

Abstract

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Singing at Meals among the Therapeutae

1. If we think with the typology of the symposium (with Smith and Klinghardt) for the social reality of the meals inscribed in Philo's account of the Therapeutae, then it is clear that the general setting of the meal can be an occasion for entertainment (philosophical discourse, dance, poetry, song, story, riddles). I want to focus on "verbal performance" and in particular on song. Philo's account emphasizes both the exposition of scripture (75-76) and the singing of hymns to God (80) preceding the shared meal, as well as the choral singing and dancing following the meal (83-89).

2. My interest here is on viewing the meal as part of the process of the formation of songs and narrative (as I suggested in my response last year). That is, the meal is not simply setting or occasion for performance, but is part of the generative matrix for the composition-in-performance (Parry & Lord) of song (and narrative, but we don't seem to have traces of narrative formation in this account). But in addition to look at the activity that Philo depicts, we can also observe that there are indications of performative speech ("speech act") in Philo's account. These would help to establish that the meal is understood as part of the generative matrix for performance.

3. Composition of hymnody is clearly a community activity that Philo emphasizes, not only at the meal, but also as the daily activity (29, using very similar language. I would also suggest that it's part of the process of "initiation into the mysteries" (25-26) as Philo depicts the personal contemplative prayer "in the secluded place." Here taking "hymns" (along with laws, oracles, and other things) into the secluded place suggests a process of internalization of hymnody such as would contribute to the composition-in-performance of new song. I would also note that the language describing the process of composition in Cont. 29 matches that in 80 very closely.

4. In Cont. 26, "holding the memory of God as something not to be forgotten" (mnêmên alêston) suggests the marked speech of performance--"memory" here is enacted, performed memory, not conceptualization. alêston similarly points to poetic process in the Greek epic and lyric performance tradition.
5. In Cont. 8385, after the meal, the song of the community is likened to the Song of the Sea (Exodus 15). It is said to be a "mimêma" of the Song; I take this in Aristotle's sense of mimesis as true representation in performance (Poetics). That is, the song of the community is not similar like the Song of the Sea, but is a reenactment of the Song itself--reenactment as the actualization of a song tradition in the here and now of the community. This is reinforced by the observation that in Cont. 86, Philo provides a version of the Song of the Sea itself--unusually for this text, which seldom speaks of the content of scriptural interpretation in specifics; I would suggest that Cont. 86 picks up on the sense of reenactment in song and brings that into the ideal description of the community's practice. One might say that the poetics of composition in performance are so strongly felt as to provoke the actualization in a discursive text. We would have then here an instance of "marked speech" in the discourse itself.
6. Philo's description of the process of scriptural interpretation at the meal (75-77) emphasizes the interaction between "presider" and congregation/community, in terms of whether the congregation is following the points of interpretation and how they indicate this. If we see poetics as residing not only in what the speaker is doing but also in the whole community in which the performance takes place (Lord, Nagy, Foley), then we can say that Philo shows special interest in the poetics of the whole.
7. A further note: in the contrasting meals, Philo makes no mention of speech/song performance. Even in his comparison with the symposia of Xenophon and Plato there is little mention of speech performance. This would suggest to me (in line with what some of you have argued) that the idealization of the meal of the Therapeutae such that it becomes the privileged setting for the composition of song in Philo's view. Moreover, the action of composition-in-performance and of singing generally here becomes an occasion for the display of the (ideal) identity of the community, suggesting that Philo is viewing the meal and song together working to constitute (in a generative sense) this group.

8. I'll mention in passing some of the work I've done with song traditions in 1 Peter, Hebrews, and Barnabas (and narrative with 1 Corinthians) within the performance practices (poetics) of community ritual.

Thanks for bearing with me concerning this. I'll shape it into something more presentable for our session, but this will give you an idea of the points I'll cover and the general framework of interpretation.

I look forward to our time together!

Yours,
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