

Notes on early Christian responses to corporeality, sexuality, and intimacy  
in dining culture

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A. Jesus as exemplar?

In preparing these notes, I chose to focus primarily on material outside the Gospel tradition. Having done so, however, I ultimately realized I could not ignore the Gospel evidence entirely. Why? Jesus enjoyed dinner parties, or so the evidence suggests. He was remembered as a partygoer. In the Gospel of John, what is considered unusual is that Jesus lowers himself to wash the feet of his fellow diners. That he reclines amidst his friends is not out of the ordinary (13:1-25). A picture emerges of Jesus as one accustomed to recline with friends and associates at meals. Thus, while I don't bring to the seminar table any new insights about Jesus and meals—a topic well covered by many, including of course members of this seminar—I would at least like to raise the question of the implications of Jesus' dining practices for Christians of later generations.

The Gospels suggest Jesus was criticized for his dining behavior. According to Luke, for example, after a sumptuous banquet held by a tax collector named Levi, Jesus was criticized by Pharisees and scribes for reclining among tax collectors and sinners (Luke 5:29-32; Matthew 9:10-13). A Pharisee named Simon who hosted Jesus at another dinner party silently grumbled that Jesus permitted himself to be touched by a sinful woman who washed his feet with her hair (7:36-50; compare Mark 14:3-5, where the

target of criticism is a woman who anointed Jesus). Although we can debate the meanings of the corporal intimacy in this latter example, Simon's disapproval of Jesus' laxity in letting a sinful woman touch him suggests that we should not ignore the physical and potentially eroticized intimacy implicit in that represented encounter.<sup>1</sup>

For the purposes of these notes on Christian responses to corporeality, sexuality, and intimacy in dining culture, I do not have a question per se about Jesus' involvement in such moments or about Lukan or Johannine treatments of Jesus' presence at banquets. Instead, I would like to gesture toward another question. How would a Christian man of the late second or early third century have responded to a woman who attempted to wash his feet with her tears and dry them with her hair? As I will argue later in these notes, however central dining was to early Christian gatherings, Christian writers regularly expressed discomfort with the physicality of dining experiences. A potentially useful exercise—that I have not pursued—would be to trace patristic references to key dining scenes in the Gospels. How often are Jesus' physical encounters allegorized? Are there any references that emphasize the corporeality and intimacy of those scenes? Do patristic writers routinely ignore the intimacy of these scenes? Although I have not pursued these leads, perhaps some who participate in the seminar discussion will have insights to offer.

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<sup>1</sup> Charles H. Cosgrove, who sets out to “clarify the social meaning of the woman’s gesture with her hair,” resolutely argues against an eroticized interpretation of the scene. In the course of Cosgrove’s argument, he amply demonstrates that a woman’s unbound hair could carry many meanings in the Greco-Roman world. On my view, he is less successful in downplaying the physical and potentially eroticized intimacy of the scene. Simon’s disdain is key. Cosgrove argues that Simon’s response is conditioned by the identity of woman as a sinner—which a prophet should have intuited—rather than her actions. This seems to me rather too fine a distinction. Something about the woman touching Jesus disturbs the host. See “A Woman’s Unbound Hair in the Greco-Roman World, With Special Reference to the Story of the ‘Sinful Woman’ in Luke 7:36-50” (JBL 124 [2005] 675-692, esp. p. 675).

According to the Gospel narratives, the banquet was an important setting for Jesus' interactions with his friends and acquaintances. Moreover, Jesus often drew on banquet imagery in his parables and other teachings. Communal dining was also a central early Christian practice, perhaps in part because Jesus had modeled such behavior, but also because of the centrality of common meals in Greco-Roman cultures. Although we may see parallels between Gospel representations of Jesus reclining at meals and accounts of later Christians gathered to dine and to worship together, I would suggest that in one significant way the dining Jesus did not serve as an exemplar for Christian communities. The repeated but brief Gospel accounts that link Jesus and banqueting hint at a high degree of ease with dining practices, whereas Christian communities entertain reservations about implicit dangers of the banquet setting. We may even speculate that, like the Pharisee named Simon in the Gospel of Luke, a number of prominent Christian theologians would have looked askance at Jesus' willingness to allow an unknown woman to caress his feet with her hair.

#### B. Implications of cannibalism charges

Early Christians claimed that their enemies charged them with an extreme breach of dining ethics, notably, dining on infants. The charge exists in various forms.<sup>2</sup> Most references to the cannibalism charge are brief, but in some sources, the charge is elaborated. Cannibalistic dining is followed by incestuous sex, which transpires in the dark after dogs knock over candlesticks, the dogs having been tempted with bits of meat

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<sup>2</sup> See, e.g., Justin Martyr, *1 Apol.* 26; *2 Apol.* 12; Athenagoras, *Leg.* 3; Tatian *Orat.* 25; Minucius Felix, *Oct.* 9, Tertullian *Ad. Nat.* 1.7, 1.8, and 1.15, and *Apol.* 7, 8.

to enact this wicked trick: “We are spoken of as utter reprobates and are accused of having sworn to murder babies and to eat them and of committing adulterous acts before the repast. Dogs, you say, the pimps of darkness, overturn candles and procure license for our impious lusts” (Tertullian, Apology 7.1). The setting for the unspeakable behavior is a symposium, with men and women apparently reclining together. Tertullian imagines what instructions for such a meal might include: “Meanwhile, as you recline at table, note the place where your mother is, and your sister; note it carefully, so that, when the dogs cause darkness to fall, you may make no mistake” (8.3).

Alleged activities at Christian feasts thus include perverse versions of corporeality—consuming bloody infant corpses—and of intimacy—sexual relations between men and their wives or sisters. Christian repetition of these charges evokes latent fears of ever-present danger inherent in the pleasures of dining, danger associated with the temptations of food and sex, here imagined in terms of horror. In repudiating the charges, Christian authors hurl insults back at the wider pagan world: The stories of Greek and Roman gods and heroes, for example, include plenty of tales of cannibals enjoying “Thyestean feasts.” Moreover, as a result of indiscriminate promiscuity men are said to unwittingly frequent prostitutes who are their offspring; by implication, pagan men cannot claim that they know themselves to be innocent of incest. In contrast, Tertullian pointedly notes, Christians practice chastity (9.19).

In the *Octavius* of Minucius Felix, with which Tertullian may have been familiar, the familiar charge of incest takes this form: “On a special day they gather for a feast with all their children, sisters, mothers—all sexes and all ages. There, flushed with the banquet after much feasting and drinking, they begin to burn with incestuous passions”

(9.6). Minucius's version of the incest charge thus includes a brief reference to the effects of drinking, a standard feature of symposia and a standard trope in discourse related to the symposium, as contributing to the debauchery to come. Indeed, excessive consumption of food and drink is implicitly a component of the debauchery. The charge continues: "In the shameless dark with unspeakable lust they copulate in random unions, all equally being guilty of incest, some by deed, but everyone by complicity" (9.7).

Like Tertullian, Minucius alleges that all pagan men are complicit in incest because of the possibility, however remote, of copulating with one's own abandoned offspring. By contrast, Minucius assures the reader, Christian men are faithful to their wives (31.5). Minucius offers a thumbnail sketch of a Christian banquet. "In our banquets we have regard not for modesty alone but for temperance as well; we do not indulge in sumptuous feasting, nor do we prolong the banquet with unmixed wine. Rather we temper gaiety with gravity, chaste in our conversation, even more chaste in our persons" (31.5). Minucius makes no attempt to deny that Christian banquets include women as well as men, all of whom may be inferred to sip and to converse.

Tertullian's rebuttal of pagan charges includes a more extended sketch of what transpires when Christians gather to dine. He writes, "Now I myself will explain the practices of the Christian Church, that is, after having refuted the charges that they are evil, I myself will also point out that they are good" (Apol. 39.1), an overture that leads to (among other topics) his own description of Christians at table:

Our repast, by its very name, indicates its purpose. It is called by a name which to the Greeks means 'love.' Whatever it costs, it is gain to incur expense in the name of piety, since by this refreshment we comfort the needy, not as, among you, parasites

contend for the glory of reducing their liberty to slavery for the price of filling their belly amidst insults, but as, before God, greater consideration is given to those of lower station.... No one ... [reclines at] table without first partaking of a prayer to God. They eat as much as those who are hungry take; they drink as much as temperate people need. They satisfy themselves as men who remember that they must worship God even throughout the night; they converse as men who know that the Lord is listening. After this, the hands are washed and lamps are lit, and each one, according to his ability to do so, reads the Holy Scriptures or is invited into the center to sing a hymn to God. This is the test of how much he has drunk. Similarly, prayer puts an end to the meal. From here they depart, not to unite in bands for murder, or to run around in gangs, or for stealthy attacks of lewdness, but to observe the same regard for modesty and chastity as people do who have partaken not only of a repast but of a rule of life” (39.16-19).

How does Tertullian’s description respond to the corporeality of dining culture? Like Minucius, Tertullian emphasizes moderation in food and drink and self-control in conversation. Minucius comments that at table Christians are chaste in conversation, but Tertullian goes further. As Christians converse, they know the Lord hears. Even before reclining, Tertullian informs the reader, Christians pray. Dining Christians enjoy music, but the music they enjoy consists of pious hymns. Moreover, the quality of the singer’s performance should advertise the singer’s sobriety, or at least the singer’s moderate intake of wine. A Christian meal thus shares many features with a pagan meal, including the pleasures of food, drink, conversation, and music. At the same time, Tertullian wants

to insist, a Christian meal has little to do with its pagan counterpart.<sup>3</sup> Christians would not tolerate guests who are parasites, enduring insults in exchange for a place at the table. Unlike pagan dinner parties, which culminate in misbehavior in streets or bedrooms, Christian dinner parties end on notes of sobriety, order, and righteousness.

Minucius's and Tertullian's brief descriptions of self-controlled Christian symposia hint at an insight that receives more extensive attention from Clement of Alexandria. The symposium may be central to Christian identity and practice, but at the same time, the symposium is a dangerous place. The symposium is dangerous because of the varied pleasures of corporeality—food, drink, and eroticized intimacy. Excessive consumption of food and drink is a risk factor leading to proscribed sexual expression, but we should not underestimate the degree to which Christian authors viewed excessive consumption—of food, of drink—as itself a violation of community norms.

### C. Clement of Alexandria

How to affirm the positive importance of conviviality while warning against the dangers of the table is a task Clement of Alexandria sets himself in the second book of *Christ the Educator*. Clement's obsession with table manners has been ably—and humorously—handled by Blake Leyerle in her 1995 article, "Clement of Alexandria on the Importance of Table Etiquette."<sup>4</sup> In preparing these notes, I have turned frequently to passages discussed by Leyerle. Leyerle's insights are unfailingly valuable (note to reader:

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<sup>3</sup> See discussion in Veronika E. Grimm, *From Feasting to Fasting, The Evolution of a Sin: Attitudes to Food in Late Antiquity* (London: Routledge, 1996) 118-121.

<sup>4</sup> Blake Leyerle, "Clement of Alexandria on the Importance of Table Etiquette," *J ECS* 3 (1995) 123-141.

track down the article). In framing questions about Clement's responses to corporeality and intimacy, I hope to further the discussion Leyerle has begun. Whereas Leyerle focuses on the intersection of etiquette and morality, in these notes I focus on Clement's at-times alarmed responses to corporeality, intimacy, and sexuality in dining culture.

Clement pictures the corporeality of the dining experience as at once inevitable and threatening. For Clement, the corporeal threats of dining begin with tempting odors and include indulgence in gastronomic delicacies, drinking in a way that betrays dignity, and even the physiological effects of digestion. Yes, the intimacy of the banquet setting and judgment-impairing effects of wine may lead to erotic transgressions, including indiscrete conversation, but food and drink are dangerous not only as conduits to bad behavior of a sexual kind. Eating and drinking are temptations as well as necessities, and Christians must guard against succumbing to gustatory pleasures.

Clement concedes the importance of commensality to the Christian life: "Festive gatherings of themselves do contain some spark of love, for from food taken at a common table we become accustomed to the food of eternity" (2.1.7). Christians should turn to Jesus, Clement teaches, for a dining and drinking exemplar. Was Jesus shameless in his consumption? By no means, Clement assures us. Jesus had excellent table manners. "From the things he taught about banquets, he plainly insisted that one who drinks must keep self-control. He set the example by not drinking freely himself" (2.2.32). At the same time, the fact that Jesus is reported to consume wine should be a rebuke to those who, like the Encratites, are said to refuse wine.

So Christians should recline together, and dine together, and drink together, and converse together, and sing together; but that reclining and dining and drinking and

talking and music-making must manifest a kind of corporal self-control that Clement sees as atypical for banquets in his day. The good cheer arising from a cup of cheer (2.4.43.1) must be appropriate to a feast of reason. Clement specifically addresses the kind of music, the tenor of conversation, and even the quality of laughter in which Christians should indulge. He complains that at other dinner parties an excess of drink leads to drunken confession of love affairs. “But love affairs and drunkenness are both contrary to reason, and therefore do not belong to our sort of celebrations” (2.4.40). Flutes, harps, and castanets have no place at a Christian banquet, for Clement regards these as immodest instruments that assault the eye and ear and so emasculate listeners (2.4.41). When Christians gather to drink they should instead raise their voices in hymns of praise, perhaps accompanied by lute or lyre. This is not a blanket endorsement of singing, of course. No love-songs allowed. Melodies may corrupt; the instrument of the voice should not be used in an over-delicate fashion. Clement relegates such pleasures to the world of prostitutes (2.4.44). Like other corporal pleasures of dining, the pleasures of music are thus not proscribed but circumscribed.

Clement’s recommendations for a controlled aural environment include limitations not only on what can be spoken—no obscene talk, no trivialities, and no bickering—and how loudly one may laugh but also on a variety of other non-verbal noises, including whistling, hissing, finger-snapping, coughing, nose-blowing, and belching.<sup>5</sup> Clement helpfully supplies careful instructions on how to burp as quietly as possible (2.7.60). Hint: A mouth wide open may invite moral decline, whether that

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<sup>5</sup> Clement knows more arcane corporal pleasures. He writes that “scratching the ear and irritations to prompt sneezing are gestures proper to swine, suggestive of the search for immoral pleasures” (2.7.60).

gaping mouth is engaged in belching, racy talk, or overeating.<sup>6</sup> As he says with contempt of a glutton, “a man of this sort seems nothing more than one great mouth” (2.1.4). The corporal control incumbent on “rational animals” extends even to control of facial muscles in laughter. The Christian is not gloomy, nor does the Christian laugh loudly or uncontrollably. Clement advises that “the proper relaxation of the features within due limits—as though the face were a musical instrument—is called a smile... it is the good humor of the self-contained” (2.5.46). The corporal pleasure of a shared laugh, though not proscribed, is circumscribed, for “laughter can easily give rise to misunderstandings, particularly among boys and women” (2.5.47). Wine loosens laughter and morals in ways not only unbecoming but also unmanly and indecent. Easy talk and easy laughter betoken eroticized intimacy of which the Christian must be wary.

What is the greatest corporal temptation of the banquet? Although certainly aware of the sexual atmosphere and antics of the symposium, Clement seems to me at least as exercised about the temptations of food. He thus ridicules the postures and gestures of greedy men reclining at table. He excoriates the “fool” whose eyes become “enslaved” to “exotic delicacies.” He continues, describing the fool “leaning forward” from the couch, “all but falling on one’s nose into the dishes,” or repeatedly “dipping one’s hands” or “stretching them out for some dish.” Such diners behave like livestock, he says.

They are in such a hurry to stuff themselves that both cheeks are puffed out at the same time, all the hollows of their face are filled out, and sweat even rolls down as

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<sup>6</sup> Leyerle writes, “As a bodily orifice, mouths demand cautious and respectful treatment. Clement’s comment that the gluttonous resemble ‘nothing more than one great jaw’ not only arouses revulsion, but also raises the unpleasant possibility of prandial violence. In addition, one unregulated orifice may conjure up another” (“Importance of Table Etiquette,” 129).

they exert themselves to satisfy their insatiable appetite, wheezing from their intemperance, and cramming food into their stomachs with incredible energy, as though they were gathering a crop for storage rather than nourishment. (2.1.11)

The corporal movements associated with drinking come in for equal critique.

We should drink without turning our head about, without swallowing all we can hold, without feeling compelled to roll our eyes around in the presence of the drink, and without draining the cup in one gulp with utter lack of self-control; thus we will not wet our chin or our clothes as we tip the cup all at once, practically washing or bathing our face in it. (2.2.31)

The reader is unlikely to be surprised by Clement's disgust at slurping noises.

The dangers of sexuality are also present at banquets, although Clement would deal with those dangers, when possible, by curbing the participation of women and young men in banquets where wine flows freely. Restricting participation of women and young men is for their own protection, but also to keep them from tempting grown men. A man should never share a couch with another man's wife. Married women who have reason to be present at a banquet should be properly cloaked, and unmarried women should never appear. (At Christian gatherings organized around food and wine, it is unclear to me how Clement would respond to women's participation.) While Clement allows that he would like to keep young men away from at least some banquets, he has suggestions for how a young man who does attend might properly comport himself: "And as for the young men, let them keep their eyes fixed on their own couch, lean on their elbow without too much fidgeting, and be present only with their ears. If they should be sitting down, let them not

put their feet one on top of the other, nor cross their legs, nor rest their chin on their hands” (2.7.54).

In his description of a woman drinking, Clement’s distaste for the physicality of eating and drinking merges with a condemnation of sexual displays, however limited, in the banqueting context. As for women, Clement writes:

If only they would not keep their lips wide open as they drink from big cups, with their mouths distorted out of shape! And if only they would not lean their heads back when they drain vessels narrow of neck, thereby exposing their throats with—or so it seems to me—such immodesty! They hold their chins high as they pour the drink down, as if they were trying to reveal as much of themselves as they can to their companions at table; then they belch like men, or rather, like slaves, and at their carousals begin to play the coquet. (2.2.33)

The description includes themes we have already seen in Clement’s writing, including his moral qualms about open mouths and his indignation at those who belch. Beyond that, however, Clement focuses on the physical process of drinking as a site of improper pleasure both for the drinking woman and for her (male) companions, who may be titillated by the site of a woman lifting cup to mouth.

At the outset of my treatment of Clement I noted that on his view the corporeal danger of dining includes the physiological process of digestion itself. This trepidation about the danger of digestion is implicit in his most notorious physiological observation, his approving citation of statement attributed to Valentinus concerning Jesus’ exemplary dining self-control: “He ate and drank in a way individual to himself without excreting his food. Such was his power of self-control that the food was not corrupted within him,

since he was not subject to corruption” (*Strom.* 3.7.59). Leyerle notes that it was “quite otherwise at the banquets of the wealthy. There the luxury attendant upon excretion matched that of ingestion. In visible use were silver urinals, alabaster chamber pots, and waste receptacles of gold.”<sup>7</sup> Clement is vexed not only by luxury products employed for human waste, but also by the wastefulness of the process by which foodstuffs are transformed into excrement (2.1.4). Of the dissolute, he charges that their lives are a meaningless cycle of symposia, “drunken headaches, baths, undiluted wine, chamber-pots, idleness, and drinking” (2.2.25). Yet at the same time he recommends a bit of wine, which he claims can warm the innards as a welcome laxative (2.2.24). Why should Clement care about the Christian’s constipation? Perhaps because of a moral sensibility lost in the modern age. “Lusts,” Clement instructs, “are aroused when the excrement gathers about the organ of generation, and therefore the excess must be dissolved and absorbed by digestion” (3.11.66).<sup>8</sup> Clement’s worries about the corporeality of dining culture feature not only sexuality and intimacy, but also about the temptations of the table and the regrettably inevitable aftermath of indulgence.<sup>9</sup>

### C. Conclusions

Caveat: These notes on Christian responses to the corporeality, intimacy, and sexuality of ancient dining culture have focused on a handful of Christian writers, and among those writers, I have focused disproportionately on Clement of Alexandria. We

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<sup>7</sup> Leyerle, “Importance of Table Etiquette,” 129-130.

<sup>8</sup> See Grim, *From Feasting to Fasting*, 108.

<sup>9</sup> Of indirect relevance is Tertullian’s observation that it can be no accident that the digestive organs are located so close to genitalia (*On Fasting, Against the Psychics* 1.1).

should not imagine that these writers speak for all Christians of their era. Nonetheless, consistent themes emerge from their writing. Commensality is a good thing. It is good to eat together. It is also good, perhaps after a glass or two of diluted wine, to raise voices to praise the deity. Nonetheless, the dining room is not an innocent or safe space. The dining experience is potentially corrupting, not least because eating, digesting, and eliminating are part of the cycle of corporal corruption that characterizes mortal life. I believe that from our modern perspectives we may be readiest to acknowledge those early Christian concerns about corporeality that arise from issues of intimacy and sexuality. However, such concerns, certainly present in the authors we have considered, run concurrent with concerns regarding other corporeal pleasures.<sup>10</sup>

Editions and translations:

Quotations in this paper are from standard English translations (FC translations of Tertullian and Clement and ACW translation of Minucius Felix), which I have checked against SC editions.

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<sup>10</sup> Teresa M. Shaw traces these concerns through late antiquity (*The Burden of the Flesh: Fasting and Sexuality in Early Christianity* [Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1998]).