

CONCLUSION: COMPETING CHRISTIAN AND JEWISH RELIGIOUS  
STRATEGIES IN THE MEAL RITUALS OF LUKE'S GOSPEL AND THE  
RABBINIC PASSOVER SEDER

By the beginning of the second century C.E., the rituals of Greco-Roman symposia had been transformed into a long-standing, fully developed set of literary conventions for specifying symposium settings, for typical characters attending literary banquets, and for typical events to take place at literary banquets. Thus, there is not a simple correspondence between the ways in which Greco-Roman symposia were practiced and the ways they were represented in Greek and Latin literature of the first and second centuries C.E. - including Luke's representation of Christian meal rituals and the Passover seder in the Mishnah. The literary depictions of banquets framing table talk not only

1. represent contemporary Greco-Roman group rituals, social interaction, and the social structures underlying them as manifested in the symposia of the day. They also, more importantly,
2. idealize or parody certain interpretations of these social structures, and
3. transform these social rituals into a literary figure.

Symposium literary conventions represent a social order of patron/client relations particularly valued by the sophists, the intellectuals and professional teachers of the first two centuries C.E. In particular, the ambiguous picture of the hosts and the quarrels between hosts and guests in symposium scenes may reflect the struggle for leadership

between sophists and wealthy and/or politically influential patrons. The banquet becomes a metaphor for society, in which the philosopher/teachers, the "guests" at the banquet, make the best "symposiarchs," that is, conduct the banquet/society better than the hosts themselves who set it up in the first place or financed it. However, authors who represent these tensions in a unifying and convivial social gathering, the literary banquet, criticize the roles which society assigns sophists, rather than the patron/client cultural system as such.

Luke's Gospel and the rabbinic seder in the Mishnah employed symposium literary conventions likewise, to transform the meal rituals of their small Jewish sects in first-century Palestine into symbols of their respective ideals of communal life. Both used the framework of a communal banquet to interpret the experience of radical changes of his community and contemporaries' social and economic status characteristic of their historical period, but not peculiar to them. In certain ways then all symposium literature, including Luke's meal scenes and the Mishnah's seder, is very much a product of the cultural conditions peculiar to the Hellenistic period.

The literary features and strategies of Greco-Roman symposia express a shift to distinctively Hellenistic worldviews. Perhaps the most compelling and ambitious characterization of this shift is Luther H. Martin's theory of Hellenistic religion. For Martin, Hellenistic religions were part of a coherent system of responses of a variety of ancient Mediterranean communities to the dramatic changes initiated by Alexander the Great's political conquests and the "Ptolemaic cosmological revolution."<sup>1</sup> The particular reinterpretations of the traditions of Homer and Moses we have mentioned would be

examples of more general tendencies in process of the Hellenization of religions. It is worth quoting Martin's summary of this transformation of worldviews at length to do justice to its richness, relevance, and complexity.

The Hellenistic world was a world in transformation, a transformation characterized primarily by the general acceptance of a magnified spatial distribution by the end of the fourth century B.C.E. The Ptolemaic cosmological revolution established a universal, hierarchically differentiated architecture of the cosmos in place of traditional, regionally centered topographies of the world. Coincident with this cosmological revolution, the conquests of Alexander successfully internationalized these geographies, challenging the traditional social conventions of political identity with cosmopolitan aspirations. These wider distributions in the physical and political conditions of existence signaled also an enlargement of mind with increased possibilities for inspiration and discernment, but also for sophistry, folly, and extravagance.

The effects of Hellenistic cosmological universalism, political internationalism, and widened cultural and intellectual possibilities together raised new questions of individual existence. The ethical concerns of Hellenistic philosophy, exemplified in literature by the labyrinthine wanderings of Apuleius' Lucius, replaced the classical cosmological and metaphysical certainties of Plato and Aristotle concerning the order of things. These Hellenistic transformations all

generated the question reportedly asked of Jesus by an anonymous Everyman: "What must I do?" (Mark 10:17).

Hellenistic religions belonged to their world, and like that world were in transformation: from piety to mystery to gnosis. Local practices were adapted but not eclipsed by later religious formations, and formerly alien practices were enfolded into Hellenistic cosmopolitanism.<sup>2</sup>

In Martin's scheme, there were the three different "types of discourse and practice" and "strategies of existence" particularly distinctive of Hellenistic forms of religion: piety, mystery, and gnosis.<sup>3</sup> Any religious innovations or reformations of older localized religious traditions in the Hellenistic period can be understood as examples of one, or a combination, of these three types.

Applying Martin's theory of Hellenistic religion to the interpretations of Jesus, Biblical Passover, and other earlier Greco-Roman traditions in literary symposia lets us view them, too, not only as "types of discourse and practice," but also as religious "strategies of existence." As expressions of one or combinations of these three Hellenistic religious strategies, literary symposia of Luke's Gospel, the rabbinic *seder* in the Mishnah, and other examples of the Greco-Roman tradition of symposium "assumed an essentially identical order of things, but evaluated this order differently."<sup>4</sup>

One principle difference between these three strategies seems to be their relative evaluation of ritual in the order of things. Without getting into a long theoretical discussion and defense of Martin's definitions of gnosis, mystery and piety, I think it is fair to say that gnosis is a strategy that minimizes the salvific value of ritual. Insofar as the Platonic, encyclopedic, comic, and most of the novels' symposia seem the least

concerned with advocating ritual performances of the meals they portray, they strike me as gnostic in this sense. The meal scenes in the *romans recherches* and in these other types of symposia cultivate reflection, not action. It seems enough that they stimulate some sort of cognitive or intuitive insight to achieve a sense of well-being; it is not necessary really to *do anything*.<sup>5</sup> The meal scenes in Luke's Gospel, as in Apuleius' *Metamorphoses*, seem to represent the strategy of mystery. Mystery seems to combine the ways of gnosis and ritual.<sup>6</sup> There are certain actions one needs to do to achieve salvation, but they must be done with the right knowledge - "gnosis" of their import. Nor is that knowledge publicly available to anyone. It is vouchsafed to the initiate by a mystagogue with insider knowledge; to those outside it is a mystery. Thus, in Luke's Gospel, Jesus' disciples did not at first recognize him on the road to Emmaus, after his resurrection. That is, they did not recognize what had *really* happened; they were "ignorant and slow to believe all that the prophets said" *until* the risen Jesus "explained to them that in the whole of scripture the things that referred to himself" (Lk 24:25,27).

The *practice* of the Eucharist is meaningless for Luke unless one possesses the "gnosis" of the three-fold periodization of salvation history stamped according to the stages of Jesus' biography. Conversely, the experiential awareness of all three dimensions of Jesus' relative presence or absence in salvation history, can be known best through the performance of the ritual of the Eucharist instituted at the Last Supper. As Luke puts it, "He was made known to them in the breaking of the bread" (Luke 24:35). What both mystery and gnosis have in common however is their relative detachment from local practices and shrines, or ethnic groups geographically-based around them. In contrast, the way of piety emphasizes the salvific value of local practices among groups

linked by ethnic kinship or geographic proximity (or lack thereof from) and to their shrines, especially places for sacrifices.<sup>7</sup> The Passover seder seems to exemplify this strategy of piety. Performance of rituals is much more important than right knowledge (in and of itself) for achieving well-being. As Rabban Gamaliel put it in the seder, "Anyone who does not say these three things [*Pesah*, *matzah*, and *maror*] on Passover *does not fulfill his obligation*."<sup>8</sup> He does not say, "Anyone who does not *know* these three things"!

Thus, the ancient literary representations of the Last Supper and the Passover *seder* differed in the way they used the conventions of Greco-Roman symposium literature to ritualize their respective Christian and Jewish foundation myths to establish their communities' relationship to the Biblical people of Israel. The Last Supper and rabbinic seder employed distinctive "strategies of ritualization" and "ritualized metaphors." The different literary forms of Luke's Last Supper scene and Chapter 10 of *Mishnah Pesahim* cast the meals they represented as rituals with quite different meanings and functions. Luke cast the Christian Eucharist as a ritual both of separation and re-integration, stressing the Christians' break with other first-century Jews, as well as the union of contemporary Christians with their ancestors. The Mishnah makes the rabbinic seder function primarily as a ritual of re-integration, stressing the unbroken link between contemporary Jews and their ancestors, despite the traumatic events of the Temple's destruction and exile. Granted, the table talk of both these rituals similarly associated words of "scripture" (whether the Written and Oral Torah, or the sayings of Jesus) with the food and drink to be consumed. Ingesting the foods "inscribed" with the words of God is a ritualization of scriptural metaphors, a palpable sensual experience of

internalizing the rabbinic or Christian myths, which transforms the rituals' participants respectively into "embodied Torah," or "the Body of Christ" incarnate. However, there is quite a difference between the ritualized metaphors of "Body of Christ" and "embodied Torah." That was precisely Luke's point in the symposium scenes when he contrasting his ethic based on allegiance to the person and experience of Jesus, to allegiance to Pharisaic Torah.

At the end of this book, it is difficult not to be struck that a single cultural tradition, the Hellenistic tradition of symposia, could include such dramatically divergent manifestations such as Luke's meal scenes, Petronius' *Satyricon*, Plato's *Symposium*, Athenaeus' *Deipnosophistai*, the early rabbinic seder, and Lucian's parodies of nearly all these types. Luke's ideologization of Christian symposia had resonance not only for a broader audience of literate non-Jews throughout the Greco-Roman world of Luke's age, but continues to resonate for many people brought up in Western and non-Western cultures even today. He transformed the Christian Eucharistic meal instituted by Jesus at his Last Supper into a symbol of continuity, which made the changes meaningful, and therefore bearable. In Luke's view, the numinous and reassuring presence of God was to be recognized and experienced precisely in the activity of the "breaking of the bread" and sharing of the cup of wine that ritualized for Luke a Christian ethos of radical inclusiveness.

However, the resistant Jewish reader in me can't give Luke and his idealized vision of community the last word, as attractive as it might be. I think there's an undertone of violence, or at least of muted conflict in Luke's image of a community who knows God by the *breaking* of the bread. Or as I once heard a Southern Baptist woman

put it, “Controversy is a sure sign of the presence of God!” Luke offers a Christian version of a culture of controversy as a model of pluralistic co-existence, even among people who think their worldviews are intellectually incompatible. How do we know whether Luke’s sympotic vision promotes “good” or “bad” conflict? Luke has an answer, in the words he puts in the mouth of the Pharisee Gamaliel in defense of the Christians (Acts 5:38-39): “For if this plan or undertaking is of men, it will fail; but if it is of God, you will not be able to overthrow them. You might even be found opposing God!” Is Luke’s view all that different from the way *m. Pirkei Avot* puts it, “All controversies for the sake of heaven are destined to last”?<sup>9</sup> Even if they’re to last as *controversies*. What keeps these controversies for the sake of heaven from degenerating into bloody violence? Not much, as we look around at the current world situation. But the shared table is still a powerful symbol and means of self-restraint, bringing us in a full circle back to Margaret Visser’s quip, “behind every rule of table etiquette lurks the determination of each person present to be a diner not a dish.” The symposium tradition in its ancient and modern manifestations, and analogous non-Western meal rituals, offer a compelling ethos, a wide range of ways to live with diversity, to embrace the worldviews we’re willing to die for, but restrain our impulse to *kill* for them. Then truly, as in the beatific vision expressed by General Loewenhielm near the end of *Babette’s Feast*, “Mercy and truth have met together, and righteousness and bliss have kissed.”<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Luther H. Martin, *Hellenistic Religions: An Introduction* (New York/Oxford: Oxford University, 1987) 155-6.

<sup>2</sup> L. Martin, *Hellenistic Religion*, 156.

<sup>3</sup> L. Martin, *Hellenistic Religion*, 11, 156.

<sup>4</sup> L. Martin, *Hellenistic Religion*, 11.

<sup>5</sup> L. Martin, *Hellenistic Religions*, 12

<sup>6</sup> L. Martin, *Hellenistic Religions*, 12, 61-2.

<sup>7</sup> L. Martin, *Hellenistic Religions*, 12, 35-36.

<sup>8</sup> *M. Pesah* 10:5.

<sup>9</sup> Peter J. Tomson draws a similar conclusion based also on the comparison between Acts 5:38-39 and this rabbinic tradition in “Gamaliel’s Counsel and the Apologetic Strategy of Luke-Acts, *The Unity of Luke-Acts* (BETL 142; ed. J. Verheyden; Leuven-Louvain, 1999) 602.

<sup>10</sup> Isak Dinesen, *Babette’s Feast*, in *Anecdotes of Destiny and Ehrengard* (New York: Vintage Books, 1993) 52.