

A Response to Hal Taussig's Paper
Greco-Roman Meals and Performance of Identity: A Ritual Analysis
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Since Dennis' response was circulated to the participants of the seminar in advance (and is well known to them, I suppose), I will not repeat those of his comments on Hal's paper which coincide with my own observations. Instead I will try to concentrate on the more general input of Hal's application of ritual theory for our task of understanding ancient meals.

1. Hal's application of ritual theory on Greco-Roman meals functions as a systematic pattern for structuring the data we have collected so far. As his examples show, many of our observations and a good number of the categories we have used so far (negotiating boundaries and bonding, utopian character, typical problems discussed in a sympotic setting etc.) are corroborated by the categories of ritual theory. This agreement is necessary in order to establish ritual theory as a tool for understanding ancient meals. I regard this as a major innovation, since all our attempts to find an overall definition of ancient meals (with regard to participants; degree of organization; religious distinction; social function etc.) have failed so far (esp. with the results of our 2005 seminar on Women in Meals in mind). The systematic of ritual theory (or ritual theories? here I am not sure yet) is general enough to include all the distinctions between the individual meal "types" we have discussed so far.

2. It is, in my understanding, this character of systematic generalization that allows to overcome the deficiencies of my own description of meal values which Hal correctly addressed as "somewhat static" (and which, compared to ritual theory, lacked even the slightest touch of methodological reflection). The question that arises at this point is: Does ritual theory avoid these shortcomings simply because its categories are wide enough to comprise the great variety of meal-"types" we have encountered so far, or rather because it is flexible in itself?

Two questions arise and need two answers: (a) With regard to the description of a single meal, ritual theory provides an enormous advantage, for it allows to grasp the dynamic aspects inherent in meals: The descriptive categories "ritualization" (Bell), "marking/perfecting" (J.Z. Smith), or "ongoing practice" (Bourdieu) add a complete new perspective for understanding a meal. (b) But is the same true for understanding historical changes and developments that have occurred over the time? At least as far as Christian meals are concerned, a substantial change needs to be assessed when the evening supper migrated to the morning (something we still have to think about): In the opinion of those who commented on this change (Hippolytus, Cyprian etc.), these morning gatherings were "the" meal, yet not identical with it. From Hal's description I can easily see that the tools in the shed of ritual theory will be fitting for this kind of

meal as well. But how will they work on the change in itself, the necessities that caused it, the losses and advantages (e.g., of “ritual negotiation”) that came along with it? In other words: Is ritual theory insofar “static”, as it allows for an assessment of a great variety of *single* meals, but not for understanding historical processes?

Two concluding remarks: With respect to the problem of ritual history, Hal’s precise distinction between the “ritual” of medieval eucharists and ancient meals indicates, at least, an open question. And: The five examples in which Hal demonstrates how ritual theory works on meal issues seem to intend a generalization that encompasses historical changes. I am not so confident that all aspects in discussion can be understood by establishing a ritual regularity or uniformity (s. Dennis’s comments on the symposiarch).

3. The great improvement of Hal’s applying of ritual theory on meals becomes apparent in those instances where it does not confirm previous results (though in a new terminology and a reflected, theoretical framework), but where it contradicts our explanations of the data or hints to areas that have escaped our attention so far: Here new insights can be gained! (I take it that Dennis’s hint to the problem of slaves in meals is such a new perspective.) I mention two aspects only. The first is, ironically, Paul’s argument in Rom 14 and 15. As Dennis correctly observed, Paul does exactly what ritual theory would require in this situation: He tries to negotiate the tensions within the group; of course, he could not do so “ritually” (for he was not present), but he provided a possible solution which, then, might or might not be “ritually negotiated”. At least, Paul clearly considered his solution as “ritually negotiable”.

The other aspect is the relationship between the ritually defined group of a meal and the larger society to which its participants belong. As I understand, this is an essential element in all the theoretical models, and it made me aware of the fact that we know quite a bit about the social stratification and related problems *within* the meal situation, but almost nothing about how this interfered with the relation outside the sympotic setting. Would, for instance, the fact that two persons of different social status reclined together in a meal affect their relationship in other situations? As far as I can see, none of the literary evidence we have points to an affirmative answer: Lucian’s stressing the utopian character of the meal or Plutarch’s insisting that there be a difference between the outside and the meal relations indicate, at least, that there was not a direct impact. Therefore, I am wondering if these utopian counter-images which frequently pop up in our literature, serve as a stabilization of the general social stratification. (Which, of course, would be proof of such an influence.)