

“A Valentinian Response to the Culture of Reclining”

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I have been asked to prepare for this year’s discussion by the SBL Seminar on Meals in the Greco-Roman World a survey of the responses to the culture of reclining at meals found among those early Christians known as Valentinians. Let me begin with an unscholarly and contemporary reflection. As I worked through the Valentinian material, I was reminded of the following sort of experience: At some time in your life, you have perhaps had dining companions or dinner guests who have gone through the entire dinner party seemingly without taking any notice of their surroundings, the décor of the dining room or restaurant, the table settings, the food on the plates before them, or the wine in their glasses. The conversation at the meal has been lively, it has been a good dinner party, and everyone has enjoyed each other’s company, but the arrangements and composition of the meal itself seem to have escaped notice. I would not speculate too much on the reasons—your friends are not boors, after all—but it may be because there has been business to do over the meal or the ideas have been flying fast and furiously, or the meal may be simply a precursor to the rest of the evening’s entertainments or intimacies.

In brief, the Valentinians—at least as they are reflected or refracted in the texts that are reasonably taken as having an association with Valentinus or with the

Valentinian school—would appear to be somewhat like these dinner guests. That is, the very short answer to the question posed for this paper is that *there is no Valentinian response to the culture of reclining at meals, or at least that there is no such response evident in the texts that we have*. What I shall do therefore in this paper is, first, to discuss why we might hope to find some traces of meal practice among the Valentinians, and, second, to outline my approach in attempting to answer this question. I shall then turn to a discussion of the one text, possibly Valentinian, that may allude to a culture of reclining at meals. Finally, I shall take up the question of what this almost complete silence signifies and what are to we make of it.

The reason why we might hope to find some traces of meal practice among the Valentinians is that Valentinian texts display significant interest in ritual practice, more so than many of their contemporaries. In particular, a number of Valentinian texts refer to or reflect upon baptism, anointings, the laying on of hands, and the ritual of the “bridal chamber.” In addition, there are passing references to eucharist¹, although the eucharist itself appears not to be a basis for Valentinian theological reflection. Valentinian eucharistic practice also is one of the objects of heresiological attack by Irenaeus against the Valentinian Marcus (*Adv. haer.* 1.13.2).² Valentinian texts from Nag Hammadi are richer with ritual references than most of the other texts in that corpus. Thus discussions

¹ *A Valentinian Exposition* 43, 20–38; 44, 1–37; *Gospel of Philip* 56, 67; *Excerpta ex Theodoto* 13.4; 82.1.

² Irenaeus’s complaint against Marcus here pertains to Marcus’s practice of consecrating cups of wine, involving women in the consecration, and the mediation of prophecy by what he does with the cups. There is no mention of reclining. Moreover, we should exercise caution before taking Irenaeus’s words as an accurate description of Valentinian practice.

of ritual practices among heterodox groups in early Christianity have tended to place some emphasis on Valentinianism. A second reason to hope to find traces of meal practice among Valentinians is that with some certainty it is possible to count the “school” of Valentinus among the groups in Rome in the middle of the second century C.E. Alongside Justin Martyr and Marcion, Valentinus was probably the leader of a school and/or a house church in the city of Rome.³ This situation leads us to think in terms of social grouping, social and ritual practice, and social location; because of Justin’s portrayal of Christian meal practice in *I Apology* 65 and in light of the eucharistic references in texts associated with Valentinus’s followers, it becomes to reasonable to hope that Valentinian material might yield some information specifically about bodily posture at meals.

A word about my method of proceeding is in order. I have delimited a corpus of texts that are generally associated with Valentinus and his followers. These are as follows:

- the fragments of Valentinus contained in other authors⁴
- *Summer Harvest* (a hymn attributed to Valentinus)⁵
- the two Valentinian inscriptions from Rome⁶
- *Gospel of Truth* (NHC I,3)
- *Gospel of Philip* (NHC II,3)

³ See the discussion in Einar Thomassen, “Orthodoxy and Heresy in Second-Century Rome,” *HTR* (2004): 241–56; and Peter Lampe, *From Paul to Valentinus: Christians at Rome in the First Two Centuries* (German edition, 1989; trans. Michael Steinhauser; Minneapolis: Fortress, 2003), 292–318.

⁴ I have here followed Bentley Layton, *The Gnostic Scriptures* (Garden City, N.Y.; Doubleday, 1987), 229–45.

⁵ Layton, *Gnostic Scriptures*, 246–48.

⁶ See Lampe, *From Paul to Valentinus*, 298–311; these are (1) a mid-second-century marble inscription from the Via Latina and (2) a late second- or early-third-century marble grave inscription for Flavia Sophe, also from the Via Latina.

- *Prayer of the Apostle Paul* (NHC I,1)
- *Tripartite Tractate* (NHC I,5)
- *Treatise on the Resurrection* (NHC I,4)
- *(First) Apocalypse of James* (NHC V,3)
- *Interpretation of Knowledge* (NHC XI,1)
- *A Valentinian Exposition* (NHC XI,2)⁷
- *Ptolemy Letter to Flora*
- *Excerpta ex Theodoto*
- the fragments of Heracleon’s *Commentary on the Gospel of John*

For the purposes of this investigation, I have not examined in detail the portrayals of the Valentinians by the heresiologists since it would be difficult to isolate a “Valentinian response” to a culture of reclining from the cultural expectations of the heresiologists.⁸

As I have examined these texts, I have been alert to any mention of reclining specifically in the context of other ritual or dining contexts. In addition, I have searched for any use of “reclining” used as a metaphor in the theological discourses of these texts. This second step is necessary in order to understand whether and how the bodily practice of reclining at meals is engaged, adopted, contested, or negotiated in the conceptual world of Valentinian thought. I have also looked for references to dining rooms, triclinia, and gatherings for dining, including any discussions of communal eating and drinking.

I would note that I have excluded references to the bridal chamber from this investigation, except to attend to whatever dining references there may be in relation to the mention of the bridal chamber. The “bridal chamber” is an important locus in Valentinian writings, used both metaphorically for the human relationship with the divine and also, it would appear, as a name for a distinct ritual practice. I mention here only

⁷ I follow here the list provided in Ismo Dunderberg, “The School of Valentinus,” in Antti Marjanen and Petri Luomanen, *A Companion to Second-Century ‘Heretics’* (VCSupp76; Leiden: Brill, 2005), 84.

⁸ A brief investigation has not yielded any material relevant to this question.

briefly *Gospel of Philip* 67.29–30, "The lord [did] everything in a mystery, a baptism and a chrism and a eucharist and a redemption and a bridal chamber." Even though weddings included feasts, the use of the bridal chamber in Valentinian writings is not associated with meals and indeed appears specifically focused on the intimate nuptial relationship, however spiritually or metaphorically apprehended. The bodily postures associated with the bridal chamber are not, in my view, the same postures as those associated with the meal or symposium. Moreover, whatever happens in the bridal chamber is not contrasted or compared with meal practices in the Valentinian texts.

The results of this investigation are disappointing. With the exception of one of Valentinian inscriptions, which I shall discuss below, none of the texts I examined yielded any information at all that would help to identify a "response to a culture of reclining." Indeed these texts are remarkably silent about reclining; they do not mention it. References to the eucharist (or baptism or the bridal chamber, for that matter) do not include any mention of reclining or any other bodily posture. Reclining is not engaged metaphorically in Valentinian theological exposition or reflection. There are references to eating or to being consumed, but none of these speak of communal eating. Likewise, with the exception of one of the Via Latina inscriptions, no mention is made of dining rooms, triclinia, or gatherings for dining.

The one exception is the mid-second-century fragmentary marble inscription from the Via Latina in Rome:⁹

⁹ See Lampe, *From Paul to Valentinus*, 298–99, who cites the initial publication of the inscription and the subsequent discussions.

τρα δ'έμοι παστῶν δαδουχοῦσιν συν(
)απίνας πεινοῦσιν ἐν ἡμετέρο(
)νοῦντες γενέτην καὶ υἷέα δοξάσον(
)γῆς ἔνθα μόνης καὶ ἀληθείης ῥύ(

Peter Lampe reconstructs the text as follows and translates it:

λουτρά δ'έμοι παστῶν δαδουχοῦσιν συνάδελφοι
εἰλαπίνας πεινοῦσιν ἐν ἡμετέροισι δόμοισι
ὑμνοῦντες γενέτην καὶ υἷέα δοξάσοντες
πηγῆς ἔνθα μόνης καὶ ἀληθείης ῥύσις εἶη

Co(brothers) of the bridal chambers, celebrate with torches the (ba)ths for me;
They hunger for (ban)quets in ou(r rooms);
(La)uding the Father and praisin(g) the Son;
O, may there be flow(ing) of the only (sp)ring and of the truth in that very place.

A Valentinian context for this inscription has been argued by M. Guarducci and Lampe, following the suggestion of Manlio Simonetti. Lampe further tests and refutes the response of C. Scholten that the inscription is not Christian, Valentinian, or religious, but rather a pagan, non-religious, wedding inscription.¹⁰ Recognizing that its Valentinian context is not secure, I nonetheless include it here as the one reference to a culture of dining from among the group of possibly Valentinian texts.

The key words are in the second line: εἰλαπίνας (“banquets”) and δόμοισι (“rooms, chambers, houses”: Lampe here draws upon the epic usage of the δόμος). It is important to note, however, that both words are reconstructions of lacunae. He suggests that an alternative possibility for the end of line 2 would be ἀναγαίους (“dining rooms”) but this is slightly too long for the space.

¹⁰ See C. Scholten, “Gibt es Quellen zur Sozialgeschichte der Valentinianer Roms?” *ZNW* 79 (1988): 244–61.

The inscription itself is composed in dactylic hexameters, the meter of epic. It is displayed, according to Lampe, in a "suburban villa"; he speculates that it was "displayed in the room where the baptisms took place." Lampe uses this inscription along with the second Via Latina inscription, the acrostic grave inscription for Flavia Sophe, also argued to belong to a Valentinian context, as part of his argument for that Valentinians in Rome belonged among the "socially privileged."¹¹

For our purposes, if we grant the Valentinian context for this inscription, it provides us with evidence that Valentinians (or *these* Valentinians) participated in a banqueting culture that took place in houses. It would appear here that banquets were part of a ritual complex that included baptisms or baths, hymns, and the bridal chamber. This coheres with the passing indications to ritual in other Valentinian texts. In terms of a Valentinian *response* to a culture of reclining, however, it must be noted that reclining *per se* is not mentioned and can only be assumed as proper to the banquet. What is evident is that reclining is not the subject of reflection, contestation, refutation, negotiation, or the establishment of boundaries or communal identity in this or any other Valentinian text.

What are we to make of this silence? I would suggest two options. The first is that Valentinians did not recline at meals but also did not take it as a point of differentiation from Roman culture or from other Christian groups. I think this option is unlikely, since I would expect that reclining (or not) would appear as a point of contestation in the texts, given the apparent habitual and normal practices of the social context. Moreover, I would expect that not-reclining would also become a site for Valentinian theological reflection, which we do not see.

¹¹ Lampe, *From Paul to Valentinus*, 313.

The second option is that Valentinians, like most of their contemporaries in the Roman world, reclined at meals, thought nothing special of it, and thus did not adopt it as a discursive site for their theology. I would also observe that we do not have any narrative texts from Valentinians. That is, if we had stories, then we might find, as we do in the narrative gospels, portrayals of reclining of meals but where this bodily posture is not otherwise engaged. Perhaps, moreover, the emphasis in Valentinian "social" life lay more in the school practices, the discursive, the speculative, and even in those intimacies that came after the meal, that is, with the bridal chamber.