited to partake of the consecrated cup seem to fly in the face of the radical equality among the baptized intended by Jesus' table fellowship with his disciples. Admittedly no one may be forced to receive sacramental communion under the form of consecrated wine (although one would think Jesus' express command would be of some weight in determining Eucharistic piety), but access to both forms of Eucharistic food and drink for every participant should be the norm at every Mass.

3.4. How do we structure our eating and drinking in Christian worship?

Two practical issues arise from the way in which the Roman Rite structures its Eucharistic celebration. First of all, the separation of the clerics' Eucharistic communion from that of the rest of the faithful is problematic. This separation is signaled by such practices as using a larger host for the priest, having the priest alone consume the larger host completely, offering the consecrated elements to clerics with no dialogue when such a dialogue is the norm for the communion of the laity, and by distinguishing the com-

munion procession (one, completely clerical, centered on the altar; the other, completely lay, focused on a communion rail or station). These practices hardly seem to carry the cultural dynamics of Jesus' table fellowship.

A deeper question arises from a consideration of the present structure relating the Liturgy of the Lord's Word to the Liturgy of the Lord's Table. According to an earlier theory, the Christian Liturgy of the Lord's Word is an adaptation of the synagogal Torah reading and exposition service, while the Christian Liturgy of the Lord's Table is an expansion of the take/bleed/break/share structure of Jewish domestic meals. In this scenario, the two originally separate liturgies were yoked to form a single Eucharistic service by about 150 C.E., when such a structure appears in Justin Martyr's First Apology 65. However, if the data we have discovered concerning the *deipnon/symposion* structure is accurate, primitive Eucharists may have begun with the Lord's Table liturgy celebrated as a *deipnon*, followed by the Liturgy of the Word as a Christian *symposion*. This may have implications for restructuring contemporary worship to allow more time for pondering God's Word and working through the implications of that Word for our common life than would be possible in a typically structured Liturgy of the Word followed by the Liturgy of the Table.

3.5. What do we think our eating and drinking in Christian worship means?

One fear liturgists have in raising concerns like those mentioned above is that we will be perceived as prissy artistes, metaphorically arranging sanctuary furniture as the Barque of Peter founders in a tempest. In fact the Church may judge that even after acknowledging the issues raised above, no change in our ritual prayer would be advisable at this time. This would not bother me, as long as the questions are raised and forthrightly discussed. After all, as Nathan Mitchell reminds us:

The goal of ritual is not to produce a meaning, but to produce an outcome—a person redefined by grace as God's own welcoming heart and hand.... We become hospitable...not by analyzing hospitality, but by greeting guests, offering them the kiss of peace, washing their feet, serving them food, adoring Christ's presence in them....¹⁹

4. “We Proclaim The Lord’s Death Until He Comes:”

Implications for Christian Living

I will conclude with two remarks on the implications that recovery of Jesus' meal ministry through the ritual structures of Christian worship may have for our communal life. If, in fact, what we do around the Lord's Table is rehearse the Reign of God, then what we do in ritual prayer should have profound implications for what we do in daily life where we encounter that reign in hope.

First of all, Jesus' promiscuous table fellowship should commit us to a world where all human beings, regardless of race, gender, economic status, class, sexual orientation, or religious belief, have access to the goods of the earth bestowed on us by our Creator God. There is no avoiding the economic and political implications of genuine table fellowship, as Malcolm X so powerfully stated in 1965:

I'm not going to sit at your table and watch you eat, with nothing on my plate, and call myself a diner. Sitting at the table doesn't make you a diner, unless you eat some of what's on that plate. Being here in America doesn't make you an American.²⁰

In this year of holy Jubilee, it would seem especially appropriate for us to examine what kinds of behavioral changes we might need to embrace if such access to the goods of the earth is to become the common patrimony of all the earth's citizens.

Secondly, the fact that Jesus chooses bread and wine—the fundamental staple and most common potable of his day—as the central elements to be transformed by his self-sacrificial identification and the vivifying power of his spirit should invite us to reflect on human stewardship of the goods of the earth. Note that at Eucharist we do not offer nature “raw” to God: we do not present wheat and grapes before the Holy One. Rather we offer nature transformed by human intelligence and will: we present bread and wine, “fruit of the earth and work of human hands” as the Preparation of the Gifts *berakoth* remind us. It is this profound synergy between created nature and human nurture that is taken up and transubstantiated as the Real Presence of Christ in space and time. This should provide a liturgical vision of ecological living: humans stewarding rather than exploiting the good earth God has given us as our garden home.

I hope as I conclude these few reflections on the meal ministry of Jesus and its implications for Christian worship and life you will be inspired to deeper engagement in the mystery of the Eucharist, deeper commitment to Jesus' way of life in the world, and deeper hope in the church's contribution to humanity's future. For, as Elizabeth Schüssler-Fiorenza reminds us:

The gospel is not a matter of the individual soul [alone?]; it is the communal proclamation of the life-giving power of Spirit-Sophia and of God's vision of an alternative community and world. The experience of the Spirit's creative power releases us from the life-destroying power of sin and sets us free to choose an alternative life for ourselves and for each other.... Christian spirituality means eating together, sharing together, drinking together, talking with each other, receiving from each other, experiencing God's presence through each other, and, in so doing, proclaiming the gospel as God's alternative vision for everyone, especially for those who are poor, outcast, and battered.²¹

END NOTES

- 1 See, e. g., D. and P. Brothwell, Food in Antiquity: A Survey of the Diet of Early Peoples (New York: Frederick A. Praeger, 1969); J. Wilken, D. Harvey, and M. Dobson (eds.), Food in Antiquity (Exeter: University of Exeter Press, 1995).
- 2 See, e. g., J. Goody, Cooking, Cuisine and Class: A Study in Comparative Sociology (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982); R. C. Wood, The Sociology of the Meal (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1995).
- 3 See, e.g., M. L. Arnott (ed.), Gastronomy: The Anthropology of Food and Food Habits (Chicago: Aldine, 1976); M. Douglas, "Deciphering a Meal," in Implicit Meanings (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1975) 249-275; M. Douglas, "Food as a System of Communication," in In the Active Voice (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1982) 82-124; R. Firth, "Food Symbolism in Pre-industrial Society," in Symbols, Public and Private (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1973) 243-261.
- 4 Much of the information in this section is derived from J. Andre, L'Alimentation et la Cuisine à Rome (Paris: C. Klincksieck, 1961); B. Leyerle, "Meal Customs in the Greco-Roman World," in Passover and Easter: Origin and History to Modern Times, ed. Paul F. Bradshaw and Lawrence A. Hoffman, Two Liturgical Traditions, 5 (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1999) 29-61; A. Dalby, Siren Feasts: A History of Food and Gastronomy in Greece (London: Routledge, 1996); J. Edwards, The Roman Cookery of Apicius (Point Roberts, WA, 1985); C. Seltman, Wine in the Ancient World (London, 1957); W J. Slater (ed.), Dining in a Classical Context (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1991).
- 5 Florence Dupont, Daily Life in Ancient Rome, trans. Christopher Woodall (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1989) 103.
- 6 As quoted by Athenaeus in Deipnosophistae 14.659E.
- 7 As quoted by Athenaeus in Deipnosophistae 15.702A-B.
- 8 Much of the information in this section is derived from B. M. Bokser, The Origins of the Seder: The Passover Rite and Early Rabbinic Judaism (Berkeley-Los Angeles, CA, 1984); G. Feeley-Harnick, The Lord's Table: The Meaning of Food in Early Judaism and Christianity (Washington, DC-London: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1981); S. Safraiu and M. Stern (eds.), in cooperation with D. Flessner and W. C. van Unnik, The Jewish People in the First Century: Historical Geography, Political History, Social, Cultural and Religious Life and Institutions, 2 vols. (Assen: Van Gorcum, 1974); J. B. Segal, The Hebrew Passover from the Earliest Times to A.D. 70 (London: Oxford University Press, 1963).
- 9 Feeley-Harnick, 91-95, 97.
- 10 Lawrence A. Hoffman, "The Passover Meal in Jewish Tradition," in Passover and Easter: Origin and History to Modern Times, ed. Paul F. Bradshaw and Lawrence A. Hoffman, Two Liturgical Traditions, 5 (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1999) 9-11.
- 11 J. Tabory, "Towards a History of the Paschal Meal," in Passover and Easter: Origin and History to Modern Times, ed. P. F. Bradshaw and L. A. Hoffman, Two Liturgical Traditions, 5 (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1999) 62-80 [here 64].
- 12 Much of the information in this section is derived from A. A. Just, Jr., The On-Going Feast: Table Fellowship and Eschatology at Emmaus (Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 1993); X. Leon-Dufour, Sharing the Eucharistic Bread: The Witness of the New Testament, trans. M. J. O'Connell (New York: Paulist, 1987); L. E. Klosinski, The Meals in Mark, diss (Ann Arbor, MI: University Microfilms International, 1988); E. LaVerdiere, Dining in the Kingdom of God: The Origins of the Eucharist According to Luke (Chicago, IL: Liturgy Training Publications, 1994); N. Mitchell, Eucharist as Sacrament of Initiation, Forum Essays, 2 (Chicago, IL: Liturgy Training Publications,

- 1994); D. E. Smith, "The Historical Jesus at Table," SBLSP (1989) 466-486.
- 13 For the reader's convenience, I offer the following list of the meals assigned to each of these categories:
- 1a. The meals of Jesus the prophet taken in Galilee: a great banquet at the house [of Jesus? Of Levi?] (Matthew 9:9-12; Mark 2:13-17; Luke 5:27-30); a great dinner at the house of Simon the Pharisee (Luke 7:36-50); the multiplication of the loaves and fishes (Matthew 14:13-21; Mark 6:30-34; Luke 9:10-17; John 6:1-13 // Matthew 15:32-38; Mark 8:1-10).
- 1b. The meals of Jesus the prophet taken between Galilee and Jerusalem: hospitality at the home of Martha (Luke 10:38-42); a noon meal at the home of a Pharisee (Luke 11:37-54); a Sabbath dinner at the home of a leading Pharisee (Luke 14:1-24); hospitality at the house of Zacchaeus (Luke 19:1-10).
2. The Last Supper of Jesus the Christ (Mt 26:26-28; Mk 14:22-24; Luke 22:14-38; 1 Corinthians 11:23-25; John 13:1-17, 26).
- 3a. The meals of Jesus the Lord in Jerusalem and its environs: the breaking of the bread at Emmaus (Mark 16:12-13; Luke 24:13-35); with the community in Jerusalem (Mark 16:14-18; Luke 24:36-53; John 20:19-23).
- 3b. The meals of Jesus the Lord in Galilee: meal on the shore of the Sea of Tiberius (John 21:1-14).
- 14 Mitchell, Eucharist, 89-90.
- 15 Mitchell, Eucharist, 78-79.
- 16 Some of the information in this section is derived from D. Smith and H. Taussig, Many Tables: The Eucharist in the New Testament and Liturgy Today (Philadelphia, PA: Trinity Press International, 1990).
- 17 See, inter alia, J. F. Keating, The Agape and the Eucharist in the Early Church (New York: AMS, 1969); A. McGowan, "Naming the Feast: The Agape and the Diversity of Early Christian Meals," in E. A. Livingstone (ed.), Studia Patristica XXX (Leuven: Peeters, 1997) 314-318.
- 18 Kenan Osborne, The Christian Sacraments of Initiation: Baptism, Confirmation, Eucharist (New York, NY – Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1987) 231.
- 19 Nathan Mitchell, "The Amen Corner," Worship 71 (January 1997) 71.
- 20 Malcom X, "The ballot or the bullet," in Malcolm X Speaks, ed. G. Breitman (New York: Grove, 1965) 26.
- 21 Elizabeth Schüssler-Fiorenza, In Memory of Her: A Feminist Theological Reconstruction of Christian Origins (New York: Crossroad, 1983) 344-345.