

Abstract  
Hal Taussig

In Philo's portrait of the Therapeutae's meals together there exists a series of hyperboles. He makes a point of saying the meal had no servants, and that the Therapeutae served one another, a highly unusual circumstance for normal leisure banquet behavior. He paints a picture of women and men reclining (on separate couches) in numbers and equality that certainly is exceptional for Hellenism. He has them singing in perfect harmony, both men and women together. He says they created their own songs spontaneously. He says they sang until dawn. The reclining order relative to the places of honor, according to Philo, was done according to spiritual merit, not social status or age. And, in accordance with Philo's ascetic values, the foodstuffs themselves were extremely simple.

That each of these behaviors are outside the norm of regular daily behavior is obvious. Indeed, commentators of all stripes have noticed this hyperbole as a major feature of Philo's literary effort.

My presentation wants to think about how much of this hyperbole is literary idealization by Philo (perhaps even to the point of the Therapeutae being an imaginal reality of Philo) and how much is what Jonathan Z. Smith would call the "ritual perfection" of the meal itself. What Smith means by this is that a major dynamic of rituals themselves is to portray within the constructed environment of a ritual a kind of ideal behavior that stands in contrast to normal social behavior. This, for Smith, is at the heart of ritual. The contrast between the "perfected" actions of the ritual and the normal patterns of day-to-day reality make people think about those differences, Smith says. His classic illustration is that of the Siberian people who raise a tamed bear cub until it is fully grown and then slaughter it and eat it, as a contrast between the many normal difficulties of bear hunting in Siberia.

My position concerning Philo's portrait of the Therapeutae is that almost all of the hyperbole could easily be either a literary idealization or a ritual perfection. With the exception of "singing until dawn" at the meal (which I take as a definite literary idealization, but an implausible ritual perfection), each of the hyperbolic elements of Philo's description of the meal could be either. Because both literary idealization and ritual perfection are easily plausible, it is almost impossible to decide which and how much of either is happening in this case.

Nevertheless I am much more interested in the possibility that some of Philo's description is somewhat accurate of actual behavior that reflects the Therapeutae and Greco-Roman meals in general. In this regard, scholarship has focused on the fact that the equality of men and women is vociferously opposed by Philo in other texts, making the reclining together of the sexes a facet of the Therapeutae's practice, not Philo's idealization.

This leads me to see the Therapeutae text as an evocative example of ritual perfection within the Greco-Roman meal in general. Indeed, I would like us to consider the Greco-Roman banquet as a major socially imaginative moment in Hellenism. The controlled and constructed character of the banquet seems to offer ritually a contrast to much of the oppressive relations, chaotic interactions, bitter contestations, and garbled communications of normal life in the Greco-Roman Mediterranean. The ways religious

behavior fuel social imagination is illustrated by the more overt religious character of the Therapeutae meal, but points also to the same results of the somewhat religious character of all such meals.