

Rethinking the Eucharistic Origins

Response to the Work of Andrew McGowan

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First of all, let me emphasize my thanks for this excellent historical work on actual Christian meal practise and what one can and cannot know from a critical and close reading of all attainable sources up to the 4th century and beyond. As a New Testament scholar, I could gather much about what early Christians did and did not do during their banquets and ritual meals. I agree that there is no evidence to speak of two meal types, a non-sacramental *Agape* and a sacramental *Eucharist*, as Hans Lietzmann did in the beginning of the 20th century or Bernd Kollmann, more recently, in the nineties.¹ Meals are in general full meals – whatever food and drink however was served – and no token meals – as Andrew McGowan puts as the modern practise in western churches. And there is no continuity between the meals Jesus shared as a guest, with tax collectors and sinners (and Pharisees in Luke)², and those in which he is the host (the feeding stories and the meal in the upper room).³ The latter reflect post-Easter experiences and emerging Christologies.⁴

Different words like *agape*, *eucharistia* or *kyriakos deipnos* do not as such name and indicate different practices, even though I have to mention, that in the German Protestant tradition (since Reformation) we call a meal during the worship service with the words of institution simply as Abendmahl (literarily translated evening meal). The term itself, with or without the prefix Lord, is therefore, in my opinion, no indication of the interpretive understanding of the meal. Moreover, as dogmatical differences in interpreting the words of institution cause a lot of ecumenical problems in middle Europe, Lietzmann's *Agape* had political implications in providing a possibility of shared meal-rituals between Roman Catholics and Presbyterians and Lutherans. It should be noted that even as late as 1973 the two protestant denominations had no official inter-communion (Abendmahlsgemeinschaft).

I agree to the point that one of the most standardized features in all early Christian meals and banquets is the *beracha* or blessing over food and drink in continuation

¹ Hans Lietzmann, *Messe und Herrenmahl. Eine Studie zur Geschichte der Liturgie* (AKG 8; Berlin: Marcus und Weber 1926). Bernd Kollmann, *Ursprung und Gestalten der frühchristlichen Mahlfeier* (Göttinger Theologische Arbeiten 439; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck 1990).

² And was therefore called „a glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners” (Mt 11:19, Lk 7:34).

³ Cf. The Meals of Jesus and the Meals of the Church. Cf. as well Dennis E. Smith, “Table Fellowship and the Historical Jesus,” in: *Religious Propaganda and Missionary Competition in the New Testament World. Essays Honoring Dieter Georgi* (ed. Lukas Bormann, a.o.; NT.Suppl 74; Leiden: Brill 1994) 135-162.

⁴ In the following, I will discuss the question of whether “the distinct Eucharist represents the necessary routinization of the proclamation of Jesus into the meal tradition ... (of a) distinct community” (Meals of Jesus, 112), or whether there is some more specific role for the risen Jesus or Kyrios in at least some of the early meals.

with Jewish meal customs. *Didache* informs us that, some took the drink first.⁵ No doubt, early Christians gave their meals different meanings. The formalization of many meal practices into the later Eucharist with the words of institution over a small piece of bread and wine, happened sometimes in the 3rd and 4th centuries, which had a lot to do with social factors of a growing community as well as political factors.⁶ Ascetic Eucharists with bread and water, and other ingredients emphasized the (moral/ethical) difference to the outside society. Even the ascetic opposition to pagan sacrificial system of meat and wine were no longer relevant as Christianity became the state church.

It was also intriguing to read that people not only ate and drank at their meals, but made it meaningful with cheese, honey, milk, oil, salt, fruits and vegetables and perhaps also fish. It would be interesting to know why people chose such ingredients. Is it only coincidence that most of such foods were also offered to the dead in antiquity?⁷ In passing Andrew McGowan notes that Paul, the Onesimus family, and Thecla shared an *Agape*, a meal with bread, water and vegetables, in a tomb and “were joyful over the holy works of Christ” (καὶ εὐφραίνοντο ἐπὶ τοῖς ὁσίοις ἔργοις τοῦ Χριστοῦ).⁸ What is meant by this last expression? I agree that this does not mean that somebody recited the words of institution; rather they might have shared some stories about, or perhaps also enacted the “works of Christ”.

In imitation of non-Jewish (pagan) as well as Jewish customs, early Christians, especially women, brought food not only to the martyrs in prison, but also to the graveyards to dine with their beloved dead.⁹ From modern analogies one learns that the food as well as the mourning and ritual lament at the graveyards constitute a dialogue between the mourner and the deceased, the living and the dead.¹⁰ “Food mediates the opposition between life and death... It is believed to cross the boundary between the world of the living and the world of the dead, to pass from this world on over into the other world where the souls of the dead dwell.”¹¹ If this is one of the reasons for taking out food to the tombs, what role does the dead person play in those meals?¹² Are there analogies to the earliest meals with the dead and risen Christ that can explain the use of the enigmatic words of institution?

⁵ I am not very convinced that 1 Cor 10:16-18 is another meal of this type, because the aim of Paul’s argument is the *koinonia* caused by the one bread and the change of the order could be caused by the line of argumentation.

⁶ Cf. *Ascetic Eucharist* and “Rethinking Agape and Eucharist in Early North African Christianity.”

⁷ For the practice of eating with the dead cf. Ulrich VOLP, *Tod und Ritual in den christlichen Gemeinden der Antike* (SVigChr 65, Leiden: Brill 2002).

⁸ ActThecla 25, cf. *Ascetic Eucharists* 125.

⁹ Cf. MartPoyk 18; Acts of John 72, Augustin, Conf. 6,2, Johannes Chrysostomos, homil. To Joh 11,1f; Mt 9,18; Gregor of Nazianz, orations 15,9 etc.

¹⁰ Anna Caraveli-Chaves, “Bridge Between Worlds. The Greek Women’s Lament as Communicative Event,” *Journal of American Folklore* 93 (1980) 129-157, 141

¹¹ Loring M. Danforth, *The Death Rituals of Rural Greece* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton Univ. Press 1982) 104-5.

¹² From the analogy of the feeding of the martyrs in prison, at least the abundance-tradition of the Martyrium of Perpetua, one can see “that the martyrs were functioning as powerful intermediaries with the divine, providing a means for channelling peace, the restoration of individuals to and within the Christian community and its benefits present as well as heavenly.” (Discipline and Diet, 466).

Andrew McGowan reminds us of the imperial background of *kyriakos* in 1 Cor 11:20 which was already observed by Adolf Deißmann. Deißmann interpreted this use of imperial language as “bewußte Kontrastempfindung,”¹³ a way of emphasising a conscious contrast between Caesar and Christ. Or as Andrew McGowan puts it: “(A) supper that was genuinely ‘lordly’ in the divine sense (...) should be characterized by the example of Christ rather majestic ostentation.”¹⁴ But if *kyriakos* means belonging to *Kyrios* (if this is Caesar, Serapis, Christ or God), what role does the *Kyrios* actually play at that meal?

I agree that we cannot be sure of the words of institution as cited in the first letter to Corinth.¹⁵ And the words are definitely not prayers.¹⁶ Does this ‘cult legend’ or ‘aetiology’ – as Andrew McGowan calls it with many interpreters – “function here as a piece of teaching that interprets the meal and seeks to dictate the conduct of the assembly, not via mimesis only but via catechesis?”¹⁷ Three observations lead me to think in a different direction.

1. From 1 Corinthians 10:1-13 one can observe that, the Corinthians, or better the *gnosis* party there, had a sacramental understanding of the meal. That is why Paul reminds them in a kind of midrash, of two aspects of the biblical wilderness-tradition: the heavenly food and drink Israel enjoyed and the later failure of the wilderness generation. In Paul’s view, the heavenly food courses are not *character indilibilis*, and do not function on their own (like some Corinthians think, at least in Paul’s eyes). It is the behaviour that matters, even for us (1 Cor 10:11), and it matters with whom and how one dines (1 Cor 10:18-22). Cup and Bread constitute the *koinonia*, a sharing in (*metechein*) the death (blood) and body of Christ (10:16). The meal as a whole constitutes the one body (10:17). This is the first theological interpretation of the words of institution we have, and as Paul hopes that the Corinthians will agree with him, he must be referring to a common experience of their meals.
2. What Paul advises in 1 Cor 11:17-34 follows the same line of thought. It is not all that clear to me, whether the problem in Corinth has to do with some of the

¹³ Deißmann, LO, 306.

¹⁴ Meals and their Names, 5.

¹⁵ For Justin I agree, that in the blessings over bread and wine are the reason of the *μεταβολή metabole* of the food while it remains open, if the words from the *hypomnemata of the Apostels* are cited or not. But in Apol. I.66 Justin compares the *eucharistia as* with the Mithras-mysteries: “For the apostles, in the memoirs composed by them, which are called Gospels, have thus delivered unto us what was enjoined upon them; that Jesus took bread, and when He had given thanks, said, ‘This do ye in remembrance of Me, this is My body;’ and that, after the same manner, having taken the cup and given thanks, He said, ‘This is My blood;’ and gave it to them alone. Which the wicked devils have imitated in the mysteries of Mithras, commanding the same thing to be done. For, that bread and a cup of water are placed with certain incantations in the mystic rites of one who is being initiated, you either know or can learn.” This sounds to me as an analogy, that shows at least a kind of sacramental (sacrament is the Latin translation of *mysterion*) understanding of the blessed food as well as a kind of sacramentalization of it through words like “this is my body/blood”.

¹⁶ Cf. „Is there a liturgical Text in this Gospel?”, 74.

¹⁷ „Is there a liturgical Text in this Gospel?” 79

wealthier people. Paul still speaks of divisions and parties (*schismata* and *haireseis* 11:18-19), but most importantly he does not advise to set apart a liturgical meal from a meal that satisfies hunger (11:34).¹⁸ The unworthy meal that causes illness and death in Corinth is a meal “without discerning the body” (11:29-30).¹⁹ It is not a coincidence that the word *soma* is used here again from the quote of the tradition in 11:23. Therefore, I assume it is not only an ideal *Kyrios* who is present at the meal, but a real one with whom the community comes together to dine (cf. 1 Cor 5:4-5). At least the meal itself is for Paul the “proclamation of the Lord’s death” (11:26).

3. The *anamnesis* formula in the Pauline and Lukan tradition (“Do this in remembrance of me”), well known from the Epicurean tradition and other commemorate meals for dead people, points to an enactment of a meal in remembrance of the dead (and risen) Jesus. In addition, some expansions of the Markan tradition in the Gospel of Matthew make a kind of re-enactment likely. Otherwise one cannot explain why Luke changes the Markan tradition only at this point in the passion narrative, and why Matthew adds “drink from it, all of you” (26:27), and “for the forgiveness of sins” (26:28) to the text of Mark. Matthew as well as Luke refer at this point to special traditions in their communities which increase the imperatives, the request to eat and drink, and let a meal practice in the line of the words at least become imaginable.

Therefore, even if we cannot be sure that the exact words of institution played a role in the meals of these four communities, we must assume that there was a story which was enacted in and through their meals. This story or stories – a kind of passion story probably (cf. Ellen Aitken), in which biblical psalms, laments, biblical and actual prophets (cf. 1 Cor 14) and other traditions were also cited – was an integral part of the community banquets of which the words of institution seem to be a kind of short form. I am not too convinced that the form-critical identification ‘cult legend’ (Bultmann) or ‘aetiology’ is a good one to understand the function or ‘Sitz im Leben’ of these words in the ritual itself. But I have to admit, that I do not know a better one. These words seem to be a kind of short form, an expression of the core of the meaning of that meal. Therefore, one question that still remains would be how these earliest communities understood the enigmatic words “this is my body (that is for you)” (1 Cor 11:23 / Mk 14:22) and “this cup is the new covenant in my blood” (1 Cor 11:24) or “this is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many” (Mk 14:24). What do these words tell us about the role of the *Kyrios*, the risen Jesus, plays in the meals? How did these communities communicate with him through the sharing of food?

¹⁸ *Ekdexesthai* (*allelous*) does not only mean wait for each other, but also take or receive from another.

¹⁹ Without discerning the community as a whole - one can add from 1 Cor 10:17 or 12:12 - which represent the *Kyrios*.