

Memorable Meals: Symposia in Luke's Gospel, the Rabbinic Seder,
and the Greco-Roman Literary Tradition

the symposium...is the most delightful way to remember each other

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PREFACE

In *The Rituals of Dinner*, Margaret Visser suggests that "behind every rule of table etiquette lurks the determination of each person present to be a diner not a dish."¹ Regardless of their origins, the rituals of dinner certainly have become symbolic means for representing and even mediating controversies - both within a culture and between different cultures. Thus, literature and art from the Bible to *Babette's Feast* have used the setting of meals to represent social conflicts or tensions between the sexes, between old and young, competing philosophies and religious perspectives, rich and poor, the Orient and the West, and so on. Socrates and the Sophists, Jesus and the Pharisees, Bet Hillel and Bet Shammai, women and men in the ancient novels took each other on in the course of some of the great literary meals of the Western Greco-Roman, Judeo-Christian traditions.

Closer to home, I remember my grandparents' comic argument routine (well-honed after fifty years of practice) at our weekly Friday night Shabbat dinners at their house. "It's day." "No, it's night!" "What are you arguing about, Princess *Hok-a-tcheynik* (Yiddish, loosely, for "Princess Bang-on-the-Pots")?!" I also remember trading Episcopalian and Jewish jokes with Christian seminarians and fellow graduate students over meals seasoned with intense theological discussions when I was a student at Vanderbilt Divinity School and at NCCJ retreats. There is something remarkable about the way a shared meal can "frame" people even from very different backgrounds and perspectives into a moment of shared experience, of companionship (literally, "sharing bread"). There are things you might not say or do, things you would say and do among company at a shared meal, that otherwise you would or wouldn't. Generally, the

experience of a shared meal is a heightened sense of awareness of the implications of your talk and actions - sensitivity to the feelings of your company. Of course, your heightened awareness might better equip you to shock or insult your fellow diners. Socrates, Alcibiades, and Jesus, and Lucian's parodies of symposia provide appropriate literary precedents. Nevertheless, as Visser's quip points out, there is a lot of counter pressure from the conventions of meals themselves to keep the sublimated violence contained - to drink from your cup rather than conk your companion on the head with it.

However, the real challenge might be getting to the *same* table. What if you keep kosher and your host does not; if you're a meat-eater and your guests vegetarians; if you're offered communion and you're not a communicant; if you live on the "right" and your potential guests on the "wrong" sides of the tracks; if you're Black and she's white; if you're a Zionist and your companion a Palestinian Muslim; or if Christ is your hosts' Savior, but you've been cast for the past two thousand years as the "spawn of Satan"? Supposedly, the Christian table ethics of the Gospels are a model, since inclusiveness was its hallmark. In the parable of the Great Banquet, Jesus says, "invite the poor, the crippled, the blind, the lame... Go out on the highways and along the hedgerows and compel them to come in; *I want my house full*" (Lk 14:22,24). But isn't this at the cost of *excluding* the Pharisees' "friends, brothers, other relations, and rich neighbors," whom Jesus says *not* to invite (Lk 14:12)?

Thus, among my reasons for writing this book is to offer alternative models of inclusiveness, models that do not gloss over or deny very real differences between people with competing interests and perspectives. In literary meals, conflict - diversity of characters and quarrels - are precisely the aesthetic features that give symposia their

dramatic power and integrity. If Andre and Wallace agreed on everything in *My Dinner With Andre*, the film would be as boring as the Epicureans-only *Symposium* Athenaeus of Naucratis panned nearly two millennia earlier. Literary meals have been a wonderful way to frame the clash of perspectives in a civil manner. Even the long history of sympotic parodies - where the philosophic debates over dinner degenerate into food-fights and hand-to-hand combat - reinforces the ideal of communal co-existence that they depart from. As a relative outsider to the banquet of Christian Biblical scholarship, I am acutely sensitive to what happens when Jewish-Christian controversies are taken outside the venue of a shared meal, literary or otherwise. One of the reasons why Luke's Gospel appeals to me as a Jewish scholar of New Testament, is that no matter how heated the dinner table arguments get between Jesus and the Pharisees (Lk 11:37-54 is especially harsh!), it does not preclude them from sharing a common meal together *again* (i.e., Lk 14:1-24). Contrast this to Matthew's version of the same "Parable of the Great Banquet" and "Woe to you Pharisees!" traditions (Mt 22-23) that are not set at a shared banquets, but during the Passion narrative. They take on a very vindictive, violent tone - marking the end of discussion, the irrevocable parting of ways. Matthew's ideal of "Christian inclusiveness" for those unfit for the Kingdom/banquet is to "bind their hands and feet and cast them into the outer darkness" (Mt 22:13). My fellow Jews are a "brood of vipers" told to go to hell (Mt 23:33). History amply demonstrates the danger of Matthew's condemnation of the Jews and their leaders when taken literally, and out of context. Luke's banquet vision of the Kingdom of God seems much broader, more welcoming. In today's social climate when political conventions and college campuses alike tout the

virtues of diversity and civility, the ethic of symposia - transmitted to us in its Christian, Jewish, and classical Greco-Roman literary forms - has something valuable to offer.

I have also written this book out of the conviction that rituals are not mindless, or at least, they need not be. Making rituals is a poetic and imaginative activity. Yehudah Amichai, the contemporary Israeli poet, cuts to the heart of the matter in the analogy he draws between ritual and poetry in "Instead of a Love Poem."

Just as from "You shall not boil a kid in its mother's milk,"
They made the many laws of kashrut,
But the kid is forgotten, the milk is forgotten, and the mother is forgotten,
So from "I love you"
We made our whole life together
But I didn't forget you
As you were then.²

Rituals, like this poem, are rooted in a powerful, life-shaping experience that we don't want to forget, that we desire to prolong, even as we change, mature, move on. The rituals we do, the words we say build a hedge to contain and cultivate the relationships that gave them their original impetus.

We have become far too insensitive to the language of ritual. Lacking fluency, we have forgotten how to say what we mean with rituals. Perhaps the best way to learn to read and speak the language of ritual is to design your own, a tack I have taken when counseling couples planning their weddings with me or when teaching First Year college students in my seminar "The Rituals of Dinner." However, rituals like any other language depend on their speaker and audience sharing some set of social conventions if

any sort of communication is to take place. One does not create new rituals *ex nihilo*. Rituals seem much more effective when they are not wholly new, but rather when they combine old traditions (with all the deep mythic emotional resonance that they alone can carry) in new ways. Neologisms in ritual fall just as flat as they do in written or spoken discourse. To learn the art of ritual it would be helpful to study those who are good at it. The composers of the Hellenistic symposia in this study - Plato, Lucian, Luke, Athenaeus, Petronius, the anonymous editors of the Mishnah - were virtuoso speakers of the language of meal rituals. So an ulterior motive of this survey of symposia is to reveal the techniques of the masters so that we can learn from them.

Ultimately my book is an argument for a liberal understanding of ritual. To think about rituals, to make intentional thought itself an integral part of rituals, are acts of freedom and autonomy, even if they are rallied to reinforce a group sense of identity and solidarity. We are as free and as bound by rituals as we are by our own language. As social animals, we cannot choose to communicate without language or rituals, but we can choose *to say what we mean* with them.

¹Margaret Visser, *The Rituals of Dinner: The Origin, Evolution, Eccentricities, and Meaning of Table Manners* (New York, NY: Penguin Books, 1991) 4.

²Yehudah Amichai, "Instead of a Love Poem," in *Great Tranquility: Questions and Answers*; translated from the Hebrew by Glenda Abramson and Tudor Parfitt (New York: Harper & Row, 1983).