

A Review of Hal Taussig's *In the Beginning was the Meal*
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Hal Taussig's book, *In the Beginning was the Meal: Social Experimentation and Early Christian Identity*, provides a missing link in Christian origins research. His achievement in this regard is groundbreaking. In my review, I want to assess this aspect of the contribution of his book and then make some suggestions about how we might proceed to build on what Hal has laid as a foundation. In the process, I will also propose a few critiques.

a) The Christian Origins Project.

As Hal outlines in his book, he has been engaged for some time (as have I) in various research projects on Christian origins. He and I were both on the initial steering committee for the SBL Seminar on Ancient Myths and Modern Theories of Christian Origins (which ran from 1995 to 2003) and are now participants in the ongoing Jesus Seminar on Christian Origins, which is a research project of the Westar Institute.

To put his contribution in perspective, let me expand on my "missing link" metaphor:

1) Previously, Christian origins discussions broadly considered worked on a hypothesis that could be diagrammed something like this:

The Jesus movement ----> took shape as *ekklesiai* ----> and emerged on the other side as "churches".

More often than not in traditional scholarship, the default picture of this process has assumed a natural progression to the 4th century institutionalized church.

2) As Hal points out, new research on Christian origins has undermined this traditional model:

a) We now have new research that establishes that a great deal of diversity has existed in Christian groups from the very beginning. We can no longer give credence to a hypothesis that there was a direct line from Jesus and the apostles to the 4th century institutional church. The clearest example of this corrective is provided by the new theories of eucharistic origins, as represented

especially in the research of Andrew McGowan and discussed recently in this seminar.

b) For some time, Christian origins discussions have also incorporated in the research model a number of changes and adaptations that are obvious in the data. Examples include:

- the change from a primarily Jewish movement to a primarily Gentile movement;
- the adaptation of a theology of “neither male nor female” to a theology represented by the household codes.

3) The new research on Christian origins that pays attention to the diversity and adaptation data nevertheless remains fuzzy on the process whereby these issues were dealt with. To put it differently, somehow *ekklesiai* took form and texts emerged, but how this happened, or the social process and social location for this happening, remained vague.

Hal has now filled in that “missing link” by providing a thick description of the process of social formation of ekklesiai at the meal.

b) The Elephant in the Room in Meals Research.

In traditional scholarship, meals have tended to be pushed to the perimeter in cultural studies. Meals are part of the “entertainment” in the ancient world, the story goes. The important stuff happened elsewhere. This has been true in classical studies as well as in New Testament and Christian origins studies. We have faced an uphill battle in this seminar in attempting to define meals as significant.

There are many versions of this bias in scholarship. For example, even though the house church is an established model in reconstructions of Christian origins, there is a tendency to see the dining room as the location of a “fellowship meal” at best; the important stuff, one would assume, would happen elsewhere in the house. More recently, however, a variety of close studies of domestic space in the ancient world, exemplified, for example, by the research of Mike White, have established that when guests were entertained in the house, the dining room is where that would have happened. Properly stated then, the working hypothesis for Christian origins should be this: *the dining room was the default context for early Christian social formation in the house church*. There might have been other contexts, but the burden of proof would be on those who would propose them.

This has not settled the issue, however. The 4th century institutional church still overshadows much scholarly imagination about Christian origins and the meal as “entertainment” is too deeply embedded in scholarly tradition. Consequently, one often sees in the rhetoric of Christian origins research that, even if the dining table was the location of early Christian social formation, it should only be considered a stop-gap – the natural form of “church” was never comfortable there and was just waiting to burst forth from the shackles of the dining room. Versions of this argument include those that posit that early Christian gatherings would have been too large for the dining room. Therefore, even though the gathering was in a house, they had to utilize it as if it were an assembly hall (e.g. more like a “church”) and meet in the courtyard or some other large space. [To be sure, one can read the latest phase of the Christian building at Dura Europas this way, but I would argue that the date of this phase and its singularity in our data argues against the perspective that the “Christian building” style of architecture was just waiting to happen as soon as the church budget could afford it.]

c) Meals as the *Necessary* Locus for Early Christian Social Formation.

Hal has now shown how the meal is not just a stop-gap social location but actually emerges as a necessary locus for the social formation that was the *ekklesia* in process of becoming. Through his careful laying out of the data, he has shown that we can now make much better sense of the components of Christian origins than we were able to do before. Understanding the meal as the locus for social experimentation and the development of early Christian identity fills in the “missing link” in the reimagining of Christian origins.

d) The Importance of Ritual Studies.

Hal has made a brilliant move in incorporating ritual studies into his research program. He has shown how ritual studies provide a theoretical model that can explain in much more detail how the meal functioned as the location for social formation. Even though I and Matthias both proposed the meal as a ritual that produced social bonding and *koinonia*, Hal has provided a thicker description of that process through the use of ritual studies. In his book, he has helpfully and persuasively provided not just the ritual theory but a demonstration of its effectiveness in explaining the data.

Yet I still wonder how the various theories mesh together and hope Hal can enlighten us a bit more here. Does not ritual theory, especially as proposed by J. Z. Smith, tend to assume conversation but *not* transformation? It allows a

community to sort through and note tensions but not specifically to resolve them. A good example of this function of ritual can be seen in the *Saturnalia* festival that we studied in this seminar a few sessions ago. As you will recall, at the Saturnalia festival, there would be a ritual reversal of roles, in which the servants would take the positions of the masters and vice versa. Everyone had a great time playing with the roles. But at the end of the festival, everyone went back to their original status and role in society. Nothing had really changed.

When we apply such a model to Christian origins, therefore, at what point and for what reason can we assume that transformation would result from the social experimentation? Clearly, it appears, we need to assume that at best such issues as rich vs. poor, master vs. slave, Lord vs. Lord, gender equality vs. patriarchal default had to be brought to the surface and discussed at the meal but not necessarily resolved. Can we then propose that something like a truce was the result – that differences were acknowledged and they learned how to live together with the differences still in place (the gist of 1 Cor 7:17-24)?

On the other hand, we also work with a social transformation model, as especially illustrated by the social bonding theory of social formation at the meal (sharing bread creates the experience of social bonding, 1 Cor 10:16-17). But when they left the gathering, had anything really changed in their relationship? Is this where the “habitus” model comes into play, in which on an incremental basis ritual performance gradually changed social experimentation to full social identity? If so, there had to be times when it did not work. Do we therefore need to assume that other factors might enter into the history of a group that affect the ritual outcome?

Proposing a “Thicker Description” of the Meal as Locus of Social Formation

a) The Libation.

Hal has brought out the importance of the libation as especially definitive for meals of the *ekklesiai*. This is an attractive hypothesis, but in order to strengthen it I propose that we need to develop a more comprehensive collection of comparative libation data for the 1st to 2nd centuries CE in order to situate more solidly the Christian data into the Greco-Roman context. It would help us evaluate in more complex terms the function of the libation in a variety of meal communities. And it might help us situate such features as the wording of the words over the wine in the last supper tradition as perhaps partaking more directly of language forms in use in libations.

b) The Symposiarch and Other Meal Leadership.

I am also still a bit nervous in regard to the use of this data. I would feel better if we could develop here as well a more comprehensive collection of symposiarch and related meal leadership data for the 1st to 2nd centuries CE. We also need to include the role played by the host in providing leadership for the meal and leadership roles described in the association data.

I must also admit I am still not persuaded by the “weak leadership” definition of the symposiarch in Hal’s reconstruction. I still read the data on the task of the symposiarch as that of making the meal work as the communal event it is supposed to be; in this sense the symposiarch’s role is to facilitate rather than rule. That is not a definition of weak leadership, it is rather a definition of a specific type of “strong” leadership derived from the ethos of the meal [in this sense, it is related to the theme in meal ethics that one’s actions at the meal should be undertaken for the good of the group as a whole, not for one’s own individual purposes].

c) Social Experimentation.

Hal makes an especially important move in correlating the social tension inherent in the meal, such as the conflict between the values of social equality and social stratification, with the concept of social experimentation. I really like this move; it is at the heart of his reconstruction of the meal as the locus for early Christian social formation (the missing link in Christian origins). It fits well with the data:

1) Early Christian worship, when placed at the table, correlates well with the data about various forms of “entertainment” at the symposium, such as conversation, hymns and other forms of music, dramatic performances, poetic performances. Hal has shown how the content of early Christian worship materials, such as hymns, can be seen as important components of social experimentation.

2) It correlates with association data in which a variety of social classes would be present and tension with the state could be a given at certain points with certain associations. In other words, the data from the associations confirms Hal’s thesis in regard to Christian meals.

3) It is supported by much of the data already gathered in the work of this seminar, in which we have explored the evidence for a variety of individuals found to be reclining together at meals who are otherwise defined as social opposites in the culture (women, slaves, etc.).

d) The Uninvited Guest.

Hal has proposed that the uninvited guest is a marker of the porousness of the meal. I still have problems with this motif. My reservations include the following:

- 1) I still see the uninvited guest primarily as a literary motif in the symposium literature.
- 2) The community of diners tended to be bound by a social network connection; for example, they were of the same social class. I would suggest that where we have uninvited guests showing up in the literary data, they for the most part represent individuals already connected to the particular social network represented at the meal and certainly representing the same social class. (And in one of the most prominent such stories, in Plato's symposium, when uninvited guests arrive, they do not join the group until issued an ad hoc invitation by the host). I do not think we should assume that just anyone could wonder into the gathering and start eating. All of the rules of etiquette and order at the table would be for naught and the whole range of values at the meal – from social bonding to social boundaries, indeed the entire complex of features that make up the performance of *koinonia* – would be impossible. In addition, the cultural value of hospitality to the stranger would be overturned, since it is defined as an invitation to the stranger, not an enforced encroachment by the stranger.
- 3) Finally, I strongly suspect that “uninvited guests” would be entirely ruled out in associations by the rules stated in their by-laws. This is another way in which the association model can inform us in our reading of the Christian data.

e) Problematizing the Meals vs. Empire Model.

I like this data for the most part, especially in the construct of Lord vs. Lord at the libation. But I am still bothered by some features. For example:

- if a libation to “Lord Jesus” can be assumed to have existed at all phases of *ekklesiai*;
- yet some of the *ekklesiai* practicing such libations were in tension with the state while others were not;
- then how do we tweak our reconstruction to allow for this?

f) The Gathering.

How did such groups come together? This question is not really taken up in Hal's book; he tends to concentrate on the meal in process. Yet the question is important given the central focus on social experimentation in a group of very diverse individuals – the question is, how did such a diverse group come to be at the same meal anyway?

For the most part, I like the social network explanation, namely that individuals who were associated already in ethnic or occupational or patron/client or household connections formed the core of any group that gathered for meals. For example, the membership of associations was formed out of groups of individuals who already had social network connections, even when different social classes were represented. Nevertheless, I think a thick description would mean that we also consider the social dynamics of the meal as contributing to the collecting of diners, including such features as the importance of the invitation to the meal, the patron/client aspect of the invitation, and the way in which the concept of hospitality functioned in the gathering together of a meal community.

g) Membership.

How was “membership” in the community marked at the meal? Associations had membership rolls; their membership was also marked by the payment of dues. Did Jesus *ekklesiai* also have membership rolls and dues? Who decided who would get an invitation and on what basis? Would a host also have some obligations to a patron, whether or not the patron was a “member” of the Christian association? Was there any limitation in participation based on whether or not one was a “member”?

On the Relationship Between Text and Meal

Another significant contribution of Hal’s book is the ability of his reconstruction to provide a persuasive context for the performance of early Christian texts. The performance of such texts as Jesus stories, early Christian hymns, prayer fragments, meal sayings in regard to bread and wine, and even letters, can easily be placed at the meal. None of these is foreign to the meal; indeed, materials of this type would be necessary to any formal meal in the Greco-Roman world; the only difference in our data is that it has a focus on Christian concerns.

For some time, scholars have proposed that many early Christian texts originated in communities. These theories usually propose that the community gave rise in some way to the production and/or preservation of the text. Yet while the theory states that the community came first, the use of texts in Christian origins reconstructions often seem implicitly to presuppose that the text produces the community (e.g. the thesis that early Christians gathered for meals in imitation of the meal practice of Jesus). This nuance probably derives from the fact that the profiles of the communities are developed out of the existing texts thus giving a priority to the text in the reconstruction.

Nevertheless it confuses how we think about the relationship between text and community.

The model Hal proposes, buttressed by the ritual studies data he brings to the analysis, provides a basis for a much stronger connection between community and text than has been proposed before. Indeed, based on Hal's model, we can propose, I would suggest, that the connection between the meal context and the text was so close, and the function of the text at the meal was so essential to its purpose, that the meal was not simply the locus for performance of texts but also was effectively the catalyst for the production of texts.