

Present and Absent: Women at Greco-Roman Wedding Meals¹

SBL Meals in the Greco-Roman World Seminar

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Although our focus on Greco-Roman meals leads us inevitably to the dining room, we begin this particular journey in another place. The three narratives that follow remind us that when considering early Jewish and Christian wedding meals we need to consider the bridal chamber as well. First from Tobit:

Raguel called his wife Edna and said to her “Sister, get the other room ready and take her there.” So she went and made the bed in the room as he told her and brought Sarah there. She wept for her daughter. Then wiping away tears she said to her, “Take courage, my daughter; the Lord of heaven grant you joy in place of your sorrow. Take courage, my daughter.” Then she went out. When they had finished eating and drinking they wanted to retire; so they took the young man and brought him into the bedroom. Then Tobias remembered the words of Raphael, and he took the fish’s liver and heart out of his bag where he had them and put them on the embers of the incense. The odor of the fish so repelled the demon that he fled to the remotest parts of Egypt.²

Edna settles her daughter then leaves the wedding chamber. Does she join the feast? It is hard to say. Meanwhile, the narrative must attend to its demons and does not indicate whether Sarah ever leaves the chamber. In the Apocryphal Act of the Apostle Thomas - (*ActsThom*) the bride and the groom already occupy the wedding chamber when the king comes to the apostle:

“Arise and come with me, and pray for my daughter! For she is my only child, and today I give her in marriage.” But the apostle would not go with him, for the Lord was not yet revealed to him there. But the king led him away against his will into the wedding chamber, that he might pray for them (the bridal pair) . . . And after laying his hand

¹ I wish to thank Debra Bucher for her insightful and helpful comments on an earlier draft of this paper.

² Tobit:7.15-8.3a NRSV.

upon them and saying: “The Lord shall be with you,” he left them in that place and departed. The king required the attendants to go out of the bridal chamber. And when all had gone out and the doors were shut, the bridegroom lifted up the veil of the wedding chamber that he might bring the bride to himself. And he saw the Lord Jesus in the likeness of the apostle Judas Thomas, who shortly before had blessed them and departed from them, conversing with the bride, and he said to him: “Did you not go out before them all? How are you now found here?”³

The king has led Thomas from the feast (which we will explore in more detail later). We see a Houdini-like scene which assures us that all doors are closed before Jesus-Thomas enters in a super-natural fashion interrupting the privacy of the bride and groom. And finally, the rabbis in the Babylonian Talmud discuss a hypothetical autumnal wedding that overlaps with the Feast of Booths, *Sukkot*, thus complicating the placement of feasting space and wedding chamber:

R. Abba b. Zabda also said in the name of Rab, A bridegroom and the attendants and all the wedding guests are free from the obligation of the *Sukkah* all the seven days [of wedding festivities.]
 --What is the reason?
 --Because they have to rejoice.
 --But let them eat in the *Sukkah* and rejoice under the *huppah*?
 --There can be no real rejoicing except where the banquet is held.
 --But why should they not put up a *huppah* in the *Sukkah*?
 Abaye says, [This is impossible] because of [the need for] privacy . . .⁴

The rabbis allude to the need for privacy and thereby the sexual activity of bride and groom in the *huppah* or wedding chamber.⁵ This becomes even clearer when we consider the sexual connotations of the word “rejoice.”⁶ Nevertheless, although the rabbis discuss the relationship of the *huppah* and feast, and *where* the feast should occur,

³ *ActsThom* 1.9-11 (343), translation adapted from Drijvers, 1992.

⁴ bSukkah 25b.

⁵ Lehman, 2006, 328, observes the non-private nature of the Sukkah in this text as she presents the larger argument that the rabbis develop the sukka as *different* from a house, despite the fact that one dwells in both.

⁶ Anderson, 1992, 57-8.

they don't tell us exactly who joins the feast or the order of events and thus when the privacy begins. Each of the three narratives or discussions above reveals wedding chambers that are intensely connected to the feast. Moreover, as we look towards these wedding chambers we see our first glimpse of women at Greco-Roman weddings. In all these examples, much remains unclear, but in contrast to some other Greco-Roman meals we cannot even begin to consider wedding feasts without recognizing the presence of at least one woman, the bride, who at the very least remains "present" in the imagination of those celebrating, whether or not she attends the feast.

As we ask about whether the bride makes an appearance in the banqueting room, and also about what other female guests might be present there as well, each of these episodes reminds us vividly that some of the action at a wedding feast takes place beyond the banqueting room. Leave it to a demon or a magical apostle to provide instant excitement, but there is also a certain drama in speculating about how much privacy a copulating bride and groom require. In fact I begin with the essential dynamic of wedding chamber and wedding feast in order to situate my thesis that while the overshadowing presence of the bride and the charged sexuality make wedding banquets particularly dangerous meals, nevertheless this does not appear to have kept women from attending such communal feasts. Despite my original assumptions that this danger would have served as a deterrent, we catch glimpses of many women in and around wedding meals.

I. Interpreting the Evidence

Originally I had seen the evidence for wild weddings and assumed that these wild circumstances would have posed more danger to women than men in Greco-Roman cultures that protected "their" women, and I thus assumed it less likely that women participated. In doing so I had made assumptions about the nature of this threat, that later appeared unjustified. Moreover, one sees that in addition to erotic energy, other

excitement and communal importance also accrues to weddings, thus challenging the attempts to exclude large portions of the community. It is not a new idea that a wedding is a place of “sexual tension,”⁷ but the balance of possibility and danger deserves even more examination than it has so far received. Consideration of the question of whether and how women participated at these feasts forces us to confront the question of how to interpret the visions of hope or concern that surround these occasions; how to interpret which visions of the future replace real women with imaginative constructions of women; how much weight to give the gestures towards inclusion; and likewise how much weight to give portrayals of feasting women as scandalous; and finally how to fathom the vast invisibility of women within the sources.

We are in a good position to reconsider questions about women at weddings and women at meals since advances both in the Greco-Roman Meals Seminar, and elsewhere in the field, inform important aspects of the search. In pioneering work on women at Greco-Roman meals Corley revealed the dynamism of the question when she pointed to the contested role of women at Roman meals, as opposed to the more fixed exclusions of Greek meals.⁸ The work of Smith, Klinghardt, Ascough and Harland in various ways continued to focus attention on the more general dynamic of inclusivity and exclusivity.⁹ Meanwhile, recent work in gender studies and post-modern criticism reminds us of the complexity of the question. In last year’s seminar Aitken broached the subject of segregated spaces and whether there might be parallel feasts for men and women, and Standhartinger brought in the important question of whether the appearance of women in meal narratives necessarily pointed to real women.¹⁰

⁷ Smith, 2003, “[t]his may have become a popular literary motif because of the inherent sexual tension that was present at a banquet at which respectable women were present,” 40.

⁸ Corley, 1993, 28-33.

⁹ Smith; Klinghardt, 1996; 2005 Meals in the Greco-Roman World Seminar papers by Ascough and by Harland.

¹⁰ See 2005 Meals in the Greco-Roman World Seminar papers by Aiken and by Standhartinger.

The daunting consideration of “constructed” versus “real” women certainly informs the materials associated with weddings. Nevertheless, the “constructedness” of gender has other implications as well. We can conceive of gender not only to explain the presentation of “women” in narratives, where doubt remains as to the likelihood of flesh and blood women making an appearance, but we can also consider *in what manner* “real” women might have ventured into the wedding festivities. In other words, as we look closely at whether women entered these banqueting spaces, we must also consider *how* women would have occupied these spaces, and, further, how these spaces contributed to the understanding or “construction” of those women who did so. We attend not only to whether the bride joined the feast, but also accounts of her posture when there. We examine suggestions of the bride’s symbolic power as it may relate to the nature of weddings themselves and to the inclusion of female participants. We consider the activities of women at weddings and how these acts constructed their gendered presence, as we extrapolate to consider the attendance of women at meals.

Interpretation emerges as such a critical issue in this exploration because so many sources remain so silent concerning women. A consideration of method reveals the “choice” in interpreting this silence as absence, and helps uncover other choices. In this paper, as I move from questions of “were the bride and other women at the feast?” to “*how* were the bride and other women at the feast?” I am indebted to the recent work of two scholars of Judaism and gender: Grossman and Baker. Grossman takes an approach based on the reader-response studies of Fish, and her work particularly helps address questions of inclusion. In considering evidence for women in the Dead Sea, Grossman looks at the multiplicity of possibilities. She reminds us how much leeway the reading/interpreting community has. She explains that whether we view the community of the Damascus Document as including or excluding women depends entirely on which

of the surrounding texts we let guide us.¹¹ She argues against claiming a “right” interpretation and instead offers conflicting “possible” understandings. She demonstrates for instance that given certain intertexts, the Damascus Document can appear to reference a more inclusive community, wherein a “woman joining the covenant community might thus be seen simply as another member, one of those who ‘each’ joins, of ‘his’ (which here includes ‘her’) own volition.”¹² This in turn leads me to think of the inclusive appeals that “all” participate in weddings and the various ways one might interpret this “all.”

Baker helps us see how the construction of women interacts with the habits and actions of women. In examining archaeological and textual evidence for women in third century Galilee, she challenges earlier assumptions about the seclusion of women, and the very nature of public versus private, concluding that there is no evidence that Jewish women were secluded.¹³ She uses ideas of gaze and habit from Foucault and Bourdieu to argue that seclusion would have been redundant in so far as all evidence leads us to understand the enforced ways that women would have carried themselves, thus announcing their status and separation without the need of a physical barrier. In Baker’s words: “the house, both as ‘viewing mechanism’ and as framework of signification, plays a critical role in gendering . . . It is rarely a blunt weapon or a static object, almost never a confining cage that it has almost universally been read to be.”¹⁴ According to Baker, the actions and carriage of women defined the spaces in which they moved, rather than explicit inclusion or exclusion. A similar study of Roman houses explains that “male and female . . . inhabit the same spaces” where they are “separated by social rituals rather than physical environment.”¹⁵ These re-presentations of ancient houses prod me to

¹¹ Grossman, 2004, 227-233.

¹² Grossman, 227.

¹³ Baker, 2002, 34-76.

¹⁴ Baker, 75.

¹⁵ Wallace-Hadrill, 1994, 186. He indicates that “attempts to seek . . . distinctions (similar to those Bourdieu finds in anthropological studies of Berber houses) in the Roman house look unconvincing,” 218 n.30.

re-consider the gendering work done by weddings and the implications for feasting rooms and bridal chambers. The acts of bathing, dressing and processing with the bride all constitute highly gendered practice. Therefore, the women that approach wedding feasts could not have been confused with their male counterparts. While there may have been other reasons to exclude them from the banquet hall, we do well to follow Baker and consider the redundancy in exclusion for the sake of distinguishing gender in this case.

The work of both of these authors suggests the need to rethink some working assumptions about women and weddings, particularly the conviction that if women are not particularly mentioned then they were not there. I am much less comfortable with this assumption than I was just weeks ago. With Grossman we will look at our intertexts before interpreting presence or absence. With Baker, we will consider the actions that we do see on the edges of this silence. The lack of visible women need not mean that women were excluded. Or, in the words of Osiek and MacDonald, the social invisibility of women “may bear no resemblance to what was really going on.”¹⁶ Nevertheless, we must wrestle with this invisibility as we pursue traces of women at meals, of the bride as both presence and symbolic “presence,” of the relationship of these images to the overall question of the danger at wedding meals and finally of how this danger relates back to the presence of women.

II. The Nature of Wedding Feasts

The drama of the weddings above brings me to my first disclaimer as a social historian: I have yet to encounter a wedding narrative that appears particularly concerned with verisimilitude. Demon, apostle and voyeuristic imagination all disrupt objectivity. You will understand why this is if you ask yourself about weddings that you have attended. Likely you found some element inspiring, troubling or in some other way

¹⁶ Osiek and MacDonald, 2006, 3.

electric, even if there was no recognizable demon. Would your written account help a later historian understand how weddings work? Or would your reader find himself or herself caught up in unraveling familial and communal dynamics? In addition, because even the most “real” weddings belong so much to the imagination we also find that literary accounts of weddings shape historical weddings. We know this to be the case in modernity, as the wedding marches of Mendelssohn and Wagner have made their way from art to “reality” and back again many times. Therefore, in the ancient world, for instance, I would expect that vase painting and Greek dramas would mirror each other, each providing a different ideal (or in the case of comedy “non-ideal”). Thus I don’t see that vase paintings provide a “documentary”¹⁷ source so much as an alternate artistic exploration, and I worry about what kind of check and balance the consideration of diverse sources provides in this instance. All of this means that we may look at accounts of weddings, but we may or may not see into weddings themselves.

In addition, I am well aware that in moving from Tobit in the second century BCE to *Acts Thom* in the fourth century CE and the Babylonian Talmud that was not redacted until the sixth century CE, I offer little in the way of reconstructing the weddings of a particular time and place. I recognize the likelihood of local differences, and of trends that develop or wane over decades and centuries. Nonetheless, I see the task of this paper as a prior task, that of asking which dynamics appear in a range of texts concerning ancient weddings that one might consider *before* asking about detailed historical possibilities based upon particular wedding narratives in particular times and places. I have made some attempt to separate Greek, Roman, Christian, Jewish, as well as early from late, but the demand for comparison interferes with the ability to be consistent. Moreover, our sources likely point to primarily elite weddings. Slaves could not legally marry. If they nevertheless ritualized such unions, no sources remain to inform us. We

¹⁷ Pace Oakley and Sinos, 1993, 5.

may assume that the weddings of freedpersons followed similar patterns as those described in our sources, but in most instances we cannot know.

And as a final obscuring feature, as the three initial accounts above indicate, some of the most important action at a wedding happens behind closed doors. Only Thomas-Jesus can walk through walls to enter the bridal chamber, while most guests may access it only with their imaginations. In other words, this paper not only looks at ancient feasts, but also at the ancient reflections from *within* the banqueting chamber towards events that were out of sight to the majority of actual guest-participants as well as to us.

III. Locating Wedding Feasts

We can get a quick sense of where wedding feasts occurred in Oxyrynchus by considering the papyri wedding invitations that remain. Feasts appeared to have had one host,¹⁸ and to have taken place at either the home of the parents of the bride or the groom, the home of a third party, or sometimes a temple.¹⁹ Invitations were delivered by messenger the day before.²⁰ In the Roman world, it was an *officium* /duty to attend wedding feasts.²¹ Belying the simplicity of this kind of answer, the questions of when exactly wedding feasts were held and their duration prove more difficult to pin down. We may also be looking at practices that changed over time. While the *ActsThom* and the Babylonian Talmud make it clear that the feast and the seclusion of the bride and groom happened simultaneously,²² historians of Greek and Roman weddings generally describe “the” feast as occurring at the house of the bride’s family, followed by a procession to the groom’s home and her new hearth and altar²³ followed by the seclusion of the bride and

¹⁸ Llewelyn, 2002, 63.

¹⁹ Llewelyn, 64.

²⁰ Llewelyn, 65, in addition to the papyri evidence he offers the example Luke 14.16-24.

²¹ Treggiari, 19xx 162

²² In addition to the concern voiced in bKetub that the Sukkah be able to accommodate both the bridal chamber/*huppah* as well as the meal, see also the account of the man “whose wedding chamber caught fire at the close of his wedding feast” and while the bride calls for help, help arrives too late, bYeb 115a.

²³ Oakley and Sinos, 34, figs 96-8.

groom.²⁴ As a partial answer to this puzzle of why some but not all feasts juxtapose the seclusion of the bride and groom we may observe that all our sources note the occurrence of another feast the following day.²⁵ In other words, we observe feasting both before and after. If we insist on the narrowest definition of the wedding feast and focus on a single discreet wedding meal, we stand to miss significant wedding feasting. We know that numerous feasts surrounded the wedding,²⁶ so we must be careful to not prejudge the data.

From preparations and invitations onward we learn of the importance of the feasting, but on some level the *procession* (occurring either after *the* feast, or perhaps between feasts?), the seclusion of the bride and groom and the gift-giving shapes what would otherwise be seen as a “typical” feast. Significantly, among the numerous vase paintings that portray such detail as dressing the bride, making wedding cakes and processing, only one *calyx-krater* vase portrays the feast, and this one “feast” was the wedding of Perithous and Hippodameia, including intoxicated centaurs and an evening of mayhem and slaughter.²⁷ In other words, no one doubts that weddings had feasts, but an artist depicting a “wedding” achieved his/her aim by depicting other scenes. These choices regarding “interesting” subjects necessarily impact our evidence for feasts. If feasts belonged in the midst of other wedding practices and thus often go unremarked, we need to take especial care before assuming we can provide a detailed sketch of the parameters of this feasting, and that includes consideration of the gender of all participants.

Moreover, Treggiari explicitly reminds that not all rites occur at each wedding.²⁸ Roman variants would have included situations in which the entire set of feasts occurred

²⁴ Oakley and Sinos, 35-7; Treggiari, 1991,162-169.

²⁵ Re; Roman weddings, Treggiari, 169. In the Greek tradition, this next reception began at dawn and included a time for opening gifts. See below section V.

²⁶ Rehm reminds that ancient Greek practice included the sacrifice and meal offered by the new husband “for phratry members” some days after the wedding, 18.

²⁷ Oakley and Sinos, 24, figs. 46-9.

²⁸ Treggiari, 161.

at one house, since the *deduction*/procession between the homes of the bride and groom was not legally necessary.²⁹ This appears to have been the practice in the examples from Talmud and *ActsThom*, such as can be discerned. Thus, one might ask about the boundaries between one feast and another in this series of feasts. In the Greek and Roman practices described, did the guest invited to the home of the bride tend to appear the next day for the morning feast, even without a new invitation? Or put another way, did feasting really stop with the procession or simply move to a new location? More particularly, did those singing and carrying on outside the door of the bridal chamber find refreshments at the new house? Or, alternately, are we observing an evolution of such wedding practices by the fourth century CE? I highlight these alternatives because the evidence for where we find women remains most ambiguous, in an already ambiguous setting. I will continue as I began with Tobit, and *ActsThom* and Babylonian Talmud Sukkot and consider the possibility of simultaneous feasting and bridal chamber for the evidence it provides concerning gender. In acknowledging that we cannot always distinguish evidence for participants in the wedding and at the wedding feast, I nevertheless try to indicate when the evidence is more and less clear.

IV. The Mention of Women at Wedding Feasts

If the question before us was not about women at feasts but was merely a question of the involvement of women with some aspect of weddings, there would be no question as to the inclusion of women. As in the case from Tobit, the bride may count on her mother and/or other women to prepare her for occasion. The answer becomes murkier when narrowed to consider those who shared the wedding meal. Two kinds of evidence touch on this question: direct references to women and wedding celebrations, and a silence concerning women that we will interpret in light of conflicting images of the bride

²⁹ Treggiari, 167

and of the nature of weddings. We must certainly recognize that one answer does not necessarily fit all weddings, but each may give us a slightly different perspective.

Moving from the more clear-cut to the less, one does find reference to “women” in the same breath as reference to weddings guests. The importance of weddings as communal function becomes quickly apparent, as does the principle of inclusion. Howsoever they are included or excluded, women were aware of the weddings in their communities. Plutarch (1st c. CE) describes:

There is no occasion for a feast that is as conspicuous and much discussed as a wedding . . . a wedding feast is given away by the loud cries of the Hymenaios and the torch and the pipes, things that Homer says are admired and watched even by women who stand at their doors. Therefore since there is no one who is unaware that we are entertaining and have invited people, we are ashamed to leave out anyone, and we invite all of our relative and friends and connections of any type.³⁰

Since Plutarch mentions women in particular, it seems likely that they could have expected invitations, although note he also moves without compunction to the literary-historical example of Homer. Because of this we must allow for the possibility of change in practice regarding women from Homer’s time that of Plutarch. Nevertheless he emphasizes that all knew of the event because of the procession. If such a procession in fact followed *the* feast, or at least “some” of the feasting, then the watching audience knew that they had not received invitations to this particular occasion. Plutarch seems to imply that the host should have taken care in the guest list lest he/she overlook someone, including presumably these watching women. Thus we receive the suggestion that women feasted at some weddings. In the following by Athenaeus (2nd c. CE), the presence of women guests appears even more plainly in instructions to servants concerning wedding preparations:

I told you to set up four tables for women and six for men. The feast must be perfect – don’t leave anything out.³¹

³⁰ Plutarch (*Mor.[Quaest.conv.]* 666f-67a), cited by Oakley and Sinos, 22.

³¹ Athenaeus 14.644d-f. Cited by Oakley and Sinos, 22; and by Corley, 29

Women had been invited and would sit before their own tables. Were the tables for women in the same space as those for men? Smith and Corley both cite Lucian (2nd c. CE) as an example of women (including the bride) sharing a couch (and thus a table?) with each other while apparently occupying the same room as room with men.³² We don't know whether that is the only answer. In any case, the Antheneaus text tells of a significant number of women guests.

Two of fourteen extant papyri wedding invitations indicate that women sometimes hosted these occasions as well. Both invitations show mothers inviting guests to weddings of their children.³³ Likewise, a statement from Mishnah Ketubbot (3rd c. CE) emphasizes that married women had the right to take part at such communal events. It goes so far as to demand that a man must divorce his wife rather than prohibit her from all "houses of mourning and houses of (wedding) feasting."³⁴ Here too there is no map to show where she spent her time once at the "house." In addition, while the demand for divorce in cases where husbands excluded wives from attending argues for the assumption that women would be "invited," it also suggests that there were husbands who sought to keep their wives away.

Thus, one finds enough examples to suggest that weddings included some women in some manner. Nevertheless, we also find moralizing depictions of negative behavior on the part of women at weddings. On the one hand we might interpret these as warnings only and therefore distant from what actually happened. On the other hand they might articulate real concern and practice with only the slightest exaggeration. For instance Apuleius (2nd c. CE) offers a glimpse of the wedding banquet of the gods. At the wedding of Psyche, after she becomes immortal, males and females recline. The bride and groom have not yet departed into or have already returned from the wedding

³² Smith, 43; Corley, 29; citing Lucian, *Symp.* 8-9.

³³ Llewelyn, 63, referring to pOxy. 111 and pOxy. 1579. See also Lefkowitz and Fant, 1992, 205.

³⁴ mKetub 7.5.

chamber: “Instantly there appeared a rich wedding-banquet. The bridegroom reclined on the couch of honour, clasping Psyche in his arms. Jupiter with his wife Juno were similarly placed, and then all the gods in order of rank.”³⁵ Framing this as a gathering of gods might serve as a caveat that human weddings are different, and Hague says of Greek weddings: “women reclined on banquet couches apart from the men, with the bride among them.”³⁶ Or, this portrait might articulate possible practice and related concerns.

This is not the only example of women reclining at weddings or of the overt sexual intimacy of the meal. Recently Roller has argued for the normalcy of women reclining at Roman meals. Upon consideration of literary evidence, funerary monuments and wall paintings Roller concludes, contrary to the earlier received opinion, that reclining was standard practice for women. He indicates that the antiquarian voices, such as Varro and Valerius that describe a more staid practice prior to the breakdown in their own era make a moral rather than an historical point. They offer no real evidence that there ever was such a time.³⁷ Assumptions to the contrary have been based on funerary monuments that depict women seated on the couches on which their husbands recline. Roller argues that these belong to subelite Romans who wished to portray themselves as socially integrated into Roman society. These up-and-coming freedpersons refrained from portraying a woman in a reclining posture when sharing a couch with her husband because, although they borrowed images of elite meal settings to show that they had “made” it, they also felt the need to accentuate the purity of their lineage.³⁸ Roller argues that elite families did not share these same constraints. He concludes that that a woman reclining on a couch with a man indicates a licit relationship; she could be his wife, or a prostitute, but not constitute an adulterous or forbidden relationship (*stuprum*).³⁹ Roller also suggests that the pleasures of the dining couch led seamlessly to the pleasures of the

³⁵ Apuleius, *Metamorphoses* 6.24.

³⁶ Hague, 1988, 34, but she offers no sources.

³⁷ Roller, 2003, 378-9, citing Isid. *Etym.* 20.11.9, and Val. Max. 2.1.2.

³⁸ Roller, 409, although many monuments portray a woman reclining to dine alone, 406.

³⁹ Roller, 399.

bedroom. He indicates that the sexuality or eroticism of licit couch sharing spills over into the feast, as depicted in Roman literature by gazes across the room.⁴⁰ Nevertheless, this was only one of a number of erotic possibilities at a banquet, where, after all, servants and flute-girls were easily available. Roller thus argues that reclining was unexceptional and that men and women reclining together remained sexually charged.

Roller's argument has significant implications for wedding meals. First, it suggests that if in certain Roman contexts wives reclined regularly with husbands, then we would also expect this custom at wedding meals. In contrast, Treggiari, who wrote of Roman marriage and weddings, albeit before Roller, describes the instances of reclining as implying scandalous behavior, citing mock descriptions in Tacitus and Juvenal.⁴¹ In other words, like the feasting gods in Apuleius these could have been the examples of what did not take place. Treggiari suggests elsewhere that the women socialized separately at these wedding feasts.⁴² By contrast, Roller argues that "scandalous" literary examples work because they depend on the normal behavior. He cites the same Tacitus that Treggiari cites, describing Messalina and her adulterous lover in order to illustrate how "they co-opt and subvert" a "symbol of legitimacy."⁴³ Roller challenges us to revisit evidence for where and in what manner we find women at wedding feasts and for the posture and behavior of husbands and wives. At the very least we see variations in the norm as suggested by segregated couches in Athenaeus and Lucian, and wives with husbands in Apuleius and Dio Cassius (discussed below).⁴⁴

The second area for exploration revealed by Roller concerns his presentation of pervasive sexuality at Roman meals. His focus on reclining and sexuality complicates my assumption that wedding meals generated a particularly intense eroticized atmosphere

⁴⁰ Roller, 401.

⁴¹ Treggiari, 169 citing Tac. *Ann* 11.27.1, 15.37.9 and Juv. 10.333ff, 2.119-20.

⁴² Treggiari, 422, writing in general of birthday parties, betrothals, funerals and weddings, citing Fronto *ad M. Caes.* 2.8, 9, *Ep. gr.* 2 (LCL i.144. ff.).

⁴³ Roller, 403, citing Tac. *Ann* 11.27.

⁴⁴ See section V.

that would have aroused a particularly guarded concern. He forces me to reconsider whether the sexuality of weddings was unique. There seems no doubt that something of the aura of wedding attracts particular attention and the need for a text like the Mishnah to both flag it as a potential source of difficulty while at the same time assure the rights of wives to attend. Thus weddings may not have been the only wild meals, but wild behavior happens at them, nonetheless. Alternately, some, but not all descriptions of women guests at weddings appear in moralizing contexts. Like reclining, the act of “drinking” figures in mocking critiques of dining women. Such a moral tone certainly appears in Menander’s (4th-3rd c. BCE) description that women at weddings might soak up wine “like sand.”⁴⁵ In his interpretation of sub-elite funeral monuments Roller notes the absence of wine cups in the hands of banqueting women, suggesting care in avoiding the “transgressive overtones, of the woman who reclines and drinks wine with a man.”⁴⁶ On the other hand, the wedding in Cana in the Gospel of John presents the mother of Jesus concerning herself with the emerging wine-shortage,⁴⁷ but the text does not suggest that she was drinking too much. As in the case of reclining, we have no reason to believe that drinking was transgressive, only drinking too much.

V. The Bride and the Wedding Feast

Evidence for brides at wedding meals echoes evidence for wedding guests, only more so. In the case of guests, we encountered a great deal of silence and some occasional representations of moderate or scandalous female behavior. In the case of the bride, again we encounter a great deal of silence, in addition, we also find diametrically opposing characterizations of the bride. Not only do we wonder about the location of the bride, but also whether she represents light or darkness, the forces of good or the forces

⁴⁵ *Dyskolos* (949), cited by Oakley and Sinos, 22.

⁴⁶ Roller, 410.

⁴⁷ John 2.1-11.

of evil. Concern with the bride crystallizes concern with the occasion. On some level the bride epitomizes both the possibility and the threat.

At early Greek weddings, the *epaulia*, or gift-giving feast began at dawn when the bride and groom emerge from the wedding chamber.⁴⁸ One finds debate about whether this morning *epaulia* coincides with the *anakalypteria* (or unveiling) and thus also involved a gift from groom to bride. Oakley and Sinos note “our sources are not consistent on the timing of the [*anakalypteria*] ceremony, with some agreeing . . . that it took place on the third day of the *gamos* [in the dawn feasting] and others suggesting that it was part of the [central?] wedding feast.”⁴⁹ Depending upon how one resolves this question, the bride emerging from the wedding chamber may appear unveiled among the wedding guests for the first time. For some scholars this has significant implications for how the community interprets and reacts to the bride’s appearance. This feast is where they welcome her as already “wife,” and thus part of their future, or, alternately, they see her as she had been the day before, stripped before their eyes. In any case the presence of such a veil and such an unveiled bride reminds us of the erotic potency of the occasion.

Rehm argues “a position supported by a number of scholars.”⁵⁰ He suggests that the unveiling, or *anakalypteria* “took place in the *thalamus* [bridal chamber] on the wedding night”⁵¹ and was thus, *not* a public undressing. He explains that it is misleading to interpret the vase paintings of the bride as depicting a bride already unveiled *before* the procession.⁵² While the “unveiled bride” provides a cue to the viewer of the vase that the

⁴⁸ Oakley and Sinos, 38; Rehm, 142.

⁴⁹ Oakley and Sinos, 1993, 25, see 135 n.19. Note the difficulty in trying to establish “normative” practice. Patterson, 1991, nevertheless concludes “[a]lthough there are real problems in reconciling the sources on this point, I prefer to connect the unveiling with the prenuptial feast. There may, or course, have been variation in marriage practices,” 68n 40.

⁵⁰ Rehm, 142, 213n6, citing Pottier and Reinach, Toutain, Huddleston, Buxton, Sissa, and Hague.

⁵¹ Rehm, 142.

⁵² Rehm, 141, 213n3 refers to Oakley, 1980. See also Hague: “the gesture of unveiling . . . helps to identify the scene as a wedding. It does not mean that the bride was actually unveiled at that point in the ceremony. We have a few scenes, in fact, in which the bride’s face is fully veiled during the procession,” 34. This argument is certainly consonant with Oakley and Sinos, 1993, 25, who recognize the inconsistency of accounts concerning the timing of the *anakalypteria*.

scene concerns a wedding, it does not necessarily indicate before and after. Rehm concludes that “what the gesture [of the bride in profile behind the groom in the chariot with her left hand holding her veil so that it frames her face] implies about the temporal sequence of the *anakalypteria* – whether it has occurred already or whether it will take place after the couple’s arrival? – remains a matter of conjecture.”⁵³

Alternately, Carson develops the idea that “as far as the bride is concerned, the *anakalyptēria* is the decisive sacral action of the wedding”⁵⁴ She interprets the public spectacle: “At the moment of unveiling, for the first time, the intact boundary of her person is violated by contact: the contact of vision.”⁵⁵ According to Carson, “[t]he relinquishing of her honor lays a claim upon his [the groom’s] honor,” in “a cultural game in which someone from outside the *oikos* [house] deliberately transgresses and pollutes it in order to provoke the *oikos* into absorbing . . . her within it.”⁵⁶ This interpretation does not fit at all with Rehm’s presentation of the growing scholarly consensus that the *anakalypteria* may well occur privately in the bridal chamber, and Oakley and Sinos object that “Carson’s reconstruction of the ceremony, with the bride rising up to face the bridegroom across the room, is not supported by literary or artistic evidence.”⁵⁷ Nevertheless, given concerns about “pollution” that appear in minor tractate *Kallah* (to be discussed below), we should not altogether dismiss the possibility that the bride’s unveiled presence, whenever it occurred, provoked concern.

A Roman example also demonstrates the ambivalent possibilities of a bride that signifies either union or contamination. The second marriage of Livia affords a most clear tableau of the bride at a wedding feast. Nevertheless, little of the wedding appears typical. There can be little doubt that we are meant to be shocked that the pregnant Livia’s first husband stands in place of a father to “give her in marriage.” And when

⁵³ Rehm, 141.

⁵⁴ Carson, 1990, 163.

⁵⁵ Carson, 163.

⁵⁶ Carson, 164.

⁵⁷ Oakley and Sinos, 135n17.

Livia reclines with Caesar, her new husband, a small slave boy of her household captures the confusion of the event, saying, “What are you doing here, mistress? For your husband [until today] is reclining over there?”⁵⁸ Nevertheless, despite the strangeness of the moment, her reclining appears less at issue than the number of husbands in the room and thus with whom she ought to recline. The bride captures the attention of the assembled and embodies both threat and promise.

Brides appear remarkably absent in Christian accounts of wedding feasts. In *Acts Thom*, neither the bride nor the groom had a role at the feast. Cyprian (3rd c. CE) expresses concern that the bride at wedding parties “is animated to bear . . . lewdness.”⁵⁹ He implies that her presence can only be an embarrassment. The first concerted attempts to Christianize weddings occur in Rome in the fourth century “in which the bishop placed a veil over the head of the bride and offered a nuptial blessing.”⁶⁰ Ambrose emphasizes that such a practice should presume a shared faith, “Since it is necessary for the marriage itself to be sanctified by the veil and blessing by a priest, how is it possible to call this a ‘marriage’ when there is not an agreement in faith?”⁶¹ Of course we do not know that this rite occurs at the feast, and this blessing may be no more “public” or visible than the celibacy-inspiring blessing of Thomas. Nevertheless, such an example stands amid vast silences.

Jewish texts also offer diametrically opposing glimpses of brides *vis à vis* wedding feasts. The narrative of R. Akiba’s daughter as bride situates her in the wedding chamber and *not* the feast experienced by others.⁶² R. Akiba’s daughter is a “good” bride. As a bride, she saves herself from death by a self-less act of charity. It may also

⁵⁸ Dio Cassius 48.44.3, trans. E. Cary, LCL. Also mentioned by Foss, 46; and Osiek and McDonald, 159.

⁵⁹ Cyprian, *On the Dress of Virgins*, 18.

⁶⁰ Hunter, 2003, 63.

⁶¹ Ambrose, *ep* 62.7 (CSEL 82/2.124), my translation.

⁶² Although the daughter of R. Akiba is not referred to by name, neither is her groom. It is not clear whether the groom was aware of the forecast danger to his bride, but he does not speak for her about these events. This story is one of a series of three in which the one surviving tells his/her tale. Perhaps this accounts for the voice of R. Akiba’s daughter here.

be surmised that the narrative depicting her naïve play with a “snake” in her wedding chamber marks her as a most innocent bride.⁶³ Astrologers had told R. Akiba that “on the day [his daughter] enters the wedding chamber, a snake will bite her and she will die.”⁶⁴ The story appears as one of a series that illustrate how *charity delivers from death*, and this particular titillating drama takes its audience into the wedding chamber:

On that day [of her marriage] she took a brooch [and] stuck it into the wall [of the *huppah*] and by chance it penetrated into the eye of a serpent. The following morning, when she took it out, the snake came trailing after it.

When her father later asks: “What did you do?,” meaning “what did you do that you escaped your fate?,” she replied: “A poor man came to our door in the evening”:

. . . and everybody was busy at the banquet, and there was no one to attend to him. So I took the portion which was given to me and gave it to him.

The bride explains that she was in a position to give charity because she was *not* “busy” with the feast. Either she was present at the periphery, or she ate her “portion” of the wedding feast elsewhere. In any case, she heard and responded to the door that went unnoticed by others “busy” with the feast.

In contrast to this presentation of a virtuous bride, minor tractate *Kallah* (3rd – 8th c. CE) assumes the bride is present at the feast and the text opposes such a practice: “They asked R. Eliezer what a person who takes a cup from her during those seven days while her husband is sitting at the table with her is like. He said to them, ‘Anyone who drinks from the hand of a bride it is as if he drinks from the hand of a prostitute

⁶³ It should also be noted that the snake of this wedding chamber shares some features with the demon in Tobit. The snake/demon threatens the bride in one case and the groom in the other, but in both cases he occupies the wedding chamber. Schwarzbaum, 1974, describes Tobit as fitting folktale type AT934B, “the Hero Predestined to Die on his Wedding Day.”

⁶⁴ bSabb 156b. For a sense of the pervasiveness of fears at the time of weddings, note the parallels between this story and the predictions of Psyche’s death in Apuleius’s *Metamorphoses*. There the father of Psyche seeks an oracle regarding his daughter. The oracle says: “Set out your daughter, king, on a lofty mountain crag./Decked out in finery for a funereal wedding./Hope not for a son-in-law born of mortal stock/But a cruel and wild and snaky monster,” 4.33.

[*zonah*].”⁶⁵ In contrast to the narrative concerning the daughter of Akiba where the bride was not at the table, but assumed virtuous, here the narrative assumes the bride poses a great threat. Brodsky compares the version in *Kallah* with a variant in the Babylonian Talmud. In the talmudic version two voices emerge rather than one. One voice (R. Yohanan) proves similar to R. Eliezer above. The other voice belongs to the disgruntled wife who expects to receive a cup. The talmudic account appears to favor the wife, nevertheless, there are other differences in that version, including also that she may not be a recent bride.⁶⁶ These various accounts of brides and wedding feasts may suggest that the question of women at wedding meals and the bride in particular was in a state of flux. Such a virulent expression on the part of R. Eliezer, however, suggests that brides were sometimes present and that some authors worked to contest this presence.

A third voice, that of the Palestinian Talmud dismisses any need for the bride to sit at the table, and in fact dismisses her as an object, and her presence as symbolic. The quorum of feast participants requires the groom’s presence since he may act in ways the bride cannot:

It has been taught: They say the grooms’ blessing⁶⁷ all seven days. R. Jeremiah considered ruling that they bring the bride out all seven days. R. Yose said to him, “And lo, R. Hiyya taught: They say the blessing for the mourners every day for seven days.” Now can you maintain that they bring the corpse out every day for seven days?⁶⁸ Then what is the upshot of the matter? Just as, in the case of a death, one mourns with

⁶⁵ *Kallah* 1.3, trans. Brodsky, 2006.

⁶⁶ bBer 51b, see further discussion in Brodsky.

⁶⁷ I have changed Neusner’s inclusive translation, which names this the blessing of “the wedding couple,” because as the bride does not appear involved, such a fiction appears unwarranted. Although Adler, 1998, in considering gender does acknowledge the Babylonian “polemical construction of Jewish marriage embodied in a polemical ceremony,” she nonetheless would like to avoid calling this blessing the bridegrooms’ blessing. She justifies this by the fact that “it was never recited by the bridegroom” and the text explicitly refers to both members of the couple, 180, n.50. Nevertheless, the rabbinic presentation of the blessing does not appear to present the bride as sharing the blessing with the groom.

⁶⁸ This analogy between a bride and a corpse enlarges on a discussion of appropriate wedding days and asks why a widow should marry on Thursday. The PT quotes a baraita (parallel to t.Ned.1.1) that “they arranged that he should marry her on Thursday, so that he should remain away from work for three successive days.” The gemara responds: “Moses ordained seven days of banqueting [for a wedding] and seven days of mourning. But [there is no indication] that he ordained a thing in celebration of the marriage of a widow.”

the mourner, so in the case of marriage, one rejoices with the groom. Just as in the former case, one makes mention, so in the latter case, one makes mention.⁶⁹

This text suggests that during the seven days of celebrating the wedding the groom and community need only make mention of the bride in a similar manner as the community mentions the deceased during the seven days of mourning. This text uses the parallel between weddings and funerals to illustrate why the bride need only be brought out once for one procession at the beginning, although the groom has obligations to the community that do not cease for these seven days. It doesn't protest the bride's presence at the feast, rather it establishes the importance of the groom's communal function and dismisses the bride as irrelevant. Moreover, this dismissal also indicates awareness that the bride might undermine his communal role as adult male.

In these several accounts of brides and meals we begin to discern underlying concerns about enduring communal behaviors of modesty, charity and ritual obligation, as well as the role that the bride plays in either undermining or supporting these. One does not need the physical presence of a bride in order for the bride to "present" these roles. In the previous example, it was enough to "make mention" of the bride, so too in the next example. The wedding blessings in the Babylonian Talmud construct the bride's imaginary presence, whether or not she was present as these words were sung or recited. Like the Palestinian Talmud, the discussion of the wedding blessings in the Babylonian Talmud assumes that the groom must participate in the minyan,⁷⁰ but it also provides a text of a blessing that mentions the bride. The text asks rhetorically "What does one say?" It then continues with a string of blessings: "Rab Judah said: (1) 'Blessed are you, O Lord our God, king of the universe who has created all things to his glory,' and (2) 'creator of man,' and (3) 'who has created man in his image in the image of the likeness

⁶⁹ pKetub 1.1, 25a, Translation adapted from Neusner, 1985, 23-4.

⁷⁰ "R. Nahman said [that] Rab said, 'Bridegrooms are of the number [for the *minyan* officially required for recitation] and [at funerals] mourners are not of the number . . .,'" bKetub 8a. Buchler, 1927, suggests that the blessing takes place before the groom leaves for the wedding chamber, 129.

of his form and has prepared unto him out of himself a building for ever. Blessed are you, O Lord, creator of man.”⁷¹ In this third blessing one finds reference to the first bride and groom, Adam and Eve and an allusion to the “building” in Gen 2.22 in which “God fashioned the rib.” The blessing understands “fashioned” as literally “built,” and further explains that God created Eve as a helpmeet and “building” (*banyan*). Here we observe another aspect of the characterization of the bride as supportive. She literally serves a “constructive” role.

VI. Including the Community

With these broad strokes, the good bride and the bride enter the wedding festivities. They describe a concern that we have already seen percolating in relationship to the women in attendance and their posture at wedding meals. Some voices see the presence of women at these events as worthy of being mocked, while others explicitly include women without such comment, suggesting that they too contribute to the occasion. We must heed this balance between scandalized and accepting voices because we have now considered most of the evidence that explicitly discusses women at weddings. We now must turn to the silences, and consider whether we can spot the presence or absence of women in the ungendered descriptions of weddings. We arrive at this discussion by way of the good and bad bride and the mocking or accepting voices

⁷¹ bKetub 7b-8a. In later times these blessing are known as *sheva brachot* or “seven blessings.” The first of seven is the blessing for wine, which was not included in the talmudic presentation. The last three blessings appear in the continuation of the Talmud text:

(4) ‘May the barren greatly rejoice and exult when her sons/children will be gathered in her midst in joy. Blessed are you, O Lord, who makes Zion joyful with her sons/children.’

(5) ‘May you make the loved companions greatly to rejoice even as of old you did gladden your creature in the Garden of Eden. Blessed are you, O Lord, who makes bridegroom and bride rejoice.’

(6) ‘Blessed are you, O Lord our God, king of the universe, who has created joy and gladness, bridegroom and bride, rejoicing, song, mirth, and delight, love and brotherhood, peace and friendship. Speedily, O Lord our God, may there be heard in the cities of Judah, and in the streets of Jerusalem, the voice of joy and the voice of gladness, the voice of the bridegroom and the voice of the bride, the voice of the singing of bridegrooms from their huppot (wedding chambers) and of youths from their feasts of song. Blessed are you, O Lord, who makes the bridegroom to rejoice with the bride’” (translation adapted from Soncino edition).

about women at weddings, because the ungendered descriptions of weddings also invoke communal potential on one hand and danger on the other. As mentioned above the one wedding feast portrayed on a Greek vase, was the feast that included the centaurs and ended in disaster. Violence appears to be one face of weddings, and must figure into the equation of women and wedding meals. In the following descriptions we might wonder whether weddings served such an important communal function that of course women attended, or likewise, were so dangerous that women did not. This issue of potential and danger, whether embodied by the bride or standing alone, when interpreted together with the examples of women present at feasts helps us to fathom the silence, or rather to understand how ancient women invisibly navigated this challenge.

In both Plutarch and Mishnah Ketubbot, we encountered the notion that the women of the community would be eagerly following events surrounding a nearby wedding and anticipating invitations that would be broadly inclusive. These examples of ancient eagerness respond to unspoken but understood conventions about who would be invited. We encounter a number of other texts that emphasize the inclusiveness of weddings, but they don't articulate the particulars. Because of the rare examples that do mention women, we have reason to explore the possibility that other calls for inclusion at weddings intended women as well, although they have left gender unspecified.

One of the underlying principles of such inclusions concerns the importance of weddings, but I would like to make a distinction between theological importance and communal importance. Both Jewish and Christian circles concerned themselves with a sacred marriage, whether that of God and Israel or of Jesus and the Church.⁷² Nevertheless, this allegorical concern may have little if anything to do with the weddings of human beings. Early rabbinic Judaism attempted to separate all reference to divine marriage from actual weddings. Rabbi Akiba warns that "he who trills his voice in the

⁷² mTa'an 4.8 provides an allegorical comparison which includes the Temple as the wedding chamber. See Rev 19.7-9. See also Smith, 169.

chanting of Song of Songs in the house of a feast (*b'veit hamistaot*) and makes it like another type of song has no share in the world to come.”⁷³ Since Song of Songs deals with weddings it might understandably have been made part of wedding celebrations by those other than the concerned group associated with R. Akiba, but this group takes exception to the practice. It appears likely that something similar happens in some early Christian circles as suggested by the involvement of Jesus-Thomas, who in *ActsThom* undermines the earthly wedding in the service of the divine. In addition, we find a lack of evidence for official Church involvement in human weddings until quite late.⁷⁴

We thus find ourselves in the challenging situation of looking at theological/ideological texts for evidence of prior communal practice, even while we recognize that theologians maintained a distance from communal practice. In other words, they ask that the association only work one way. Human events may be allegorized, but care must be taken not to irreverently invoke the idea of celestial union. Nonetheless, in this appropriation of images we may assume that appeals to human practice had some (however minor) claim to reality or they would not function well as allegories. Thus we may learn something from a wedding invitation in the Gospel of Matthew that aims broadly to include. In Matthew, Jesus presents the parable of a king, who despairing of hearing from his initial wedding guests “said to his slaves ‘The wedding is ready, but those invited were not worthy. Go therefore into the main streets, and invite *everyone* you find to the wedding banquet.’”⁷⁵ This parable provides a fine example of a claim of “inclusiveness,” but with no details. In some case it would be reasonable to interpret this masculine plural accusative pronoun as including women, in

⁷³ tSanh 12.10, some manuscripts read *b'veit hamisteh*, using the same form of the word for wedding feast found in the other rabbinic texts. Wedding feasts are often referred to as *hamisteh* or “the feast” (or “the party”). For instance in bKetub 4a the reference to “seven days of the feast” makes the reference to a wedding feast fairly certain. This use is also found in tannaitic texts such as mKetub 7.5.

⁷⁴ As 4th c. bishops offer the first blessings at weddings. See discussion in sections V above and VIII below.

⁷⁵ Matt 22.8-9, my italics.

other cases not.⁷⁶ We get no help from the later verse in this section of Matthew in which the king observes a “man there who was not wearing a wedding robe.”⁷⁷ We cannot know whether this suggests that all the women were well-dressed and escaped such negative attention; or, alternately that they were not present.

The great feast celebrating the marriage of the king’s only daughter in the *Acts Thom* most likely intentionally echoes the mandatory wedding invitation in Matthew. This Apocryphal Act provides an even more elaborate inclusion. Thomas learns that “the king has sent out heralds to proclaim everywhere that all should come to the wedding, rich and poor, bond and free, strangers and citizens; but if any one refuse, and come not to the marriage that one shall be accountable to the king.”⁷⁸ Should we read it as significant that the list does not include “male and female”? Or rather, would the community have known that of course women would come to the wedding, and that the surprise in this passage would have been “poor,” “bond” and “strangers”? If we use Plutarch or Mishnah Ketubbot as an intertext, women would have expected invitations.

In addition to these explicit claims of inclusion, one finds a number of texts that emphasize the communal importance of weddings, and suggest the importance of being part of the festivities. One such aspect was the display of gifts and wealth previously mentioned.⁷⁹ Regardless of debates concerning the timing of the *anakalypteria*, all assume the bride’s presence for the *epaulia*/ gift-giving. The costly gifts and ceremonies command communal attention for much of the day. And one might also observe gifts to the community, or acts of philanthropy on the occasion of the wedding. A mosaic synagogue inscription describes a contribution to the building that was promised at a wedding dinner. Levine indicates that this synagogue in Susiya was built in the third – fifth century CE,⁸⁰ presenting the inscription: “May he be remembered for good, the holy

⁷⁶ Osiek and MacDonald also discuss the concealment of information by masc. pl. pronouns, 6.

⁷⁷ Matt 22.11.

⁷⁸ *Acts Thom*, 1.4 (340), translation Drijvers.

⁷⁹ See discussion in section V above.

⁸⁰ Levine, 2000, 198, bracketed explanations are his.

master R. Asi the priest [who is also honored by the title] *biribbi*, who made this mosaic and plastered the walls, [a contribution] which he donated at a [wedding?] banquet for his son”⁸¹ The inscription records both the vow and the occasion. The feast of the wedding is noteworthy for its importance to communal happenings.

A parable that appears in rabbinic accounts⁸² and in fragmentary form in Epiphanius, the *Apocryphon of Ezekiel* also shows the communal importance of a feast.⁸³ The story tells of a lame man and a blind man who seek revenge because they were not invited to the banquet celebrating the wedding of the king’s son. Note that the general inclusiveness did not encompass this blind one or lame one. We thus see the limits of inclusion we wondered about in the case of women. The adventures of the blind man and lame man relate to the feast, which provides the site of their exclusion. The public forum captures their attention. That this story appears in both Christian and Jewish accounts and displays a somewhat ambiguous origin, only serves to underscore shared communal concerns around feasts.

Another indication of the importance of the feast appears in the growing anxiety found in the Babylonian Talmud regarding the wedding feasts of neighboring communities. Hayes has examined talmudic prohibitions about Jews attending the wedding feasts of gentiles. She argues that amoraic rabbis grew stricter in prohibiting Jews from attending such feasts, extending earlier prohibitions so that they included the acceptance of the invitation of a gentile rather than just the consumption of gentile food:

. . . Surely this applies only when there is actual consumption [and not just acceptance of the invitation]?

Rava said, “If so, the verse would have said only ‘and you will eat of his sacrifice.’ Why then does it say ‘and invite you?’ (Ex 34.15). This extends the prohibition to the time of his attendance (generally).”

⁸¹ Levine, 494, re: Naveh, 1978, #75, 115.

⁸² See Bregman, 1991.

⁸³ The *Apocryphon* is cited by Epiphanius, *Panarion* 64.70.5-7, discussed in Wright, 1998, 292.

Thus, all 30 days [of the feast celebration], whether or not it is mentioned that the feast is connected with the wedding, it is forbidden. From then on, however, if it is stated that it is connected with the wedding, it is forbidden, while if connection with the wedding is not stated, it is permitted.⁸⁴

Hayes emphasizes that these rulings display a remarkable stringency even though older theories lead one to expect a leniency,⁸⁵ and argues that “the portrait of Babylonian Jewry as struggling toward increased liberalization of such laws needs to be adjusted.”⁸⁶ Her evidence shows a concern with Gentile feasts later than the third century CE tannaitic strata. Reasons for such a concern go beyond the present study,⁸⁷ nevertheless, their concerns emphasize the communal importance of such gatherings. The undefined inclusions of wedding feasts as well as their communal importance bolsters the fragmentary evidence that explicitly locates the bride and other women at the wedding feast.

VII. Out of Control Wedding Feasts

In weighing the evidence for women at wedding meals and attempting to interpret the many silences in light of the communal pull of these events, one must also consider whether the dangerous nature of wedding meals mitigated that draw. Quite a few narratives describe risqué or raucous goings on at wedding meals, tipping the balance towards considering these as dangerous affairs. The least egregious trespass of normal societal bounds by these feasts involved the late hour. Rabbinic mention of the lateness of wedding feasts occurs in a tannaitic discussion of what to do if one has forgotten to recite the evening “Sh’ma” prayer. As an example we learn of rabbis and their disciples who stayed at wedding feasts until after midnight and thus prompted the question of

⁸⁴ Hayes, 1997, 160-2, discussing tAbod Zar 4.6 and bAbod Zar 8a, translation Hayes.

⁸⁵ Hayes writes: “in regard to the social question, the Bavli utilizes an aggadic tradition to establish a halakhic standard (although in Palestinian sources this step is not made), allowing the development of a set of remarkably stringent halakhot unprecedented in the Palestinian sources,” 154.

⁸⁶ Hayes, 165.

⁸⁷ See Marks, 2003, 243-68.

whether the new day had begun and they must accept that it was too late to recite the requisite evening prayer.⁸⁸ Likewise in Luke 12.36-8 we learn of a servant who remains awake for his master's return from feast.⁸⁹ Wedding parties went beyond normal bounds, but not outrageously so.

Sometimes the late hour may itself pose a threat. Minor tractate *Semachot* (3rd - 8th c. CE) tells of death and mayhem as the hour grows later and later: "Rabbi Meir used to relate a parable about a king who arranged a banquet and invited guests, without fixing a time for them to leave..." It seems likely that this parable illustrates the danger of the "late" hour of the world as Roman Jews suffered at the hands of Rome. Nevertheless, the wedding in the parable sounds like that of the centaurs⁹⁰: "The prudent among them began leaving during the ninth hour of the day Others rose to leave at sunset Others left during the second and third hour of the night, while some shops were open and others were closed Those remaining were overcome with wine and fell to killing and wounding each other."⁹¹ Here we find a warning not of "dangerous" risqué behaviors, but instead a warning of danger, plain and simple. As we scrutinize weddings for signs of women present we may well wonder whether such concerns for safety challenge the call for inclusiveness.

We also learn of explicitly immodest behaviors. All expected Greek and Roman wedding songs to be bawdy.⁹² And Cyprian describes them as a danger to virgins: "How greatly a virgin falls short of her resolution, when she who had come there [to a wedding] modest goes away immodest! Although she may remain a virgin in body and mind, yet in eyes, in ears, in tongue, she has diminished the virtues that she possessed."⁹³ Cyprian indicates that these women attend feasts but ought not. We also see bawdiness in extant

⁸⁸ mBer 1.1.

⁸⁹ Llewelyn, 65.

⁹⁰ See section III above.

⁹¹ *Sem* 8.10.

⁹² Rehm, 17. Tregiarri, 166.

⁹³ Cyprian, *On the Dress of Virgins*, 18.

songs, including one by the nominally Christian Ausonius (4th c. CE),⁹⁴ in which, after he describes the party escorting the bride and groom to their chamber, the song goes on to imagine what takes place inside. His first musings display a modicum of reserve as he describes how the groom “fondles her in his soft embrace” and “while thus he speaks, she for a long while keeps her eyes turned away.” But then the groom “casts [hesitation] aside, and breaks the chains of shyness.”⁹⁵ After this, Ausonius then inserts a “digression” in which he describes the physical intimacies of the unseen bride and groom in more graphic detail, including the adventures of the groom’s “hot-blooded” erection.⁹⁶ In these songs, the unseen bride and groom become the subject of public imagination.

In the *ActsThom* one also finds a wonderfully detailed portrayal of a wedding feast. The scene focuses on the apostle Thomas arriving at the royal city of Andrapolis. At this feast, everyone eats and drinks, except the apostle. Then servants provide the guests with crowns and oil: “each [guest] took of the oil, and one anointed his face, another his chin (his beard), another again other parts of his body.” People will leave this feast with anointed heads. The apostle accepts a crown woven of myrtle and other flowers, but refuses other entertainment including the sexual advances of a flute girl. Thomas looks at his feet rather than look upon this girl (in this world), explaining in a song that “the maiden is the daughter of light.”⁹⁷ The text then tells us that “they [all except the Hebrew flute girl] did not understand what he said since he was a Hebrew and what he said was spoken in the Hebrew tongue.” The *ActsThom* depicts an enthusiastic banquet and Thomas’s own self-restraint.⁹⁸ In disclosing his Hebrew background, his association with Jesus and his prophetic ability in his own right, the text sets him apart

⁹⁴ Daniel Sheerin, 2002, speaks of Ausonius’ *Cento* as a “ludicrous” lifting of familiar texts and asks whether an ensemble constitutes a text.

⁹⁵ Ausonius, *A Nuptial Cento*, 7 (LCL 384-7).

⁹⁶ Ausonius, *A Nuptial Cento*, 8. In the LCL edition, 1919, Latin faces Latin for section 8, 386-91, with no English translation.

⁹⁷ *Acts Thom*, 1.4-8 (340-3), translation Drijvers.

⁹⁸ And prophetic abilities as he promises (in Hebrew) that the cup-bearer who smites him will be dragged away by dogs, which then happens.

from this Andropolis/city of men. It shows us a risqué banquet full of celebrating guests, with the bride and groom already absented.

As in so many of our texts, we find no explicit mention of women guests, or participants other than the flute girl. While, as always, we wonder whether we can interpret this elaborately crafted narrative as telling us anything about the nature of weddings, one interesting detail appears elsewhere as well. Oil appears in a couple of rabbinic texts that concern weddings. Neither mentions women, but interestingly enough one text prohibits anointing oil⁹⁹ and one accepts it as a matter of course. In fact we learn that the “dripping of oil on the heads’ of scholars” affords proof that a public wedding had occurred and that the bride was a virgin.¹⁰⁰ This wonderfully complicates the line between luxurious-but-acceptable-feasts and feasts that are over the top. Moreover, because Thomas the apostle serves in this narrative to destabilize licit sexuality and urge celibacy upon the bride and groom, we can learn of his discomfort (and presumably that of those like him) with the luxury and sexuality of the wedding feast, but we will find it difficult to generalize from this example. Likewise John Chrysostom preached against excesses at weddings, which compared unfavorably with ideal weddings such as that of Isaac and Rebecca, in which: “there was no sign of superfluities and inanities, no sign of devilish rites, no sign of cymbals and pipes and dances, nor their screaming – instead, complete dignity, complete wisdom, complete restraint.”¹⁰¹ Once again we learn that wedding celebrations tested social boundaries.

In addition to the prohibition of oil noted in the Tosefta text above, we also find other rabbinic texts exploring the excesses of wedding feasts. In the amoraic (4th -6th c. CE) accounts described below the breaking of a glass curtails the creeping wildness. Whether these tales have any relation to the much later custom of breaking a glass at

⁹⁹ tSotah 15.9

¹⁰⁰ bKetub 17b.

¹⁰¹ Chrysostom, *Homiliae in Genesim* 48, translation Hill, 112.

weddings is anybody's guess, but for our purposes they describe wild feasting that begs for a moderating hand:

Mar son of Rabina made the wedding feast for his son. When he noticed that the Rabbis were very wild, he brought a precious cup worth four hundred Zuz, and broke it before them and they immediately became sad. R. Ashi made the wedding feast for his son. When he noticed that the Rabbis were very wild, he brought a cup of white glass and broke it before them and immediately they became sad.¹⁰²

As in *ActsThom* we do not hear of women guests, we know only of rabbis who are wild. Elsewhere the terms “all” or “everyone” demanded that we at least considered the possibility that this inclusiveness encompassed women. Here we might be tempted to interpret the threats and lack of specific mention of women to imply that it was too dangerous for women. Except that these threats only rarely do appear framed like that. Cyprian sees these occasions as dangerous to virgins, but his vociferousness implies their presence nevertheless. By contrast, in tractate *Kallah*, R. Eliezer felt the bride presented the danger to the male rabbis present. The occasion did not endanger her, nor, we may presume, would it have endangered her female companions, if there were any. Rather, the bride embodied the danger to other males. We might assume bawdiness constitutes a danger to women, but most of our texts do not say so. Certainly the various dangers at weddings coincide with silence concerning women present, but we do not have an overwhelming reason to read these as cause for excluding women.

VIII. Moderating the Wildness

Balancing such risks, we also find voices urging restraint and suggesting a vision of more moderation in weddings celebrations. The *ActsThom*, Chrysostom, and the Babylonian Talmud excerpts simultaneously suggest the wild behaviors and authorial

¹⁰² bBer 30b-31a, translation adapted from Lauterbach, 1925 (reprint 1970), 350.

concern. Cyprian urged virgins to say away. We also find some evidence that simultaneously suggests the importance of attending weddings but expresses wariness about these events. The fourth century Council of Laodicea warned of immodest behavior:

Canon 53. Christians, when they attend weddings, must not join in wanton dances, but modestly dine or breakfast, as is becoming to Christians.

Canon 54. Members of the priesthood and of the clergy must not witness the plays at weddings or banquets; but, before the players enter, they must rise and depart.

Thus we see concern for both lay and clergy guests. Peter Brown contrasts the concern for clergy at weddings with Chrysostom's call for marrying couples to have a priest offer a blessing: ". . . priests [ought to be] summoned to strengthen the harmony of the union by prayers and blessings so that the love for her spouse may be increased and the young woman's continence may be heightened."¹⁰³ For Brown, on the one hand, Canon 54 from Laodicea suggests the marginal nature of John's suggestion: "Priests were rarely invited to these occasions; and those who came were advised to leave early."¹⁰⁴ On the other hand, I suggest that we read this as implying that priests came because "everyone" came, whether they were invited "as priests" or no, but priests had special concerns regarding modesty. Meanwhile, we observe in this text a concern for all Christians, rather than for women in particular.

Laodicea speaks to both sides of the balance between wildness and potential. David Hunter follows the new possibilities and traces the earliest involvement of Christian officials at Christian weddings. While he finds "little evidence of any specifically Christian rituals in North African Christianity at least through the lifetime of Augustine," he does observe that "[b]ishops were sometimes (probably often) invited to be present to sign the marriage contracts." Nevertheless, he finds nothing to compare

¹⁰³ *Hom Gen* 48, translation adapted from Hill, 112.

¹⁰⁴ Brown, 1988, 313, n. 49.

with the blessings already mentioned as associated with Ambrose or Siricius, occurring in fourth century Italy “at the hands of a bishop.”¹⁰⁵ With Chrysostom they suggest the inclusion of explicitly Christian practices at weddings, and likely explicitly “Christian” guests as well. In other words, in contrast to *Acts Thom* in which the Apostle hijacks the weddings, ignores the guests and converts the bride and groom to a celibate life-style, these other early Christian voices stake out a presence rather than overturn or abandon a dangerous situation, but one rich in communal importance. This further explains the presence of the priest, but we find no mention of women other than the bride. Again we look for the concern for female modesty at wedding but find no evidence.

Rabbinic literature walks the same line concerning embracing weddings despite dangerous behaviors. In addition to the accounts of two rabbis each breaking a glass to settle the revelers, one also finds claims concerning appropriate language at weddings feasts such as that of R. Akiba and his concern for sacrilegious use of Song of Songs.¹⁰⁶ In addition, a later piece of talmud warns: “All know for what purpose a bride enters the wedding chamber, yet for one *who speaks obscenely* [about these things], even a confirmed sentence of seventy years’ happiness is reversed [and replaced with one] for evil.”¹⁰⁷ Both of these comments concern what not to sing or say. Like Chrysostom and Ambrose, the later rabbis also begin to formulate blessings for a wedding. As mentioned above, the text of such a string of blessing appears for the first time in the Babylonian Talmud.¹⁰⁸ This is prescriptive language, presenting an authorized vision of both bride and groom. And perhaps with these blessings the rabbis also forged a more formal role for themselves.

¹⁰⁵ Hunter, 83. In asking these questions, Hunter makes apparent the need for a new study of Christian marriage practice. Ritzer, 1970, and Stevenson, 1982, both provide a lot of information, but rely on uncritical assumptions where Jewish practice is concerned.

¹⁰⁶ See section VI above.

¹⁰⁷ bSabb 33a.

¹⁰⁸ See section VI.

Unfortunately for our inquiry, their concerns about appropriate language never mention whether women as well as men attend these occasions. None of these texts stipulate a guest list. The Council of Laodicea and the rabbis take for granted that women were either absent or present. In the case of rabbinic concerns about language, three quite different intertexts concerning the presence of women stand available to us: the Mishnah, which assigns wives the right to attend weddings; the story of Akiba's daughter, who was not at the feast with the other guests; and the furious R. Eliezer, encountering the bride at the table. Nevertheless, while these intertexts emphasize that this was a contested issue, the silences do not even tell us if women were a relevant concern when it came to obscene language. The effort to reform weddings by either Christianizing or Judaizing them addresses some of their inherent wildness, but does not explicitly appeal to the role of women guests. This serves as another indication that the danger of weddings did not pervasively concern women or supply a reason to exclude them.

IX. Did Young Women Attend Wedding Feasts?

Finally, let us consider one more category now that we have already considered women guests, the bride, and how the threat or danger plays out at weddings. Women who were already married might have been seen to remain unaffected by the bawdiness at weddings, but in considering female guests at weddings we may also examine the possibility that the matron had a right to attend, but that the maiden would have been excluded, as we have already seen Cyprian suggest. After all, even male youths had to attain a certain age in order to be included in Greek symposia.¹⁰⁹ It thus seems reasonable to consider that the community might exclude maidens from wedding feasts,

¹⁰⁹ Booth, 1991.

even as they included adult females and males. Once again the limitations of the sources make absolute conclusions difficult, however the evidence here also suggests inclusion.

Foss argues for feasts in general, “the point at which free youths would be allowed to dine formally as an adult at table is not entirely clear, but it was probably marriage for girls.”¹¹⁰ As evidence he cites a wedding poem by Catullus (1st c. BCE) wherein the “of age” bride appears in attendance. Ironically, upon further consideration the poem also reveals maidens in addition to the bride. The poem is not altogether clear, but after the men rise from the table, the young women also “rise”: “View ye the Youths, O Maids unwed? Then rise to withstand them. . .”¹¹¹ The maidens rising with the youths allow for the strong possibility that they also rise from meal tables. This evidence then appears to demonstrate the opposite, that young girls were *not excluded* from attending wedding feasts.

In any case, despite the bawdiness of the procession, maidens appear as part of it. While we find less reason to conclude that young women feasted, the evidence clearly demonstrates that they often helped the bride prepare for the wedding. The helpers appear in literary sources as well as pottery remains, in fact giving their name to one sort of pottery. *Loutrophoros* technically means “someone who carries the bath-water.” A “bride helper” carried water in a *loutrophoros* for bathing the bride before her wedding.

Such a *loutrophoros* also served as a grave gift. Or a tomb marker might depict female bridal helpers.¹¹² A grave marker from Leontopolis (2nd c. BCE – 2nd c. CE), identified as Jewish, also hints at bridal helpers.¹¹³ The text on the marker includes the

¹¹⁰ Foss, 1994, 46.

¹¹¹ Catullus, *Carmina*, 62.1-6, trans. R.F. Burton:

Youths: Vesper is here, O youths, rise all; for Vesper Olympus
Scales and in fine enfires what lights so long were expected!
Time 'tis now to arise, now leave we tables rich laden,
Now shall the Virgin come; now chant we the Hymenaeus
Hymen O Hymenaeus: Hymen here, O Hymenaeus!

Damsels: View ye the Youths, O Maids unwed? Then rise to withstand them. . .
(Catullus, *Carmina*, 62.1-6, trans. R.F. Burton)

¹¹² Rehm, 14-5 and 27-9.

¹¹³ JIGRE 31, Noy, 1994.

word “decked” (*numpokomoi*), suggesting that others dressed her. If this stone did belong to the Jewish cemetery, it becomes one of the earliest examples of a Jewish text describing a bride with some sort of “other” or companion to dress her for her wedding.

Likewise we see young women in Pseudo-Philo’s *Liber Antiquitatum Biblicarum* (1st– 2nd c. CE) as they join Jephtha’s daughter, Seila, who prepares herself for death rather than a wedding because of her father’s vow. Her speech describes how the women that would have prepared her for her wedding now prepare her for her funeral:

O mother, it was in vain you bore your only daughter,
 for hell (*infernus*) has become my bridal bed,
 and my unguents will be spilt on the earth
 and all the oil you blended for me wasted,
 and the white dress my mother sewed, the moth will eat it,
 and the flowers in the garland my nurse plaited will wither in time,
 and the hyacinth coverlet I wove with my own skill,
 and my purple dress, worms will ruin.
 And my maiden friends, when they tell of me,
 shall weep and groan for me through the days.¹¹⁴

Not only does this lament present impressive wedding imagery, but as Baker notes, “[e]ach item . . . becomes . . . the work of a woman with whom Seila shares an intimate bond.”¹¹⁵ The unspecified female helpers become central to Seila’s presentation of herself and her aborted wedding. We thus find young women assumed to at least provide companionship to Seila, whether at wedding or funeral. In all of the above examples such women appear as part of wedding, if not necessarily the wedding feasts.

Another poem of Catullus surprisingly places maidens at the very door of the wedding chamber (and thus also nearer the next round of feasting?). This reference appears startling because we find “maidens” situated adjacent to bawdy teasing of the bride and groom outside the wedding chamber:

Now husband, you may approach:

¹¹⁴ LAB 40.6, Alexiou and Dronke, 1971, 823.

¹¹⁵ Baker, 1989, 201.

your wife is in your bedroom,
 shining with her flowery little face,
 like to the white chamomile
 or the yellow poppy. . .

Play as you please, and
 produce children soon. It is not right
 for so ancient a name to
 be lacking in children, but rather it should always
 be reproduced from the same stock . . .

I would like to see a miniature Torquatus
 from the bosom of his mother
 reaching out his fresh young hands
 smiling sweetly at his father
 with his little lips half open . . .

Maidens, close the doors:
 we have played enough. Good
 wedded people, live well and
 keep your youth fit and strong in constant
 exercise of its function.¹¹⁶

In the poem the “maidens” who will close the door have overheard all this teasing and witnessed the bride and groom as they wait for the doors to shut. This is in keeping with Cyprian’s concern about what virgins hear. The only question concerns whether processing entitled these young women to share in the feast. Whether or not they joined in whatever feasting had occurred, or was to occur, they certainly were not sheltered from the erotic charge of this wedding. The juxtaposition of “maidens” with the bawdy speech to the newly-weds may indicate that weddings belonged outside normal rules. While normally families may have protected their maidens from sexually charged situations, weddings may have served as the “exception that proved the rule.” We can, of course, imagine that the poet includes maidens where they had not been,¹¹⁷ but we can also see young girls in many of the events surrounding weddings.

¹¹⁶ Catullus, *Carmina*, 61, selected verses from lines 184-228, translated by Godwin, 1995.

¹¹⁷ Godwin, translator of this poem, reminds us that this is a literary creation and it is “unlikely that the poem was actually sung to accompany the wedding itself: attempts to match the words to the actions of the Roman wedding ceremony are unconvincing,” 100. See such an attempt in Thomsen, 1992.

One final text explicitly shows maidens entering the banquet. In this parable from Matthew ten bridesmaid wait for the bridegroom.¹¹⁸ Only five have come equipped with enough oil. Significantly “while they [the five without oil] went to buy it, the bridegroom came, and those who were ready went with him into the wedding banquet; and the door was shut.”¹¹⁹ For the sake of the parable they must be included in the banquet so that the watchful receive their reward of inclusion. Following this episode Jesus concludes by interpreting the parable: “Keep awake therefore, for you know neither the day nor the hour.” On the other hand, consideration of the audience reminds that parables work best if they draw on understandable images. Thus this text certainly suggests that some feasts included maidens, at least in the initial stages.

Although we’ve seen young women in events surrounding the feast, and even entering the banquet itself, we cannot know whether attendants received official invitations, or whether it was it just presumed that local young women who were relatives and friends of the bride would, after preparing the bride, stay for appropriate parts of the day. Nevertheless, unless we determine to read all silences regarding women as negatives, we cannot easily decide that the feast excluded young women. Matthew taken together with Cyprian and Catullus makes it hard on the one hand to conclude that those “present” never included maidens as well as matrons. Perhaps the issue comes down to the real danger of rape or seduction to young, single, women rather than danger to the sensibilities of the community. One can imagine that an isolated young woman might well be compromised in a feasting situation, and yet, at a wedding, if a group of young women appeared together, and if together occupied the couches described by Lucian or Athenaeus, their numbers might have provided some protection, no matter how much bawdiness or innuendo accompanied the occasion.

¹¹⁸ Matt 25.1. Duling’s note in HarperCollins study Bible mentions some witnesses that indicate they wait for the bride and groom.

¹¹⁹ Matt 25.10.

X. Conclusions

Having thus navigated small mentions of women and large silences we see more reason than not to conclude that women, even young women, joined with the rest of the community to celebrate weddings. We also find some variations and select evidence contesting this practice, so we may also imagine certain times and places where wedding festivities excluded women. Nevertheless, the critiques themselves, popping up from century to century amid different cultures, demonstrate that exclusion was not the standard policy. Numerous accounts suggest the importance of wedding festivities to the entire community. We also considered the dangers associated with wedding meals, but they seemed after all not to discourage the participation of women. We struggle to understand the boundaries between *the* feast and the many wedding-related meals as we seek to locate women within these occasions. As we recognize the importance of maidens and youths who sing and taunt and close the door on the bride and groom in their seclusion, we consider the need not to place too much emphasis on one feast as opposed to another. Nevertheless, we know of some brides, and some women hosts and guests who certainly reclined at significant wedding meals. Moreover, we learn of even young women entering the banquet with Jesus. All of these women participated in the feasting as well as the importance and the risks belonging to weddings.

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