

BIBLE BLETHER – 29 OCTOBER 2014

Meals in Biblical times

Before I start, my paper tonight is based upon the doctoral research of Jonanda and with thanks to her.

Proverbs 26:15

“A sluggard buries his hand in the dish; he is too lazy to bring it back to his mouth.”

Acts 20:7

“⁷ On the first day of the week we came together to break bread. Paul spoke to the people and, because he intended to leave the next day, kept on talking until midnight.”

Mark 14:20

²⁰ “It is one of the Twelve,” he replied, “one who dips bread into the bowl with me.”

Introduction

Since the Eucharist is a ceremonial *meal*, an understanding of the way in which meals were conducted in the first-century

Mediterranean world – the historical context of this meal – can shed light on the origins and meaning of the earliest Eucharist.

It has been argued by Biblical scholars such as Elliott (1991:388) says, beyond supplying nourishment, food and meals have a variety of social capacities: “They can serve as boundary markers distinguishing types and groups of participants and consumers: men/women, adults/children, humans/gods/demons, kin/non-kin, upper/lower classes, insiders/outsideers.” Food and meals are also the media of social and economic exchange. “Like the exchange of women in marriage or of other gifts and services across group boundaries, the sharing of food and hospitality plays an important role in the maintaining or modifying of social relations” (Elliott 1991:388; cf Van Staden 1991:217).

Meals in biblical times

Formal meals in the Mediterranean culture of the Hellenistic and Roman periods (the period encompassing the origin and early development of “Christianity”) usually took on a homogeneous form. Smith (2003:2) says: “Although there were many minor differences in the meal customs as practiced in different regions and social groups, the evidence suggests that meals **took similar forms and shared similar meanings and interpretations** across a broad range of the

ancient world” (Smith 2003:2; cf Mack 1988:81; Neyrey 1991:364-365).

When the earliest Jesus followers came together, they regularly ate a meal together (see our reading of Acts). Smith (2003:1-2) says that in this “...they were no different from other religious people in their world: for when any group of people in the ancient Mediterranean world met for social or religious purposes, **their gatherings tended to be centered on a common meal or banquet.**” The meals also tended to follow the same basic form, customs, and rules, regardless of the group, occasion or setting (cf Mack 1988:114-115). The **banquet, the traditional evening meal, became the pattern for all formalized meals in the Mediterranean world**, whether these meals were “**sacred**” or “**secular**”. There was a **religious component** to every secular meal and every “sacred” banquet was also a social occasion (cf Smith & Taussig 1990:21-22; De Jonge 2001:209). Because of this the banquet can be called a “**social institution**” in the Greco-Roman world. If we thus want to know more about Greek philosophical banquets, or Israelite festival meals, or community meals of early Jesus-followers, we can gain insight from a prior understanding of the larger phenomenon of the banquet as a social institution.

In the first-century Mediterranean world meals thus represented a **social code** that expressed patterns of social relations, which we can

call the ideology of the banquet. This can be seen in the function of meals in defining groups and their values. **Eating together implied** that people shared common ideas, values and social status (cf Van Staden 1991:200). People paid close attention to who **ate with whom** (e.g. Mk 2:15-17), **who sat where** (e.g. Lk 14:7-11), what they **ate and drank** (e.g. Lk 7:33-34) and where (e.g. Mk 6:35-36), how the food was prepared (e.g. Jn 21:9), which utensils were used (e.g. Mk 7:4), when the meal took place (e.g. Mk 14:12; Jn 13:1), and what was discussed at table (e.g. Lk 22:24-38) (see Neyrey 1991:368; Pilch 1996c:95). The **patterns of social relationships** that make up ancient banquet ideology can thus be divided into the following categories (Smith & Taussig 1990:30-35; Smith 2003: 9-12; cf Neyrey 1991:364-368; Crossan 1994:68-69):

- *Social boundaries*: The defining of boundaries is primary to the social code of banquets. **Whom one dines with define one's placement** in a larger set of social networks. The social code of the banquet represents a confirmation and ritualization of the boundaries that exist in a social institution.
- *Social bonding*: A meal creates a special tie among the diners; it defines boundaries between different groups. In the New Testament Jesus is defined as a **"friend of tax collectors and sinners"** (Mk 2:15-

17) on the grounds of dining with them. “[S]hared table-fellowship implies that **Jesus shares *their* world...**” (Neyrey 1991:364).

- *Social obligation*: Because a meal created a special tie among the diners, it in turn led to an **ethical obligation between** one another (1 Cor 11:17-22) (cf Elliott 2003:194).
- *Social stratification/formation*: People who dined at a first-century table were always aware of their **different social rankings**. Even the **act of reclining indicated rank**, for this posture was reserved for free, male, citizens. **Women, children and slaves had to sit when they ate**. Social stratification was also visible in the practice of ranking the guests **by their position at the table** as well as by the **quality or quantity of food a person was given**. We see this for example in the placement of individuals according to their rank in the community at the communal meal of the Essenes at Qumran ([1QS^a 2.11-22](#)).
- *Social inclusivity*: Although the social rankings of the guests were assumed, there was also a sense of **social inclusivity** among them. Those who dined together were to be treated in the same fashion. We see this in the **Passover liturgy specification** that the poor should also **recline equally at table on this occasion** and receive at least four cups of wine.

- *Festive joy*: A proper banquet could be judged by how well it **promoted festive joy**.
- *Banquet entertainment*: The first-century banquet presupposed entertainment as part of the event. This could be anything, like party games, dramatic presentations, music, or philosophical conversation.

We can see an example of some of these characteristics in the New Testament. For the Pharisees food and meals formed a mediating link between the Temple with its altar and the private home and its table. According to Luke-Acts, this purity system, linked with the Temple and legitimated in the Mosaic law and oral tradition of the Pharisees, constituted the system which Jesus and his followers came into conflict with. Elliott (1991:390) says: “Within the Lucan narrative, **a new food code replicates** and supports a new social code, **a code consonant with a new vision of an inclusive salvation** and an inclusive community of the redeemed” (cf Neyrey 1991:361; Esler 1996:71-109). Elliott (1991:391) further says that in Luke-Acts (e.g. Ac 10:1-11:18), the pattern of domestic relations and the intimacy and solidarity it presumes, serves as the decisive model for the identity and ethos of the “Christian” community as a whole:

This form of community ordered around the roles, relationships and responsibilities of the household stand in stark contrast to the

exploitative system of the Temple, and embodies an alternative vision of salvation based not on cultic purity but on the gift of divine mercy and its imitation in the family of faith.

The following features were characteristic of the Greco-Roman banquet:

- Although the *posture* was sitting in Homeric times, it changed to reclining.
- The *time* of the banquet was in the evening.
- *Invitations* were assumed to be a normal part of a formal banquet. Invitations were communicated verbally or written and were usually send out a few days in advance for a practical reason, namely to fill the quota of guests.
- Archeological discoveries have provided us with plans for typical *dining rooms* in the Greek and Roman world. Usually an individual would host a banquet in his house. In a normal Greek city various public buildings also had banquet facilities, including temple complexes (1 Cor 8:10). Dining rooms were designed so that couches could be arranged around a central axis and diners could share tables

and communicate easily with each other (cf De Jonge 2001:210). The same form was used for domestic, public, and religious settings.

- The Greeks customarily had two *courses* in their banquet – they had the part where the meal would be eaten (*deipnon*) and then the drinking party (*symposion*) afterwards like we have in the Lords Supper as well. The Romans had the same two basic courses, but they also had appetizers at the beginning of the meal. During the Roman period, the Greeks also added appetizers.
- The *menu* at a banquet consisted of bread and various vegetables, with fish or meat when the meal was extravagant. Wine was usually drunk.
- The end of the first course and the beginning of the second was marked off by special *rituals*, beginning with the removal of the tables and the bringing in of the wine bowl. The beginning of the symposium would then be marked by the offering of a libation to the gods and other religious ceremonies, such as the singing of a hymn. In the Israelite tradition there developed a traditional benediction over the wine.

- The arranging of the guests always took place according to their *social rank*. The symposium was started with the selection of a presiding officer or “symposiarch”, which set the rules for the drinking party to follow. The person occupying the highest position at the table was the guest of honor, and the other diners would be arranged according to rank to his right (Lk 14:7-11).
- The *host* was responsible for the guest list, the menu, the provision of a place for the banquet, as well as for the provision of the places the guests would occupy at the table (cf Van Staden 1991:218).
- It was customary for the household servant to *wash the feet* of the guests before they reclined (Lk 7:44; cf Van Staden 1991:220). *Washing the hands* before the meal was also a normal part of Greco-Roman banquet customs (Mk 7:3).
 - The symposium was a time for extended leisurely drinking of wine accompanied by *entertainment* or philosophical discussions.

All of these aspects can be seen in Paul’s arguments in his letters – he refers to the power of the meal to create *social bonding* and define *social boundaries*. His arguments for social ethics within the community probably draw on banquet traditions of *social obligation*

toward one's meal companions. He responds to issues of *social stratification* at the table but especially develops the theme of *social inclusiveness*. Paul utilizes many features from the rules of *banquet entertainment*, suggesting that worship took place at the community table (see Smith 2003:175). Van Staden (1991:216) says that since Jesus frequently taught during the setting of a meal, a connection can be made between Jesus' table talk and the literary genre of the symposium, where table talk was a significant feature (cf Funk & The Jesus Seminar 1998:142).

If we take a look at the Gospels, Smith (2003:219-221) says that meals in these documents also consistently reflect the Greco-Roman banquet tradition. One example of this is that in descriptions of meals that Jesus had, the posture seems to be reclining.

If we keep the schema provided in chapter 1 in mind, the different layers of the Jesus tradition can identify the way in which the banquet motif is functioning in the Gospels:

End remarks

Meals were a social statement in the time of Jesus of who you were, and with whom you associated yourself. They did not have their main meal at night just for the sake of food. Meals were a social

mechanism of your status in that society. You would not dare to invite those who were regarded as shameful. Jesus clearly broke down all the barriers and had a much more inclusive view on who was to sit at your table. Even at the Eucharist or Last Supper it is evident that Jesus is broadening the boundaries and including more people like He did with His ministry on earth.

So in future when we eat, we must be mindful of the social boundaries we create and sustain by excluding people from our tables.

Any questions.....