

DANIEL PUIA-DUMITRESCU

CHRISTIANISM IN ITS YOUTH

How justified is the claim that
contemporary eucharistic prayers in East
and West are based on patterns to be
found in the first Christian Centuries?

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**Chapter One – ancient traditions
– Roman symposium, Greek and
Jewish banquets; Jewish prayers
as a model for the newly formed
Christian community: shape,
meaning, and development**

In our search for models for contemporary Eucharistic prayers we stop first in the ancient world, not to find a prayer per se, but more to look for comparisons with later Christian festive meals (*agape*). We will see that these kinds of meals and banquets have social implications, although the Christian Eucharist – the Eucharistic sacrifice and the Eucharistic *anamnesis*⁶ – has no obvious antecedent in ancient polytheist traditions.

⁶This term will be preferred to ‘memory’, ‘remembrance’ or any other related terms, to underline the symbolism that comes with the action that Jesus commanded to the apostles;

In his book, *From Symposium to Eucharist*⁷, Dennis Smith proposes a new model for this common banquet tradition as a whole, which would include everyday meals, symposia, funerary banquets, sacrificial meals, mystery meals, everyday Jewish meals, Jewish festival meals and Christian agape, ending in the Christian Eucharist.⁸ Will accept this as a social pattern for the Christian meals. What it is evident, however, is that the Christian agape is related to the festive meals, to Greek, Roman and Jewish banquets and to what they mean.

When we talk about ancient festive meals, the first thing that should be considered is the social ethos of that age and the social implications of such a meal. In a society with very strictly delineated social classes, dining together had very important social meanings. It is obvious also nowadays that sharing a meal creates a “*sense of ethical obligation of the diners towards one another*”⁹. Such shared meals were the opportunity for philosophical discussions –

⁷ Dennis E. Smith, *From Symposium to Eucharist – the Banquet in the Early Christian World*, (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2003);

⁸ *Ibidem*, p. 3;

⁹ Dennis E. Smith, *From Symposium to Eucharist...* p. 11;

seen as very important at this stage – as an occasion for meeting high-ranking people, and for being formally recognized and acknowledged. Keeping in mind that at these events women, children and slaves were almost everywhere excluded – only free citizens were allowed to recline – we can how such an occasion would be a mark of one’s rank in society. Those of lower status were also ranked by the places assigned to them at the table.¹⁰ Even so, those who dined together were to be treated equally, and this created a real sense of community, in which all could share everything as equal participants. In this we see a precedent for later Christian models and such an idea find its fulfilment in the Christian tradition.

Going further, one can understand the importance of such a meal from Plutarch’s words:

“*The Romans...are fond of quoting a witty and sociable person who said, after a solitary meal, ‘I have eaten, but not dined today’, implying that a dinner always requires friendly sociability for seasoning.*”¹¹

¹⁰ The author above presents an entire picture of the Greek and Roman tradition for these events (pp 8-85);

¹¹ Dennis E. Smith, *From Symposium to Eucharist*, p. 13;

Among daily activities, a banquet is (in both – Greek and Roman – traditions) associated with the evening meal (the Greek *deipnon* and the Roman *cena*).¹² Taking into account that this was the most important meal in the ancient world, we can get an idea of the importance of dinner in the daily round of the Ancient world. Two well-defined courses constituted the banquet: the first course was the proper dinner – the evening meal – and the second was the *symposium*, or ‘drinking party’. During the first course unmixed wine is drunk with the words, ‘To the Good Deity! [*agathou daimonos*]’, afterwards at the drinking party the wine is mixed with water and the first cup from the bowl is dedicated to ‘Zeus Saviour [*Dios Soterios*]’. It was said that the first greeting was meant to be an occasion for the host to honour the names of his house’s gods, and the second was for the god common to all. It is interesting how these divine names came in light – is there any hidden meaning in praising of the most important pagan god at the symposium? If we consider symposium

¹² A detailed presentation at: Blake Leyerle, ‘Meal customs in the Greco-Roman world’, in Bradshaw and Hoffman (editors), *Passover and Easter*, pp 29-61;

and symposium distinct entities separated from the festive meal, what might we find?

The meaning of the word *symposium* is “to put together”, “to gather”, same as the Greek *koinonia*, which can be translated also as “communion”. One of the central concepts for a festive meal was this, communion, to be partaker, or to share; and the same applies to the symposium if considered separately.

“For example, Plutarch uses this concept in discussing proper conversation at the meal. Here he argues that the topics chosen should be simple enough that all can take part in their discussion, even the less intellectual of the guests.”¹³

Food and discussions are to be a feast for all those who share the same table. Plutarch goes further, calling the sharing of those who were together for the banquet – *philophrosyne* (friendship) – this is the word with which he describes the relationship between the host and its guests.

Coming together in *koinonia*, united by friendship, host and guests greet the *Dios Soterios* with the wine-water. But this is not all: we find also in Plutarch materi-

¹³ Dennis E. Smith, *From Symposium to Eucharist*, p. 54;

al about a pre-meal sacrificial rite (*thysia*). Most of ancient celebrations began with a sacrificial rite or included the banquet ritual acts. But this did not change its shape. The sacrificial meal was shaped upon the Greco-Roman banquet: “it utilized the common meal symbols of celebration, community, and equality as constituent part of its religious definition and developed rules of social obligation based on that idealization of the meal.”¹⁴ We bring this up only to point out that a festive meal with a ritual in honour of the divinity wasn't an unusual or unfamiliar custom, but one spread all over the world, certainly among Greeks, Romans and Jews. More than that, between 300 B.C. and 300 A.D. there is more evidence that the celebration of this kind of meal has many parallels in Greek, Roman and Jewish world.¹⁵

As we will see in the following pages, the Jewish world had its own celebrations and festive meals, prescribed by the Law. Significantly, the monotheist world of

¹⁴ Dennis E. Smith, *From Symposium to Eucharist*, p. 85;

¹⁵ For a specific research on that see details in Dennis E. Smith, *From Symposium to Eucharist* and Blake Leyerle, ‘Meal customs in the Greco-Roman world’, in Bradshaw and Hoffman (editors), *Passover and Easter*, pp. 29-61;

the Jews was the ideal place for developing the concept of sacrificial meals (and about this almost all scholars agree).

“The Lord spoke to Moses, saying: Speak to the people of Israel and say to them: These are appointed festivals of the Lord that you shall proclaim as holy convocations, my appointed festivals.”¹⁶

Meals held a special place in the social world of Jews. Numerous feasts, whose origins we can trace to the very beginnings of Jewish tradition, marked the religious calendar. But, more important, we must note that at every feast a sacrifice to the Only God took place.

“The meal was an integral part of the sacrifice. After provision made for the service at the altar and for the priest, ‘every one that is clean shall eat thereof’ (Lev 7:19). Similarly, according to the Mishnah (*Zebahim v. 7*), the peace-offerings after slaughter in the Temple court and the due sprinkling of the blood, could be eaten anywhere in the city by any man, and cooked for food after any fashion, during two days and a night. It is not clear how far these Common Meals, held in the city itself as part of the sacrifice, were reproduced in the provinces.”¹⁷

¹⁶ Leviticus 23:1;

¹⁷ Walter Frere, *The Anaphora or Great Eucharistic Prayer*, (London: Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, 1938), p. 5;

Go deeper and we may argue that a Jewish meal is, by definition, religious: “*In connection with Israel is incorrect to speak of either a ‘sacred meal’ or a ‘profane/secular meal’.* In Israel a meal was neither sacred nor secular, but religious. This meant that the category of the sacred was transcended and that there was a direct relationship with God.”¹⁸ At this point the meal’s sacrificial meaning begins to be taken over by a religious meaning of its own. Is no longer necessary for the meal to be sacrificial in order to be religious; they are God’s chosen people, the Lord commands them in Deuteronomy: “*You shall eat your fill and bless the Lord your God for the good land that He has given to you.*”¹⁹ From this verse we infer that is not the prayer that sanctifies the meal, but the meal has a sacral character of its own, which calls for a prayer as an acknowledgement. Here is the image that will become complete in the Christian Eucharist through Christ. In Judaism prayers and thanksgiving for meals are an expression of the mono-

¹⁸ Enrico Mazza, *The Celebration of the Eucharist. The Origin of the Rite and the Development of Its Interpretation*, (Collegeville, Minnesota: The Liturgical Press, 1999), p. 14;

¹⁹ Deuteronomy 8:10;

theism of the chosen people, for whom food has a two-fold meaning: material, and spiritual. This is where monotheism forms a bridge towards Christianity:

“*What distinguishes the true Israelite from the Canaanites and all idolaters, is that he knows and acknowledges that food and drink are God’s gifts; to him they are no longer the products of natural agencies tainted by sin; they are the gifts of the grace of his Redeemer, who is also the Creator of all things.*”²⁰

But material food understood in a spiritual sense in the Jewish religion evolves into something more spiritual than material in Christianity; God is no longer the One who gives food, but The Food. If Jews bless food and give thanks for their redemption from Egypt, Christians receive the blessing of a spiritual food and give thanks for Christ, for their redemption from sin and death.

The Jewish term for blessing is *berakah* and can be translated as “*wonder – praise – gratitude*”²¹, but it often designates a

²⁰ Louis Bouyer, *Life and Liturgy*, (London: Sheed and Ward Ltd, 1956), p. 79;

²¹ Carmine Di Sante, *Jewish Prayer. The Origins of Christian Liturgy*, (New York: Paulist Press, 1985), p. 34;