

Rethinking Eucharistic Origins

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Abstract: Accounts of Eucharistic origins have usually been driven by concern to establish the genealogy of later liturgical practices, and reflect broader narratives of early Christian history as either smooth transition or radical fall from primitive ideals. A more comprehensive account of early Eucharistic practice must give attention to Greco-Roman meal conventions, acknowledge the diversity of form and meaning in early Christian meals, and be more cautious about grand narratives. It would allow for consideration not only of the explicit theologies of prayer texts, but of implicit meanings involved in ritual, foods and other elements of meals. Such an emerging new paradigm may provide both a more adequate narrative of the development of the Christian Eucharist in classical historical terms, and richer interpretations of meals as a key aspect of early Christian practice.

1. CHANGING PARADIGMS

A Dubious Consensus

A CONSENSUS ABOUT EUCHARISTIC ORIGINS still found in much scholarship goes something like this: the earliest Christian communities celebrated their sacramental meal in direct imitation of the Last Supper of Jesus, and thus with token use of bread and wine, a universal order or structure, and recitation of the “institution narrative” as the central prayer text. Sacrament and communal banquet were quickly separated – by the later first century – into Eucharist, a morning sacramental ritual, and *Agape*, a prosaic communal supper.

For all its apparent obviousness and its familiarity from use in much scholarly writing about ancient Christianity, this account must be rejected. Each of the elements just stated – causes, chronology, uniformity – is inaccurate at best.

Although a growing body of scholarship from specialists in ancient liturgy, meals and ritual now recognises the inadequacy of at least some parts of that account, and has made significant progress towards an alternative, the older consensus still has power as a paradigm – an overarching pattern of assumptions brought to historical and interpretive practice.

The inadequacy of the older paradigm is not so much a consequence of new discovery or of new theoretical underpinnings for historical inquiry, although these are important to the establishment of a new alternative view; rather the traditional narrative fails in quite classical historical terms. That is to say, given the body of evidence relatively well-known to historians concerning the communal eating practices of early Christians, it fails to account for enough of the evidence in sufficiently simple terms. Not all Christians ate their sacral meals for those reasons, in those ways, with those words and names.

The fact of this failure cannot be explored very far without adverting to its causes. The standard account is teleological – an “intelligent design” theory of liturgical history, reading back to produce a picture amenable to the conclusions assumed. In particular, in its enthusiasm to narrate the evolution of Christian liturgies as they appear from the fourth or fifth century onwards, the older consensus omits too much important evidence for early Christian meals in the intervening centuries, and relies on forced interpretations to construct a genealogy for those later rites. The standard paradigm therefore arose as an understandable if misleading effort at Christian self-understanding, seeking the origins (and hence supposedly the real meaning) of inherited patterns of later Christian worship.

A considerable amount of scholarly work has already been done to question these pictures for liturgical history, and also to outline the elements of an alternative.¹ This different, emerging paradigm is by its very nature less easily defined, since its characteristics include acknowledgement of diversity in early Eucharistic practice, as well as a greater circumspection about linking the various fragments of evidence to construct a claimed grand narrative of liturgical development.

The challenge for any paradigm of Eucharistic origins lies in the difficult task of relating the individual pieces of evidence to a whole, which is akin to reassembling the very partial remains of a mosaic or statue without a clear model of the original. So it must quickly be admitted that this is not so much a matter of right or wrong answers, but of more and less adequate ones. As with any paradigm shift, a new account must take with it the successful elements of the old –

1. Most notably the critical work of Paul F. Bradshaw; see *The Search for the Origins of Christian Worship: Sources and Methods for the Study of Early Liturgy* (London: SPCK, 2002). See now also Paul F. Bradshaw, *Eucharistic Origins* (London: SPCK, 2004).

particularly in this case, the rigorous and substantial work in examination of individual texts with the philological tools characteristic of great nineteenth and twentieth-century historical scholarship.

In what follows I will seek to propose and describe, via different means, some elements of the emergence and development of key aspects of Eucharistic meal practice and the transition from the earliest communal banquets into the familiar normative liturgy. The production of such an alternative account requires further critical reflection on the assumptions that have informed previous scholarship, as well as attention to methods that may assist the construction of a more adequate narrative of just how and why the earliest Christians remembered and celebrated Jesus at their meals.

Grand Narratives and Their Limits

The central question about the history of early Christianity is how a renewal movement within Judaism originating in obscure Galilee became, in a space of a few centuries, the religion of imperial Rome. Much depends on the assumptions with which an interpreter begins to narrate this transformation, and in particular on whether the story is understood to be one of organic continuity or development, or of radical discontinuity.

Despite its more limited scope, liturgical history is a strand within the fabric of such broader narratives. So there is a more specific version of that larger question focussed on change at the Eucharist: how was it that the earliest Christians gathered in houses for substantial meals or banquets, but less than three hundred years later the characteristic ritual of the Christian community was a token sacramental meal with a public or civic character?²

Historians of early liturgical practice have their own versions of two familiar approaches to those questions. Some emphasise the undoubted changes in the conduct of Christian meals as key to interpreting early Eucharistic history. The shift from what is described or prescribed in the New Testament to the elaborated liturgies of the fourth century is often narrated as a kind of radical shift or even “fall”,

2. Some scholarship may challenge even these parameters. The recent work of Ramsay MacMullen, *The Second Church: Popular Christianity A.D. 200-400* (Society of Biblical Literature Writings from the Greco-Roman World Supplement Series 1; Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2009) and Kimberly Diane Bowes, *Private Worship, Public Values, and Religious Change in Late Antiquity* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008) are of particular interest in challenging typical assumptions about the transition and the significance of domestic and public space.

from simplicity or inclusive egalitarian commensality into exclusive hierarchal ritual.³

Other accounts – including most that have traced Eucharistic practice through the first few centuries, rather than merely focussing on the first century or New Testament canonical texts and glancing forward – emphasise continuity in one form or another. Such scholarship has often been concerned with tracing the persistence of a core – sometimes of words prayed, sometimes of theology employed, or sometimes, as Gregory Dix famously put it, of the actual “shape” or structure of liturgical action.⁴

As noted, there are more and less convincing or rigorous versions of both positions. Although the latter tends to be more relevant to the way liturgical history has been written, it is intriguing that the two grand narratives have not produced vastly different results on the most concrete historical issues of meal practice, but diverge mostly in terms of the meaning given to the shared picture.

Despite their apparent radical differences, what these two approaches have in common is therefore central to their failure. Any grand narrative, when it makes the inconvenience of specific evidence subservient to a wider agenda, subverts its own claims. These in particular bring with them to the study of Eucharist in the early Church the same limits as they do to consideration of early Christian change and development generally, that is, assumptions either of early and immediate orthodoxy, or of post-New Testament decline and fall.

This is not to say that either approach has been without value. In describing meals, as in theology and other forms of practice, continuity and discontinuity must both be taken seriously. This already implies that a new paradigm must include worthwhile elements of its predecessors but also involve a more complex and flexible approach. A narrative is needed, but in order to be more useful it may have to be less grand.

2. CHANGING METHODS The Importance of Diversity

One consequence of constructing early Eucharistic history as a grand narrative is the effective limitation of the connections made between evidence to diachronic ones. Texts are linked to provide a

3. Thus for instance Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *In Memory of Her: A Feminist Theological Reconstruction of Christian Origins* (New York: Crossroad, 1983) 119. See also John Dominic Crossan, *The Historical Jesus: the Life of a Mediterranean Jewish Peasant* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1991) 364-5.

4. See Gregory Dix, *The Shape of the Liturgy* (New Ed.; New York: Continuum, 2005).

5. The theoretical considerations summarised in Hal Taussig, *In the Beginning Was the Meal: Social Experimentation & Early Christian Identity* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2009) are of interest here also.

plausible linear path from primitive practice to later, normative patterns.

There are at least two interdependent problems with such an approach. If constructed only to account for the end result, rather than to describe and interpret the phenomena of meal practice on their own terms, a narrative works by reverse-engineering a “golden thread” of Eucharistic evolution, picking and choosing what suits its own developmental schema, and connecting the evidence with a view to its explanatory significance for eventually-normative liturgy. This has the consequence that other texts, not so readily assimilated to that genealogy of Eucharistic development, may be ignored, and so the narrative does not present as comprehensive a picture of practice and thought as even fragmentary evidence should allow.

The second and related problem is interpretive: such a diachronically-focused procedure assumes the significance of each piece of evidence in terms of what came before and after, but down-plays synchronic aspects of meaning. Even if they do not obviously contribute to later forms and meanings, other texts or practices outside the “golden thread” of Eucharistic development provide the context within which choices are made, alternatives discerned, and changes accepted or rejected. Relevant evidence thus includes the supposedly heretical, eccentric, or simply inconvenient. Even where such evidence has no discernible place on a *stemma* of Eucharistic evolution, contrasting practices have meaning as part of an ancient system of liturgical or convivial signs. Whether to use wine or water, to take a cup first or last, to pray one way or another, are all choices whose opposites help give them meaning, just as much as do their antecedents and successors.

Yet the discernible elements of diversity in ancient Christian meal practice are not infinite in number or merely whimsical in kind. They are fairly specific and reflect fundamental choices and controversies in that milieu.⁶

Following Paul Bradshaw’s lead – and more distantly Walter Bauer’s – we should then recognise that the evidence for early Christian meals indicates a significant diversity of practice, involving locale as well as other theological traditions or “trajectories”.⁷ A glance at earlier scholarship suggests that, with important exceptions,⁸ acceptance or recognition of the diversity of ancient practice and

6. Bradshaw, *Eucharistic Origins*, 43-60.

7. Walter Bauer, *Orthodoxy and Heresy in Earliest Christianity* (ed. Robert A. Kraft and Gerhard Krodel; Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1971). James M. Robinson and Helmut Koester, *Trajectories through Early Christianity* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1971).

8. An exception being the important work of Hans Lietzmann, *Mass and Lord’s Supper: A Study in the History of the Liturgy* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1979).

exploration of its significance tended to be two sides of the same neglected coin.

Meals, Thick Description, and *Bricolage*

The study of liturgy has often meant the study of words.⁹ While texts will continue to be central, richer approaches must include attention to the wider reality of meal and ritual, including gestures, objects, space and time.

Up to this point I have already been using the idea of “meal” as though it were not merely possible but essential for understanding Eucharistic origins. While this reflects a strong conviction that the roots and early forms of Christian Eucharistic meals belong in the realm of communal dining, it also involves use of two related but distinct sets of interpretive tools: first, the possibilities raised by cultural anthropology for considering meals as significant means for creating and expressing meaning; and second, the more historically-specific context of ancient Mediterranean banqueting as a system of practice (discussed in the following section).

Exploration of ancient Eucharistic practice must give specific attention to the event as meal, with all this implies: that is, it must include not only words, gestures, and the other symbolic media in which the meal participates, but a wider social and even economic reality. The particular contribution of cultural anthropologist Mary Douglas to revealing implicit meal-meanings is very significant in this regard, including the thought that Eucharistic rituals actually can be interpreted as meals, whether or not they involve large amounts of food.¹⁰ I therefore use the term “Eucharistic meals” here to mean nothing much more or less than the meals celebrated by early Christian communities, granted that meanings as well as portions may have varied significantly across them.¹¹

Working with this more complex horizon of interpretation involves what might be called a “thicker” approach to the evidence – adopting Clifford Geertz’s notion of “thick description”.¹² For present purposes, thick description is primarily synchronic in character, exploring practices in relation to their own context, giving at least initially a primacy to indications of meaning native to the ancient setting. “Thick” description already entails a degree of interpretation in its inherent attention to the context of practices and discourses themselves.

9. See, for instance, Ronald C. D. Jasper and G. J. Cuming, *Prayers of the Eucharist: Early and Reformed* (Collegeville MN: Liturgical Press, 1990) 3.

10. Mary Douglas, “Deciphering a Meal”, *Daedalus* 101 (1972) 61-81.

11. See further below on the term “Eucharistic”; while conveniently generic, this also has some historical justification – more so than “Lord’s Supper”, for instance.

12. Clifford Geertz, “Thick Description: Toward an Interpretive Theory of Culture”, in *The Interpretation of Cultures: Selected Essays* (New York: Basic Books) 3-30.

Thick description of Eucharist as meal suggests that there are questions to be asked of historical evidence that were not traditionally regarded as particularly significant, but whose potential for yielding meaning implies closer attention to what the participants themselves regarded as important.

However the diachronic question remains historically fundamental. Although grand narrative or teleological approaches tend to subvert the particularity of meal practices in their quest to construct a sense of the whole across time, a more modest approach may still be employed to seek connections between different pieces of evidence.

Claude Lévi-Strauss famously contrasted the approach of the engineer (equivalent here to the grand narrator or the teleological liturgist) with that of the *bricoleur*, one who tinkers.¹³ “Tinkering” with the evidence, joining together bits and pieces that make sense to and of one another, rather than according to a grand plan, is a helpful way of thinking about the steps necessary to take pieces of “thickly” described evidence and make connections between them.

Such *bricolage* might be either synchronic or diachronic, hence allowing the beginnings of reconstruction. This might mean paying more specific attention to evidence from a particular locale, or to practices related either by similarity or contrast, such as common patterns of order, nomenclature and use of foods. Thus a new, more complex, account of the changes and continuities of early Eucharistic meals may emerge.

3. CHANGING CONTEXT The Ancient Banquet

Meals are always important, but the place of the formal meal or banquet in the ancient Mediterranean was distinctive, and greater than contemporary westerners might assume. Such meals were the medium through which a great variety of social formations created and maintained their identity. These included not only households or families, but various forms of voluntary association – often referred to in scholarly discourse generically as *collegia* – through which women and men might pursue goals in what would now be seen as social, religious, charitable and other realms.¹⁴ The banquet was therefore central to social life, and constituted a realm of significance, rather than merely one message or idea.

13. C. Lévi-Strauss, *The Savage Mind* (Chicago: University Of Chicago Press, 1966) 16-21.

14. Dennis E. Smith, *From Symposium to Eucharist: the Banquet in the Early Christian World* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2003) 1-46. See also Matthias Klinghardt, *Gemeinschaftsmahl und Mahlgemeinschaft: Soziologie und Liturgie frühchristlicher Mahlfeiern* (Texte und Arbeiten zum neutestamentlichen Zeitalter 13; Tübingen: Francke, 1996).

That the Christians had communal meals is hardly surprising – indeed it would be more surprising had they not. The meal that Paul refers to as the “Lord’s Supper”, or better “Lord’s Banquet” (1 Cor 11:20), is first and foremost a recognisable formal meal in the sense the Corinthian diners already knew from their other experience. Difficulties with proper conduct at Corinth mirror disputes recorded in other contemporary sources over issues such as equality of portions or quality of foods offered to different diners according to social status.¹⁵

These ancient eaters would have expected to gather with their fellow-believers had they joined any religious or similar association. The adequacy of their meal to their belief in Jesus did not hinge on liturgical niceties, but on whether the ethos of the banquet was in keeping with the example of the divine host.

Jewish Meal Models and the *Symposium*

Twentieth-century scholarship did of course recognise that there were earlier meal traditions to which the Last Supper of Jesus could be linked, and that the first Christian meals needed to be contextualised in their light. Much debate, some of it fruitful, therefore centred on just what kind of meal the supposed source or precursor of the Eucharist might be – a question often conflated with the historical character of the Last Supper.

The merits of considering the *birkat ha-mazon*, the *seder* of the Passover, or other real or imagined forms of Jewish meal in relation to the Christian Eucharist are, however, dubious. If these theories shared the common flaw of the diachronic fallacy noted above, they involved the additional problem of privileging origins as unique determiners of meaning.¹⁶ Scholarship that focussed on this approach sought a mythical ancestor figure for the Eucharist among the evidence for Jewish meals; indeed some of these meals really were mythical, whether or not they were ancestors. Gregory Dix’s alleged “*haburah* meal” was never really a specific ritual form but a whole tradition of meal and conversation,¹⁷ while Joachim Jeremias’ confident reconstruction of a first-century *seder* relied implausibly on Rabbinic literature, centuries younger than the Gospels themselves.¹⁸

15. G. Theissen, “Social Integration and Sacramental Activity: An Analysis of 1 Cor. 11:17-34”, in *The Social Setting of Pauline Christianity: Essays on Corinth* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1982) 145-74.

16. See discussion in Bradshaw, *Search for the Origins of Christian Worship*, 33-46.

17. See Dix, *The Shape of the Liturgy*, 50-77 etc.

18. Joachim Jeremias, *The Eucharistic Words of Jesus* (London: SCM Press, 1966) 41-62. See the popular but acute recent discussion in Jonathan Klawans, “Was Jesus’ Last Supper a Seder?”, *Biblical Archaeology Review* 17/5 (2001) 24-33.

More recent scholarship has turned its attention to the broader tradition of Greco-Roman meals, known for convenience as *symposia*.¹⁹ As a field of meaning against which to interpret early Eucharistic practice, this tradition seems more fruitful for contextualisation than the quest for alleged Jewish antecedents. However, this is not some simple shift away from seeking Christian origins among the Jews to focussing on the Greeks; rather, for these purposes, “Greco-Roman” refers to the complex of cultures caught up in the Hellenistic world, of which Judaism was a part.

There are meal practices in Jewish contexts that have specific and distinctive features, but these are not a basis for considering them as radically separate; rather they are one significant part of the whole. Scholars have noted for instance the impact of Hellenisation on the traditions of meals recorded by the Rabbis, including the Passover *seder*.²⁰ Viewing these different meal traditions in relation to one another means moving quickly past exaggerated distinctions between Jewish and Hellenistic models, and acknowledging greater complexity within a more loosely-defined but genuinely-connected system of meals in the ancient Mediterranean.

This interpretive shift is therefore not so much from Jewish to (other) Greco-Roman origins as determiners of meaning, as from genealogical to comparative methods. It would be unhelpful to treat the *symposium* as another form that “explained” the origins of Eucharistic meals by providing the specifics of words or actions, etc., in much the same way as earlier scholars treated one or other Jewish meal type.²¹ If it were assumed that Greco-Roman sympotic culture was a uniform or stereotypical set of practices that offered explanatory power for the earliest Christian meals, this would be little advance on earlier discussions. Better to think of Greco-Roman meals, including Jewish ones, as a whole system or language of sorts, wherein various meanings could be conveyed and enacted in specific choices made by hosts and diners.

All this implies a different but real kind of value for the study of early Christian and early Jewish meal traditions in relation to one another. The traditional preference for diachronic and genetic approaches to the history of early Christian meals has tended to collude with supersessionist assumptions embedded in scholarly discourse, with the effect that all Jewish evidence tends to be read as

19. Notably Smith, *From Symposium to Eucharist*.

20. Gordon J. Bahr, “The Seder of Passover and the Eucharistic Words”, *Novum Testamentum* 12 (1970) 181–202.

21. Some cautions on this note are sounded by Gerard Rouwhorst, “The Roots of the Early Christian Eucharist: Jewish Blessings or Hellenistic Symposia?”, in *Jewish and Christian Liturgy and Worship: New Insights into its History and Interaction* (ed. Albert Gerhards and Clemens Leonhard; vol. 15; Jewish and Christian Perspectives; Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2007).

“background” for all Christian practice. The reality is far more complex, and indeed richer. The meal traditions which are of such interest to the Mishnah and the Talmuds are better understood as parallel or cognate phenomena to Christian ones, rather than as ancestors.

Accepting Christianity and Rabbinic Judaism as phenomena in parallel rather than in series also has important implications for attempts to ground the form and meaning of the earliest Christian gatherings in other Jewish religious practices, such as the types of prayer used in the Synagogue, or the rituals and understandings attached to the cultic system of the Jerusalem Temple.

Both Temple and synagogue made deep contributions, direct and indirect, to the theologies and discourses of early Christian liturgy. There is little to be gained by attempts to choose a leader between such influences, let alone prove or disprove them; the real question is not whether, but *how* they did so. Yet some attempts to link Jewish cultus and prayer with Christian practice fall into the same genetic and/or diachronic traps. For Christians and Jews, meal gatherings were not so much an alternative to Temple or synagogue as a form of practice connected with both, as well as with other institutions such as households and *collegia*.

While the rituals and practices of both Temple and synagogue had their impact on early Christian Eucharistic meals – not just at the beginning, as the supersessionist logic of genetic approaches tends to assume, but later as well – the Christian gathering does not constitute a sort of re-invention of these institutions or their self-understandings *per se*.²² The assumption that a “religious” institution was the specific point of origin for Christian liturgy misunderstands the ubiquity of religion in antiquity, over-reading the analogy between how modern Churches and synagogues function relative to their ancient models.²³

This means that there is fresh light to shed, not only on Christian but on Jewish meal practice, from approaches which adopt something more like the *bricolage* called for here, with openness to synchronic and comparative insights.²⁴

22. The later influence of Temple imagery and logic on Christian liturgical space and subsequently (!) on Synagogues is explored by Joan R. Branham, “Sacred Space under Erasure in Ancient Synagogues and Early Churches”, *Art Bulletin* 74 (1992) 375–394.

23. A recent case in point would be Margaret Barker, *Temple Themes in Christian Worship* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 2007).

24. An important study of Jewish practice reflecting these concerns and insights will be Jordan D. Rosenblum, *Food and Identity in Early Rabbinic Judaism* (Cambridge UK and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010).

4. CHANGING NARRATIVES The Meal of Jesus

The reconstruction of Eucharistic origins is a quite different problem from that generally or traditionally assumed. The origin of the Eucharist is not the creation *ex nihilo* of a meal ritual where none existed, nor the adaptation of any particular or peculiar Jewish ritual form to a new, baptized use. The Christian meal tradition reflects the impact of the experience of Jesus, and the faith of his first followers, on an existing tradition of common meals fundamental to social identity, already somewhat varied in their specific forms and meanings. Rather than appearing from a punctiliar origin and diverging as per a sort of "branch" theory, Christian meal practice, like the Christian movement itself, appears simultaneously in different places with somewhat different features. An original diversity of Eucharistic practice was inevitable.

Granted the importance in Christian tradition of the "dominical institution" of the Eucharist, this diversity necessarily puts the place of Jesus as founder of the meal in a somewhat different light. I have already argued, in effect, that this does not mean quite what has been assumed. However important it may be regarded theologically, and however well-grounded its historicity, the place of the Last Supper in particular must be rethought.²⁵ We might say even that the Eucharist is older than Jesus or the Last Supper, in the sense that the tradition of communal meals among those who became his followers preceded their knowledge of and faith in him.

Despite this, and despite the much-discussed evidence for Jesus as participant in meals along with his followers, the history of the Eucharist proper begins after him. It was all but inevitable that his followers would use the central social institution available to voluntary associations – banquets – as the medium through which to meet, pray, and share traditions concerning Jesus, prophecies and other forms of discourse.

In what follows, then, I shall offer some proposals for rethinking Eucharistic origins, not by revisiting the actions of Jesus at the Last Supper as a sort of efficient cause, but by summarising some elements of the earliest accessible practices, the history and development of Christian meals. The aspects of practice discussed below are hardly exhaustive, but chosen partly to note progress with the development of a new paradigm, and partly to exemplify the methods that have been suggested.

25. See J. Meier, "The Eucharist at the Last Supper: Did it happen?," *Theology Digest* 42 (1995): 335–351.

Food and Drink

The food and drink that predominated at Eucharistic meals, even in the earliest times, was certainly bread and wine. There are at least two significant reasons, however, to doubt that this was a universal tradition stemming from the Last Supper (or indirectly from the *seder* etc.).

First, there is a real if limited set of exceptions or variations to the bread-wine pattern. These exceptions involved subtraction from, or simplification of, the expected elements, rather than addition to them, the most common alternative being the use of bread and water, or of no cup at all.²⁶ This ascetic pattern is not a deviation from an original and universal bread-wine practice; the concerns which lead to preference for bread and water are older than the Eucharistic tradition itself, and respond to the place of meat and wine in the “cuisine of sacrifice” central to Greco-Roman religion.²⁷ Bread and water were understood as polar opposites to meat and wine, as non-sacrificial food and drink signifying resistance to or avoidance of sacrificial cultus and the society that enacted it.²⁸

There were also cases where additional foods appeared at Christian meals alongside bread and wine or water; these may have expressed festivity, but usually assumed the same ascetic logic discussed, adding vegetable and dairy products while excluding meat and wine. Sometimes, even as late as the fourth century when greater standardisation and a purely token liturgical eating and drinking held sway, foods including milk and honey, or cheese and olives, were still added to Eucharistic ritual as signs of celebration, especially when associated with baptism or ordination (*Ap. Trad.* 6, 22).

The intriguing possibility that fish may have been included in such meals cannot be dismissed either, though it has sometimes been exaggerated or read back into New Testament accounts in implausible ways.²⁹ Some early Christian groups did value fish as a pure or ascetic food, luxurious but without the pagan sacrificial connotations of meat.³⁰

26. Andrew B. McGowan, *Ascetic Eucharists: Food and Drink in Early Christian Ritual Meals* (Oxford Early Christian Studies; Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1999).

27. Marcel Detienne and Jean Pierre Vernant, *The Cuisine of Sacrifice among the Greeks* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989).

28. McGowan, *Ascetic Eucharists*, 67-88. Cf. Detienne and Vernant, *The Cuisine of Sacrifice*.

29. McGowan, *Ascetic Eucharists*, 127-40.

30. Alistair Stewart-Sykes, “Bread and Fish, Water and Wine: The Marcionite Menu and the Maintenance of Purity”, in Gerhard May, Katharina Greschat, and Martin Meiser (eds.), *Marcion und seine kirchengeschichtliche Wirkung: Marcion and His Impact on Church History* (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2002) 207-220.

The second point to be made regarding the better-known bread and wine of the Eucharist is that their singularity or oddity has often been exaggerated. Bread and wine were not foods specific to the *seder* or any other festive meal in particular, but were the staple foods of the Mediterranean world. Wine, which scholars often seem to regard as a sign of luxury, was consumed routinely by poor as well as rich – although, of course, its quantity and quality varied.³¹

It is dubious to claim inherent symbolic meaning in the use of these elements, other than their more-or-less universal significance as foundational to life, and to sociability or well-being. In both Jewish and (other) Greco-Roman settings there may have been more specific images and ideas associated with bread or wine; but the most important thing is their ubiquity, and consequent polyvalence. Bread and wine were highly adaptable symbols, precisely because they were not particular to certain rituals, times, or cultures, but universal.

The food and drink of the Eucharist thus stem not from the particularity of a single historical meal of Jesus, but from the commonality of ancient Mediterranean diet. There is however a certain surprising and powerful quality about such prosaic things as the central elements of a banquet. This ironic or paradoxical use of the simple, prized and shared as sacred, has a force that has not been fully explored.

In particular, the belief in many early traditions and ultimately the normative or orthodox Eucharistic doctrine, that Jesus and/or his flesh and blood are genuinely present and received in the meal, is all the more startling when expressed in relation to such prosaic foods. The language of “body” (or flesh) and “blood” could not help invite comparison with the meat-laden meals central to sacrificial cultus in Judaism or Greco-Roman paganism, or with the memory of Jerusalem temple cultus. Unlike the ascetic wine-less Eucharists discussed above, the consumption of bread (and wine) represented a symbolically bold, economically accessible and religiously accommodating compromise or synthesis. While its success is historically evident, the character and development relative to ancient practice has been somewhat lost under the weight of assumptions about more specific, and genetically-laden, meaning.

The Order of the Meal

The familiar shape of the Christian Eucharist reflects the order of the typical Greco-Roman banquet, where the meal proper was followed by ceremonial drinking. This is also the shape of the meal described in the “institution narratives” of the Last Supper. Whatever the relationship between the historical last meal of Jesus and the *seder*,

31. McGowan, *Ascetic Eucharists*, 91-95.

the institution narratives preserve no specific ritual features that pertain to the Passover banquet as known slightly later, but merely the generic shape of the ancient *symposium*.³²

At the earliest point, the structural relationship between Eucharist and banquet is one more of identity than of mere homology; the Eucharist is not *like* a banquet, it is a banquet. That relationship clearly changes over time, as the meal becomes attenuated or otherwise shifts to the familiar token patterns of consumption. Even then, however, the structure of the banquet can be clearly visible, even beyond the basic bread-cup sequence. For instance, the baptismal Eucharist prescribed in the *Apostolic Tradition* (perhaps of the late third century) involved three cups – of mixed wine, of milk and honey, and of water – in a pattern similar to the expectation of three mixed bowls or cups at other banquets (*Ap. Trad.* 22).³³

Yet there were also ways in which Christians contrasted their meals and their structures with those of others. Paul's distinction between the "Lord's banquet (supper)" and the personal banquets of the various wealthier Corinthians is a case in point; it represents an attempt to establish an ethical (if not so much a ritual) distinction between Christian meal practice and that of others (1 Cor 11:17-34). A similar concern motivates the Carthaginian theologian Tertullian around 200 CE, who like Paul combines elements of similarity and difference in his description of the Christian meal:

The participants, before reclining, taste first of prayer to God. As much is eaten as satisfies the cravings of hunger; as much is drunk as befits the chaste. They say it is enough, as those who remember that even during the night they have to worship God; they talk as those who know that the Lord is one of their hearers. After washing hands, and the bringing in of lights, each is asked to stand forth and sing, as able, a hymn to God...a proof of the measure of our drinking.... We go from it, not like troops of mischief-doers, nor bands of vagabonds, nor to break out into licentious acts, but to have as much care of our modesty and chastity as if we had been at a school of virtue rather than a banquet (*Apol.* 39.16-19, ANF [alt.]).

Tertullian refers implicitly and explicitly to expectations of diners at banquets throughout, contrasting the sober Christian gathering from proverbially-riotous drinking parties without losing the connection altogether.

A different ritual pattern is also attested, and by implication a more definite contrast with the Greco-Roman *symposium* as usually celebrated. The Eucharistic meal of the *Didache*, the earliest surviving

32. Klawans, "Was Jesus' Last Supper a Seder?"

33. McGowan, *Ascetic Eucharists*, 110.

account of any “Eucharist” and prayers associated with it, famously prescribes a cup-bread pattern of blessing and consumption instead of the expected sympotic meal-drink pattern.

The *Didache* meal has sometimes been interpreted as an “*Agape*” rather than Eucharist, because of the difference from the later normative order of the sacramental meal and the lack of reference to the Last Supper or death of Jesus. That logic, however, is circular.³⁴ As we have seen, the cup-bread order differs as much from typical Greco-Roman expectations for communal meals as it does from the “institution narratives” in particular.

There are other early Christian examples of the cup-bread pattern.³⁵ Although the difference between this order and the Greco-Roman *symposium* in general (and the Last Supper in particular) is curious, there are notable parallels for the cup-bread pattern with Jewish meals. The Dead Sea Scrolls and later Rabbinic literature both witness to the opening of formal meals with the blessing of a cup. Although opening toasts or libations were not unknown in other Greco-Roman settings, these Jewish and Christian meals also seem to omit altogether the typical mixing and drinking of wine after the food.³⁶

The origins of the cup-bread order may therefore be cultural and related to Judaism. In Hellenised environments it may have served as a marker of distinctive religious and ethnic identity, including commitment to an ascetic or at least restrained meal practice, clearly distinguished from the potentially raucous conviviality of other groups.

At the Origins of Eucharistic Prayer

Not all of the earliest Christians need have been aware of the tradition of the Last Supper, or have understood their meal gatherings in any particular relation to it, let alone to the command “do this” found in two of the four canonical accounts (Luke 22:19; 1 Cor 11:24-25). The *Didache*, for instance, makes no connection between its “*Eucharistia*” – the oldest liturgical instruction for a meal bearing that name – and the Last Supper tradition.

Even where the story of the Last Supper was known, and the dominical injunction known and acted upon, it remains unlikely that the participants saw themselves as called by Jesus to celebrate a meal *per se*. Since, as we have seen, it was obvious to gather for meals in any case, obedience to his command must have meant something more

34. Bradshaw, *Eucharistic Origins*, 24-42.

35. Andrew B. McGowan, “First Regarding the Cup...’: Papias and the Diversity of Early Eucharistic Practice”, *Journal of Theological Studies* 46 (1995) 551-55.

36. Andrew B. McGowan, “The Inordinate Cup: Issues of Order in Early Eucharistic Drinking”, in *Studia Patristica* 35 (Louvain: Peeters, 2001) 283-91.

specific, such as the willingness to gather with this particular group of Christ-believers and, as Paul argues, to do so in a distinctive way.³⁷

Prayers and other discourses at the meal would certainly have been influenced by traditions and beliefs concerning Jesus. Those prayers in particular have been the object of the most detailed studies of early Eucharistic practice thus far, being in effect the traditional content of liturgical study.³⁸ Yet despite the widespread assumption that Eucharistic prayer meant first and foremost reciting the “institution narrative” over the meal, that does not seem to have happened at the earliest point. The earliest Eucharistic prayers known to us – probably those of the *Didache*, of the apocryphal *Acts of John*,³⁹ and the Strasbourg Papyrus 254⁴⁰ – do not contain the narrative of institution. The earliest known prayer that does so is from the Egyptian Church Order better known as the “*Apostolic Tradition*” (4). This prayer includes the narrative, not as a separate recitation so much as an interpolation into a prayer that, like these earlier ones, centres on blessing and/or thanksgiving to God for Christ.

Determining the precise genealogies of these early Eucharistic prayers is a contested enterprise, and is not here our immediate concern. It is worth noting however that the most fundamental common element of prayers of the Eucharistic meal is indeed literally “Eucharistic”: it involves giving thanks to God for Jesus Christ over food and drink, and not primarily the memorialisation of a particular meal of Jesus. So, granted real differences, there is arguably a genuine commonality in the orientation and character of the earliest surviving Eucharistic prayers. Yet the familiar narration of the Last Supper in the Eucharistic prayer is a later development rather than an original or universal feature.

Although it is possible that even those prayers lacking the institution narrative were sometimes offered with an implied nod to the model of the Last Supper, this does not mean that the Last Supper was always and everywhere the basis for eating with other Christians in thanksgiving to God for Jesus Christ. Recognising this creates a more open field of enquiry that looks beyond the traditional genetic and diachronic considerations. Precisely because less obvious, the

37. Andrew B. McGowan, “‘Is There a Liturgical Text in This Gospel?’: The Institution Narratives and Their Early Interpretive Communities”, *Journal of Biblical Literature* 118 (1999) 73-87.

38. Bradshaw, *Eucharistic Origins*, 116-38. See especially Enrico Mazza, *The Origins of the Eucharistic Prayer* (Collegeville MN: Liturgical Press, 1995).

39. Geoff Jenkins, “Papyrus 1 from Kellis. A Greek text with affinities to the Acts of John”, in Jan N. Bremmer (ed.), *The Apocryphal Acts of John* (vol. 1; Studies on the Apocryphal Acts of the Apostles; Kampen: Kok Pharos, 1995) 197-216.

40. Walter D. Ray, “The Strasbourg Papyrus”, in Paul F. Bradshaw (ed.), *Essays on Early Eastern Eucharistic Prayers* (Collegeville MN: Liturgical Press, 1997) 39-56.

tradition of the Last Supper may then become all the more fruitful as a focus of enquiry.

Eucharist and Meal

This overview has suggested that the earliest Eucharistic traditions are most fruitfully studied in the context of ancient meal practice. This is true even where the meal no longer seems to have a substantial character but, as in a relatively late case like the *Apostolic Tradition*, approaches the more familiar notion of "sacrament" as attenuated or token, yet retaining structural elements that can be related to meals. Such possibilities have been important in contemporary liturgical renewal, where the language of "banquet" or "supper", "table", and other concepts and symbols related to meals have been retrieved, even in reference to familiar token food and drink rituals.

Recognition that the Eucharist was and in a sense still is a meal is important. There remains the historical puzzle as to when, how and why a substantial communal meal became or gave rise to the familiar token or sacramental meal. I have argued against the assumption that the Eucharistic elements of bread and wine were peculiar sacral additions to a prosaic communal banquet, and thus readily removed to some different setting after apostolic admonition. Rather, the earliest accounts suggest the actual identity of Eucharist and meal. This of course makes it even more difficult to account for the change from a substantial meal.

Given the diversity of early Eucharistic practice, it would be dangerous to assume that any process of change was uniform. The unfinished task of historical reconstruction demands careful *bricolage* of the available evidence, considering particular locales or traditions, rather than another too-confident narrative. It seems likely nonetheless that the emergence of the familiar "token" sacramental meal came about more gradually than has generally been assumed. It is also likely to have involved the attenuation and eventual separation of the basic meal itself into a token form, rather than the detachment of an essentially separate rite.

One case where it is possible to trace such a change is Carthage, where Tertullian's evidence and that of the contemporary *Martyrdom of Perpetua and Felicitas*, both from around 200 CE, can be compared with that of Cyprian fifty years later. Where Tertullian still presents the evening *Agape* as the main communal gathering for the Christians (associated with accusations of cannibalism and incest that seem intimately connected with the Eucharist), he also indicates there is a separate opportunity to receive the Eucharist, in the morning (*De Corona* 3.3). By Cyprian's time, however, the evening gathering has become less important, and the morning event the more so (*Ep.*

63.16).⁴¹ In that case, the emergence of a distinct morning Eucharistic gathering, or at least its becoming central to the life of Christian communities, was later than has usually been imagined: not in the first century, but still developing across the third.

It was also gradual, with a shift in emphasis over time between a continuing banqueting tradition and a separate gathering for prayer, where the sacramental food and drink were also received. And not much more than a century after Cyprian, the communal banquets that had been the original form of the Eucharist became controversial, and bishops could even attempt to end them.⁴² The Christian communal meal was to survive only in less obvious ways, such as in the structured dining practices of monastic communities.

5. CONCLUSION

The ways early Christian communities ate were a central part of how they organised, sustained and expressed their common life and belief in the God of Jesus Christ. The historical reconstruction of these ways and of the transformation of the early banqueting tradition into the familiar liturgy of the Eucharist, is in fact a more narrowly-defined version of the history of ancient Christianity itself.

This history, incomplete as it remains, turns out to be neither a “fall” from pristine authenticity into institutional rigidity, nor an obvious or unremarkable procession of continuity. Peter Brown, who has done much to prompt rethinking late ancient Christianity as a whole, speaks of “a succession of distinctive ‘Christianities’ spread out in time”.⁴³ This idea fits the picture of historical Eucharistic meal practice that emerges when greater attention is paid to the specifics of particular evidence in its complexity and diversity, along with openness to the possibilities of seeing and interpreting both continuity and change.

There are, on the one hand, many distinctive Eucharists spread out over both time and space, even as many as there were assemblies or communities, with a diversity of features and meanings. That diversity is somewhat unlike the modern or post-modern plurality with which some immediate comparison may be superficially appealing. Ancient

41. See the specific discussions in Bradshaw, *Eucharistic Origins*, 97-115, and Andrew B. McGowan, “Rethinking Agape and Eucharist in Early North African Christianity”, *Studia Liturgica* 34 (2004) 165-76.

42. The most famous case may be Ambrose’s criticism, recorded by Augustine, of funerary meals (*Conf.* 6.2.2). See also the *Canons* of Laodicea (28), and Basil’s *Short Rules* 310.

43. Peter Brown, “Gloriosus Obitus: The End of the Ancient Other World”, in William E. Klingshirn and Mark Vessey (eds.), *The Limits of Ancient Christianity: Essays on Late Antique Thought and Culture in Honor of R. A. Markus* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1999) 290.

liturgical diversity seems to be centred on the strong assertion of theological, cultural and other factors quite fundamental to the identity of the communities involved. Yet they did not view their choices as expressions of personal or communal preference, but as adherence to apostolic or dominical mandates, however well-grounded these claims might now appear.

Patterns of difference and development and change are also apparent across this range of meals, although the narration of these changes requires fresh approaches that emphasise the local and specific within the appropriate drive to assemble a general and comprehensive picture. Yet if there was diversity, there was also one Eucharistic meal tradition. Formally and theologically this unity may be more readily seen later, when greater uniformity was established across the life of (most) communities in a more centrally-organised Church. Yet originally, and more basically, there is a unity to be sought and discerned in the commonality of meals in the Greco-Roman world, which do constitute a real if diffuse set of conventions within which the eating and drinking of the earliest Christians took place. And within that diffuse reality, expressed in various ways and in different words, there is still a real if sometimes elusive unity in the fact that these Christians who ate and drank together interpreted their many meals in memory of, and with thanks for, the one Jesus.⁴⁴

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