

Response to Hal Taussig, *In the Beginning was the Meal. Social Experimentation & Early Christian Identity* (Minneapolis: Fortress 2009).

Looking at the gatherings of early Christians at meals in the context of ancient Graeco-Roman meal practices, Hal Taussig's excellent book challenges the master-narrative. Instead of focussing on Christian belief and theology he proposes the manifold experience of festive meals and symposia as an initial motor for the emergence of Christianity. As the primary way first century Christians spend time together, meals are seen as the most natural context of teaching and learning, prayer and singing, worship and general community life. The practice of early Christians eating festive meals together turns out to be an eminent social experiment, a laboratory of alternative social visions, because it provides a stage on which identity was and could be elaborated.

Taking the social practice of festive meals as central, Hal Taussig takes up the work of Dennis Smith and Matthias Klinghardt, and indeed this seminar. Smith and Klinghardt have demonstrated that Early Christian meals took place in a widespread standardized social format of ancient symposium or banquet. Despite the vary diverse occasions for meals and a wide range of cultures, all meals looked similar in their basic pattern, which includes reclining at the table, the order of supper or *deipnon* followed by a *symposium*, an extended time of drinking with conversation, singing, music and other performances. Special table etiquette, the question of leadership and presidency, and the various participants are discussed. All ancient festive meals have some religious impact which is demonstrated, for example, through the *libation*, toasts and/or a ritual of pouring out wine which mark the transition between the main course (the *deipnon*) and the drinking party (*symposium*).

Klinghardt and Smith also discussed the social dynamics of Graeco-Roman meals by both identifying the meal values community (*koinonia*), equality (*isonomia*), friendship (*philia*) and generosity (*charis*), and by pointing to the ongoing negotiating of bonding, setting boundaries, being 'obliged', stratifying, and becoming equal. For Hal Taussig this "swings open a door into new social understanding of how early Christianity emerges" (32). With the help of ritual studies, especially the works of Catharine Bell, Jonathan Z. Smith, Pierre Bourdieu, Victor Turner and Mary Douglas, he asks how the social format of a meal achieved its social effects. Ritual studies provide for him "a lens through which to see how meals furnished the larger Hellenistic society with ways to think about, experiment with, and negotiate its social structures, personal relationship, and identity formation." (67-8). Banquets among slaves and masters could 'perfect' (J. Z. Smith) the relationships "along the lines of the meal values mutuality and friendship"(68), or "reproduce" (Bell) social boundaries and stratifications by ways of the hierarchy of reclining or presiding" (68). The pre-ordained yet flexible activities of the meal, like the *libation*, toasts and songs dedicated to a god or gods, "became a *habitus* (Bourdieu) in which social bonding and boundaries gained stability ... and

at the same time allowed a certain ‘liminality’ (Turner) in which new relational patterns ... could be risked without the larger consequences of everyday life.” (ibid.). Ritual theory can therefore explain the utopian hopes and the contradictory values within the social practice of meals.

I agree on the importance of the hitherto mostly overlooked social practices in the formative processes of early Christianity and on the centrality of meals in the communities’ life. But applying ritual studies to ancient texts is a challenging task which faces some difficulties, as Hal Taussig is constantly aware. To push this question a little further let me look closely at the intersection between early Christian festive meals and texts. As a case study I will concentrate on libations and songs.

As the basic social structure of early Christian gatherings meals are “a primary location for the reading of early Christian documents” (36; cf. 138f). Here letters and gospels were read and stories were told and composed. Furthermore, it might also be the case that parts of the liturgy of the meal found their way into the texts. 1 Cor. 14:26 and Col. 3:16 / Eph. 5:19 document that Pauline communities chanted at their gatherings and composed songs. Therefore the hymns of Col. 1:15-20 and Phil. 2:6-11 might have been songs once sung in the context of meals. What do we learn about the function and meaning of those texts from the meal context?

Hal Taussig points to “the importance of singing a paean or hymn during the libation” (104). The function of the ritual libation in Hellenistic meals is explained in Chapter 4. Here he emphasises three elements, its “‘centrality’ ... in the meal structure, the fluidity of the practice and the simultaneous formality and inattentiveness of the libation(s)” (75), in order to establish the thesis that the libation does important ritual work concerning the complexities of volatile identities in Roman-Hellenistic times. “Libations to multiple gods represented both the contingencies and the possibilities of emerging identity for people in the Hellenistic mix.”(77) This becomes more concrete under the discussion of a statement made by the historian Dio Cassius, that after Augustus’ Egyptian victory in 30 BCE “the priests and priestesses ... in their prayers on behalf of the people and the senate were to pray for him [Caesar Augustus] likewise, and at all banquets, not only public but private as well, everybody was to pour a libation to him.” (50.19.7). Now the “making” or “avoiding a libation to the emperor as ritual choices reproduces dramatically the dilemma of living under a foreign power.” (78)

Hal Taussig is aware that this proposal “was not reflected ... in the literature of the times” (78) and that libation “received less attention and energy” than the symposium proper, and sometimes “was treated as a pro forma necessity” (78) and was acted out in “many

variations” (75) and not stated, often dedicated to more universal deities like the Good Daemon (*Agathos Daemon*) or Zeus Saviour (*Dios Soter*).¹

But in the discussion of Christian hymns (John 1:1-18, Phil 2:6-11, Col 1:15-20) in Chapter 5 (104-112) this ritual becomes more and more the central identity marker: “When the songs about Christ ruling the universe were sung exactly at the point of the meal where identity ambivalence and contestation of authority were high, the drama of making libation and the context of the hymn’s word worked together in dramatic fashion. The libation exclusively to Jesus/Christ at early Christian meals performed the social utopian loyalty... and ritually dramatized the profile of emerging Christian identity and resistance to Rome” (109-10).

My question is twofold: How much does ritual theorising of ancient meals need to establish an abstract of standard meal practice behind or below what we can tell from ancient sources? How does the background of meal rituals help us to understand and interpret the given New Testament text?

To illustrate the first question, songs, as Hal Taussig emphasises, might also be sung not only during the libation but during many parts of the *symposium* (cf. 112; 135). Actually we hear from Smith and Klinghardt of two genres of song in Graeco-Roman meals:² The *paeon*, a song with a refrain, “a potential or realized divine helper/healer as an addressee, and a first person subject in need of assistance”³ and the *skolion*, a metric song sung solo, accompanied by the lyre, which praises heroic political deeds.⁴ In addition flute girls and other musicians belong to a meal and the symposium literature discusses which kind of music suits which kind of meal.⁵ It is clear from these discussions as well as other contexts that the ancients were very conscious of the manipulative potential of music, rhythms, tunes and keys.⁶ The tune

¹ Dennis Smith, *From Symposium to Eucharist. The Banquet in the Early Christian World* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2003) 29-31. cf. Matthias Klinghardt, *Gemeinschaftsmahl und Mahlgemeinschaft. Soziologie und Liturgie frühchristlicher Mahlfeiern* (TANZ 13; Tübingen, Basel: Franke 1996) 101-111.

² Smith, *Symposium*, 30; Klinghardt, *Gemeinschaftsmahl*, 118-129.

³ Cf. Lutz Käppel, "Paeon." *Brill's New Pauly*. Cited from http://www.brillonline.nl/subscriber/entry?entry=bnp_e903750. Cf. the collection of texts and addressees idem., *Pain. Studien zur Geschichte einer Gattung* (Berlin, New York: de Gruyter, 1992), 317-322, 341-348.

⁴ Cf. Emmet Robbins, "Skolion." *Brill's New Pauly*, http://www.brillonline.nl/subscriber/entry?entry=bnp_e1115220. Cf. Plutarch, *Table Talks* 615 A-C.

⁵ Cf. Smith, *Symposium*, 35-36, 136-7 and Plutarch, *Table Talk* 7.7-8 (727B-730F).

⁶ Plutarch argues in his *Table Talks* that flute girls were essential to the symposium: “The flute we could not drive away from the table if we wanted to; it is as essential to our libations as the garland, and it helps impart a religious tone to the singing of the paeon. As its piping note touches our ear, it suffuses us with a voice of sweetness that strikes calm to the mind itself, so that if we harbour any troublesome care, ... this brings peace to the man who yields his spirit to its graceful and gentle melody.” (713A) But at the same Plutarch claims: “the flute itself keeps due measure, and avoids emotional display, so as not to rouse into ecstasy, with low register notes and a multiplicity of tones.” (ibid.). Likewise the lyre singers should “eliminate the frequent dirges and laments from their repertory and ... sing cheerful songs that are suitable to men in festive mood.” (712E). And Plutarch postulates that “we should regard melody and rhythm as a source ... added to the words, rather than use or prize them for their own sake.” (713C). Plutarch also mentions a (hypothetical) philosopher who “runs from a party to escape a lute, or ... when he hears a harp girl tuning up” (710E). All translations Edwin Minar (LCL). Plato and Plutarch could be even more critical of music, cf. Friederike Oertelt, “Vom Nutzen der Musik. Ein Blick auf die Funktion der musikalischen Ausbildung bei Philo von Alexandria”, in: Standhartinger et al. (ed.),

may be tragic, as in laments, excited, cheerful or grave, and the performance might be sung by one performer alone or one after the other with a refrain, as a chorus, contributes to the meal. And one of the earliest records of Christians singing at meals points to this fact as well. In his treatise *On Fasting* Tertullian states:

“See, how good and how enjoyable for brethren to dwell in unity!” (Ps 132,1). This psalm *you* know not easily how to sing, except when you are supping with a goodly company! But those conclaves first, by the operations of Stations and fastings, know what it is “to grieve with the grieving,” and thus at last “to rejoice in company with the rejoicing.”⁷

The meal mentioned here seems to be the celebration of a fast-breaking and as such is related to a period of fasting and grieving beforehand. And the song which seems to emphasise best the mood and atmosphere of this specific meal is Psalm 131. Therefore it is not only reasonable but could be demonstrated that songs and hymns functioned in various ways at various kinds of meal and this question seems to me to warrant further research.⁸

Unfortunately we do not know whether and when Phil. 2:6-11, for instance, was actually sung. Ernst Lohmeyer who first assigned the genre “*carmen Christi*” to Phil. 2:6-11, pointed to the non-Pauline vocabulary and style of this piece.⁹ But his arguments were questioned by others who, because of the absence of a Greek metre, argued that the piece was written by Paul himself in “exalted prose.”¹⁰ And even while I agree in calling this text a “prose hymn”, it is still striking that it does not include an invocation of God or a prayer for his coming.¹¹ Therefore I’m not much convinced that it was sung at meals “in alternate verses ... as a hymn

Kunst der Deutung - Deutung der Kunst. Beiträge zur Bibel, Antike und Gegenwartsliteratur (Ästhetik - Theologie - Liturgik 45; Berlin: Lit, 2007) 51-62.

⁷ Tertullian, *On Fasting* 13,7. Translation from Ante-Nicene Fathers.

⁸ At the meal gatherings in the *Acts of Thomas* the apostle calls to Christ: “Come, perfect compassion; come, fellowship with the male, come, you who know the mysteries of the Chosen One; ... come, secret mother; come, you who are manifest in your deeds, come, giver of joy and rest to those who are united to you; come and commune with us in the Eucharist which we celebrate in your name, and in the agape, in which we are united at your calling” (*Acts of Thomas* 50 cf. 27). At the end of one of those invocations “there appeared to them a young man holding a blazing lamp, so that the other lamps were darkened by the emanation of its light. And he went out and disappeared from their sight.” (27) The apostle identifies the “young man” as the Lord. The hymn seems to function as an evocation of the presence of divine Jesus. In the *Acts of John*, on the other hand, the apostle adds to the bread a hymn of praise and thanks (*Acts of John* 85).

⁹ Lohmeyer, *Der Brief an die Philipper, Kolosser und an Philemon* (KEK IX), Göttingen 1962, 90-91. This thesis was first published in „Kyrios Jesus: Eine Untersuchung zu Phil 2,5-11“ (Sitzungsberichte der Heidelberger Akademie der Wissenschaften, Philosophisch-historische Klasse 18 (1927/28).

¹⁰ Gordon D. Fee, *Paul's Letter to the Philippians* (NIC), Grand Rapids 1995, 191-197

¹¹ Collins, *Psalms, Philippians 2:6-11, and the Origins of Christology*, Biblical Interpretation 11 (2003), 361-72, 361-370. Another hypothesis is to call it a prose encomium. See *ibid* 370-372 as well as Klaus Berger, *Formgeschichte des Neuen Testament*, Heidelberg 1984, 344-346. Others have voted for "Epainos" (...), cf. Ralph Brucker, ‚Christushymnen‘ oder ‚epideiktische Passagen‘, *Studien zum Stilwechsel im Neuen Testament und seiner Umwelt* (FRLANT 176), Göttingen 1997 or creed (Bekennnistext), c.f. Gunter Kennel, *Frühchristliche Hymnen. Gattungskritische Studien zur Frage nach den Liedern der frühen Christenheit* (WMANT 71), Neukirchen-Vluyn 1995.

to Christ, as to a god” (Pliny, *Epistles* 10.96), or as a antiphonal chorus with a serious background.¹²

But what we do know is how Paul integrated this piece into his argument in his letter to the Philippians.¹³ After evoking the political value *homonoia* (concord, unanimity; Phil. 2:1-4), the “hymn” is going to be an expression of the Philippians’ φρονεοῖν or “‘attitude’ in which thinking and willing are one”¹⁴ “in Christ” (Phil 2:5). After citing the “hymn” Paul applies it to the community (2:12-18): “Therefore, my beloved, just as you have always obeyed (ὑπηκούσατε)¹⁵ ... work out your own salvation (ἐαυτῶν σωτηρίαν) with fear and trembling”(v. 12, NRSV). This non-Lutheran statement alludes to the “hymn” (v. 8: γενόμενος ὑπήκοος μέχρι θανάτου) and the next sentence duplicates its basic structure. Just as Christ alone is active in Phil 2:6-8, so the Philippians must work unaided for their own salvation. And as Phil. 2:9-11 proclaims God’s acting alone, so too verse 13 states: “It is God who is at work in you, enabling you both to will and to work for his good pleasure” (v.13). In contrast to most modern translations there is no connecting conjunction between v. 12 and v. 13. Therefore the implication is not, ‘you can do because God’s work enables you’ but rather ‘you work hard and God acts above all that.’ Just as Christ in Phil. 2:6-8 exploited himself by stripping himself of his heavenly garment and coming down to the cruel reality of the cross on earth (v. 8), so the Philippians remain in obedience subjected to the earth. And just as God has identified him/herself with this crucified humanity and elevated it above all heavenly, earthly and subterranean beings, so there is a heavenly reality that the Philippians represent in their ministry at the *colonia Augusta Iulia Philippensis*.

The next verses demonstrate that this ministry is eminently political. In Phil. 2:15 Paul calls them “to shine as lights in the world” “in the midst of a crooked and perverse generation.” As Dieter Georgi and Lukas Bormann have shown, there are parallels in political symbolism, especially in the early Roman empire.¹⁶ Cicero, for instance, admonished the ideal statesmen, whose souls comes from the heavenly fire of the stars but were trapped in an earthly body, to become “luminaries of the state” and to “serve the good (*salus/σωτηρία*) of the fatherland” before returning to their heavenly home.¹⁷ Therefore, as Dieter Georgi summarises:

¹² Cf. the imagined early Christian meal in Chapter I, Taussig, *Beginning*, 6.

¹³ Cf. also Standhartinger, „Die paulinische Theologie im Spannungsfeld römisch-imperialer Machtpolitik. Eine neue Perspektive auf Paulus, kritisch geprüft anhand des Philipperbriefs,“ in: Friedrich Schweitzer (ed.), *Religion, Politik und Gewalt* (Veröffentlichungen der Wissenschaftlichen Gesellschaft für Theologie 29; Gütersloh: Gütersloher Verlagshaus, 2006), 364-382.

¹⁴ Cf. Rudolf Bultmann, *Theology of the New Testament*, I, 214.

¹⁵ Other than in many translation the Greek has no object with ὑπηκούσατε.

¹⁶ Dieter Georgi, *Theocracy in Paul’s praxis and Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1991) 72-78; Lukas Bormann, *Philippi. Stadt und Christengemeinde zur Zeit des Paulus* (NT.Suppl 76; Leiden a.o: Brill, 1995) 218-20.

¹⁷ Cicero, *Res Publica* 6,26. 38-39.

“[I]n Phil. 2:15 Paul suggests to his Philippian readers that he would like to see them as competitors of the statesmen who govern the present world. The latter rule as an elite, literally as ‘stars’ over chaos, the chaos of the “crooked and perverse generation.” The followers of Jesus on the other hand – none excluded, none preeminent – represent the authentic ruler of the human race, Jesus the truly human person. In so doing, they avail themselves of the only appropriate possibility for exercising political responsibility.”¹⁸

Therefore the political impact of the “hymn” in Phil. 2:6-11 exceeds the act of “singing the songs about the alternative cosmic reign of Jesus and the pivotal event of Jesus’ crucifixion ... to contradict [...] the overarching and public assertions and assumption that Caesar had saved the world as an act of divine benevolence” (136). Moreover the hymn together with the whole praxis of the Philippians picks up virulent political ideas of the empire and transforms them by turning their structure upside down or from above down to earth. There is a heavenly reality above (v. 9-11, 13) but through Christ’s *kenosis* (v. 6, 8) as well as the Philippians’ ministry (v. 12, 15) on earth, the earthly reality becomes a part of heaven, or more accurately its centre. In this way the “hymn” indeed expresses “social utopian loyalty” (110).

Hence, it is in my view not enough to say that “songs” like Phil. 2:6-11 or Col. 1:15-20 “which tended to be quite cosmic, also showed consistent interest in the cosmic significance of Jesus’ crucifixion” (135). Instead those “songs” map in a very concrete and specific way what happened and is going to happen between heaven and earth, God and humanity, represented by specific communities.¹⁹ But it is interesting that at the end of his discussion on the impact of the *Philippians* hymn Paul evokes an image from the sacrificial banquet: “But even if I am being poured out as a libation over the sacrifice (σπένδομαι ἐπὶ τῇ θυσίᾳ) and the public service of your faith/loyalty (λειτουργία τῆς πίστεως ὑμῶν), I am glad and rejoice with all of you and in the same way you also must be glad and rejoice with me (Phil 2:17-8).” Paul metaphorically identifies himself with a drink offering. Scholars argue over whether Paul’s self-description as a libation refers to the exercise of his ministry or to his possible martyrdom (cf. Phil 1:22-26). The latter would have been the more familiar metaphor at that time.²⁰ And compared to other instances it is striking that Paul offers himself not to

¹⁸ Georgi, *Theocracy*, 76.

¹⁹ It is therefore not accidental that Col 1:15-20 is quite different. There is here no great emphasis on descent and the author(s) quotes explicitly the cosmic parts (Col 2:9-10) in seeking to emphasise “that the community has already its place in heaven” (cf. Col 1,12-14; 3:1). C.f. Standhartinger, *Studien zur Entstehungsgeschichte und Intention des Kolosserbriefs* (NT.S 94; Leiden, Boston, Köln: Brill, 1999).

²⁰ Figurative use of the libation as metaphor seems to be well established. Philo, for instance, in his allegorical interpretation of Hannah’s silent prayer in 1 *Samuel* 1:15 states: “the mind which is filled with unmixed sobriety is of itself a complete and entire libation, and is offered as such to and consecrated to God” (*On Drunkenness* 152). For other examples see Otto Michel, “σπέμδομαι”, *ThWNT* VII (1964), 529-537. There are other authors who draw a similar connection between libation and martyrdom. Tacitus reports in his *Annales* on the death of Seneca (15.64): “It was brought to him and he drank it in vain, chilled as he was throughout his limbs, and his frame closed against the efficacy of the poison. At last he entered a pool of heated water, from which he sprinkled the nearest of his slaves, adding the exclamation, “I offer this liquid as a libation to *Jupiter* the Deliverer.” (*libare se liquorem illum Iovi liberatori*; c.f. on Thræsea *Annales* 16.35). In the tradition of Paul

God but to the public service “of” or “to” the faith/loyalty of the Philippians. This “meal” ends up on every side in general and shared joy (4x συγ-/χαίρειν), an eschatological term alluding to another meal. The metaphorical meal shared by the Philippians and Paul represents divine and heavenly joy on earth.

One of the important benefits of Hal Taussig’s book is that it gives us an opportunity to discover this mostly overlooked intersection of Phil. 2:17-18 and Early Christian meal practice. But this time, texts are not only part of the meal but a meal becomes part of the text in the fashion of a creative metaphor. Thus, it is in my view not convincing enough to place these “songs” at the “libation” and/or at the symposium proper. Meals often become parts of and thereby ritual performances of the narrated stories themselves. When Paul and his tradition evoke the “night in which Jesus was handed over”, the “words of institution” (1 Cor. 11:23-26 / Mk 14:22-26a par) represent such meals in which eating and drinking were a dramatization of the remembered and narrated Passion story. Those meals are ritual re-enactments of cult legends.²¹ The words which accompany the cup, "This cup is the new covenant in my blood. Do this, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of me." (1 Cor. 11:25) or “This is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many” (Mk 14:24) are therefore more than a “libational dedication”(112). And unlike the libation at the symposium they are not addressed to (a) God. Instead various speakers and situations are attested. Besides possibly the “symposiarch” of the day, speakers could include a prophet speaking in the name of the risen one (1 Cor 14; 11:3-16; *Didache* 11-13), a mediator trying to invoke the presence of the heavenly Jesus (*Acts of Thomas* 27, 50), and probably also wailing women who integrated the voice of their beloved deceased into their laments.²² Hence, the context of the meal is pivotal. It matters whether it was celebrated at the “dining rooms of relatively wealthy persons” (43) or at “rented locations” (Lk 24:28-30) or at miraculously discovered spaces (Mk 14:12-16 par) or at graveyards (*Acts of Thecla* 25; *Acts of John* 72, 85 cf. *Martyrdom of Polycarp* 18:3) or at the place of the poor and sick, e.g. “Simon the leper” (Mk 14:3). It matters whether the music was tragic or exciting, solemn or cheerful. It matters whether the meal occurred in remembrance of the “night before he was handed over” (1 Cor. 11:23) or in

both 2 Timothy 4:6 and Ignatius, *Romans* 2.2, use the metaphor: “[Nay] grant me nothing more than that I be poured out a libation to God, while there is still an altar ready; that forming yourselves into a chorus in love ye may sing to the Father in Jesus Christ, for that God hath vouchsafed that the bishop from Syria should be found in the West, having summoned him from the East (translation Lightfoot).” But unlike Paul Ignatius and the dying Seneca see themselves as a “libation to God” and the community gathered either as an altar or as the chorus singing the “paean” at the *symposium*.

²¹ C.f. Ellen B. Aitken, *Jesus’ Death in Early Christian Memory. The Poetics of the Passion*. NTOA 53 (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht; Freiburg: Herder, 2004) 27–52.

²² C.f. Standhartinger, *Die Frauen von Jerusalem und die Entstehung des Abendmahls*. Zum religionsgeschichtlichen Hintergrund der Einsetzungsworte im Neuen Testament, in: Judith Hartenstein, Silke Petersen und Angela Standhartinger (Hg.), *“Eine gewöhnliche und harmlose Speise”? Von den Entwicklungen frühchristlicher Abendmahlstraditionen*, Gütersloh: Gütersloher Verlagshaus, 2008, 74-104, and idem., “What women were accustomed to do for the dead beloved by them’ (*Gos. Pet.*12,50). Traces of Laments and Mourning Rituals in early Easter, Passion and Lord’s Supper traditions,” *JBL* forthcoming.

the context of the Pesach tradition (Lk 22:14-38) or on a Sabbath (Mk 1:29-31 / Lk 4:38-9, Mk 2:23 par, Lk 14:1, *Gospel of Thomas* 27, Col. 2:16) or at the first day of the week at the reunion of the risen one with his beloved (Lk 24:36-48, cf. John 21:1-14). All these meals were celebrated in early Christianity but in each case were different in tune, with distinct songs and stories.

These observations, inspired by Hal Taussig's fascinating book, seek to encourage research on "the intersection of theologizing and meals across a range of early Christian texts and social locations (179)." For giving us so much insight through analysis of ancient ritual meal practices and having thereby given rise to these important questions, we owe him many thanks.

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