

EATING IN CORINTH: FULL MEAL OR TOKEN MEAL?

Rev. Fergus J. King

Much contemporary analysis of the Eucharist at Corinth assumes it took place within the context of a 'full meal'. This paper asks whether we are justified, on the basis of the text of 1 Corinthians and the origins of the Lord's Supper, in making such claims about the Corinthian practice and raises the possibility of the Eucharist being celebrated as part of a 'token meal' tradition.

Introduction

In many commentaries on 1 Corinthians, the passage in 11.17-22 is represented as showing that the Eucharistic practice of the Corinthians was set in the context of a full meal, that is, that a ritual meal, the Eucharist, was linked to a full fellowship meal. ⁴ Paul is writing, the thesis continues, to put an end to abuses which took place within this situation, abuses which led to the exclusion of some members of the congregation by the others. Professor O'Neill has raised an objection to this scenario with his remarks:

"There is no early evidence of a stage in the history of the Eucharist when the distinct act of worship is being disentangled from something embedded in a full-scale meal."⁵

If O'Neill is right, there must be a different explanation of the meal in Corinth to that which is offered in the general thesis described above: that thesis would seem to demand the kind of situation which O'Neill says cannot be shown by contemporary evidence. Are there any possible alternatives to the Eucharist within

⁴ Ruef, J., *Paul's First Letter to Corinth*, London: SCM, 1977 is critical of approaches which see the Corinthian practice as involving two meals: a "fellowship meal" combined with a cultic "meal" (see p. 113, n. 450). It would appear that the choice must be of one or the other.

⁵ O'Neill, J.C., "Bread and Wine" in *Scottish Journal of Theology*, 48 (1995) 169-184, quotation from p. 179.

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the full-scale meal? If so, what could they be? In this paper, a possible alternative will be suggested which would point to the Corinthian meal being a ritual meal, that is, a token meal which did not take place within the context of a full meal. The thesis contains two distinct arguments: the first concerning the origins of the Eucharist, and the second examining whether the situation described in Corinth must involve a full meal.

The Origins of the Eucharist

The first of our two arguments concerns the origins of the Eucharist, an investigation which draws us back to discuss the nature of the Last Supper. Jeremias' monumental study, *The Eucharistic Words of Jesus* ⁶ popularised the view that the Last Supper was a Passover Meal, a view that helps to promote the Corinthian situation as being a ritual within a full meal. The Passover Meal was a full meal, with a strong ritual element, and, it can be argued, the early Christians copied this pattern when they instituted the Eucharist as a part of their worship. However, there are objections to this theory, and other meals have been suggested as possible precursors of the Eucharist, notably the *qiddus*, *haburah* and Qumran meals.⁷ Of these three rival theories, the Qumran hypothesis appears to be the strongest contender.⁸ However, the search for alternatives is also based on arguments which arise from within the Gospel traditions. A reading of Jeremias shows that his arguments for the Last Supper as Passover depend on accepting the Marcan chronology as accurate. He rejects the Johannine tradition which is claimed to be governed by theological rather than historical concerns.⁹ However, strong arguments can be made for the preference of the Johannine tradition over the Marcan. The

⁶ Jeremias, J., *The Eucharistic Words of Jesus*, London: SCM, 1987 (1966 ET).

⁷ Jeremias: 1987, pp. 26-36.

⁸ O'Neill: 1995, p. 183, drawing on the work of G.D.Kilpatrick. Ashby, G., *Sacrifice*, London: SCM, 1988, pp. 106-7 also quotes Kilpatrick favourably.

⁹ Jeremias: 1987, pp. 82-3.

Marcan chronology demands many events take place at times when such activities were restricted by the constraints of the Passover regulations. Jeremias' contentions that there are precedents which show the restrictions could be lifted are open to the charge of anachronism: there is no guarantee that rabbinic regulations from one period apply in another.¹⁰

Furthermore, O'Neill has shown that the temporal phrases usually interpreted as tying the Last Supper to the Passover Meal can be interpreted, in accordance with contemporary Jewish usage, as referring to the Passover season.¹¹ We might think of the way that the words "Christmas" and "Easter" can be used in Christian circles to refer to specific feasts (Christmas Day, Easter Day) or seasons (Christmas-tide, Easter-tide) as analogous with O'Neill's argument. The net result of this is to loosen the bonds which tie the Last Supper to the Passover Meal and instead argue for it being a meal held in the Passover season, or rather in the run-up to the Passover. The loosening of these bonds also weakens the identification of the Last Supper with a full meal, a factor demanded by its connection to the Passover Meal. Matthew 27.62 might also be taken as arguing against the Last Supper as Passover Meal with its reference to the meeting between the chief priests and Pharisees with Pilate taking place "the next day, that is, after the day of Preparation" (NRSV). It might be argued that this is close to the Johannine tradition, because it would place the death of Jesus on the day of Preparation. The Marcan account, however, brings this into question because there is an identification of the day of Jesus' death as being the "day of Preparation" (Mark 15.42), but a preparation for the Sabbath, not the Passover.

It is, however, the rehabilitation of the Johannine chronology which makes it impossible to identify the Last Supper with the Passover Meal. According to John, Jesus dies on the Day of Preparation, at the time when the lambs are slaughtered (John 20.14,30; cf. Mark 15.34): the chance of him sharing the Passover

¹⁰) O'Toole, R.F., "Last Supper" in Freedman, D.N. (ed.), *Anchor Bible Dictionary*, Vol. 4, New York: Doubleday, 1992, pp. 234-241 notes the objections to the Passover Meal theory (esp. pp. 235-7)

¹¹) O'Neill: 1995, pp. 169-176.

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Meal with his disciples is completely ruled out. The Johannine chronology also makes possible all those events which would be hard to explain as taking place after the Passover, that is, during the period marked as the Feast of Passover and Unleavened Bread, events which remain harder to explain if occurring within the period of the feast.

O'Neill has further suggested that the Pauline tradition has close links to the Johannine tradition, in that it stresses a connection between the events of the Passion and the Passover without making an identification of the Last Supper and Passover Meal. In 1 Cor 5.7 Christ is identified with the slaughtered lamb of the Passover, but neither this passage nor the longer treatment of the Eucharist draws any connection between the Last Supper and the Passover Meal itself.¹²

Instead of identifying the Last Supper and the Passover Meal, supporters of the reliability of the Johannine tradition tend to make a connection with the tradition of token meals which existed at Qumran. Three texts give information about the Essene meal:

“Wherever there are ten men of the Council of the Community there shall not lack a Priest among them. And they shall all sit before him according to their rank and shall be asked their counsel in all things in that order. And when the table has been prepared for eating, and the new wine for drinking, the Priest shall be the first to stretch out his hand to bless the first-fruits of the bread and new wine.” (1QS 6.4-6)

“And [when] they shall gather for the common [tab]le, to eat and [to drink] new wine, when the common table shall be set for eating and the new wine [poured] for drinking, let no man extend his hand over the first-fruits of bread and wine before the Priest; for [it is he] who shall bless the first-fruits of bread and wine, and shall be the first [to extend] his hand over the bread, [and] all the congregation of the Community [shall utter a] blessing, [each man in the order] of his dignity.” (1QSa 2.17-21)

¹² O'Neill: 1995, p. 177.

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“The priest prays before the meal, and it is unlawful for anyone to partake before the prayer. The meal ended, he prays again; thus at the beginning and at the close they pay homage to God as the bountiful giver of life.” (Josephus, *War* 2.131).¹³

The interpretation of these passages varies quite considerably: some see them as referring to a full “fellowship” meal¹⁴, others to a “token” meal.¹⁵ The classifying of the Qumran meals as “token” appears to rest on an identification with the Inter-testamental *Joseph and Asenath* in which Asenath is given the bread of life and cup of immortality as a sign of her being purified from her pagan past.¹⁶ The passage from Josephus, when viewed in its context, would appear to refer to full meals, and thus deny the possibility of a token meal. However, there is no guarantee that the Qumran communities had only one kind of meal. Support for this statement comes from an unlikely source: Jeremias’ arguments against the Essene meals as a possible source for the Last Supper. Jeremias quotes some remarks of Hunzinger to the effect that IQSa 2.17-21 refers not to daily meals but rather to a cultic Messianic meal. Jeremias tries to limit the role of these meals, suggesting that they would only take place in the Messianic times (implying that they will be, but are not yet, part of the community’s practice), and placing any possible formative role for

¹³ IQS and IQSa from Vermes, G., *The Dead Sea Scrolls in English*, London: Penguin, 3rd ed., 1987, pp. 69 and 102 respectively. Josephus, *War* 2.131 from Jeremias: 1987, p. 33, note 3.

¹⁴ Ruef: 1977, p. 114, note 456.

¹⁵ O’Neill: 1995, pp. 183-4.

¹⁶ See especially *Joseph and Asenath* 8.5,9 (11); 16.16 and 19.5 for references to the “bread of life” and “cup of salvation” which Asenath is finally allowed to share after rejecting pagan worship: these passages are variously interpreted as indicating an active token meal tradition. Text available in Burchard, C. (translator), “Joseph and Asenath” in Charlesworth, J.H., *The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha*, Vol. 2, New York: Doubleday, 1985, pp. 177-247. The verses are found on pp. 212, 213, 229 and 233. See also Jeremias: 1987, p. 33 and O’Neill: 1995, pp. 181-2.

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Christ's practice back in the Passover practices. ¹⁷ Against Jeremias, it might be legitimately asked whether communities which believed themselves to be living in the Messianic period might not, indeed, engage in such celebrations. The strands in Paul's theology that point to such a possibility, inasmuch as Christians are already glorified (Rom 8) and have already received the promises of God (Gal 3.2-5) ¹⁸, might open the door to the consideration that Christian communities, believing that the Messianic age was begun, even if not yet fully completed, could express their faith in token, Messianic meals.

The main implication of such an hypothesis is that the Eucharist and its development are removed from the context of a full meal *at any stage*, even in the institution of the ritual. The Eucharist is seen as always being a token meal, distinct from full meals, and the placing of the Corinthian rite in the context of a full meal is no longer demanded by the pre-history of the ritual. Freed from the apparent necessity of the Eucharist as "rite within full meal" by its origin within a token meal tradition, we are now free to ask whether the description of events in Corinth itself demands such a scenario.

The Situation in Corinth

The Eucharist at Corinth is described in 1Cor 11 in a passage where Paul outlines the abuses of rite (11.17-22), and reminds the Corinthians of the Institution of the Lord's Supper as a corrective (11.23-26) before finishing with practical instructions about orderly celebrations (11.27-34).

The abuses at Corinth are twofold. Firstly, they are a further manifestation of the divisions which have already been noted within the congregation (11.19; cf. 1.10ff.). Secondly, and more importantly for this discussion, there is improper conduct at the meal: people are eating their own meals (τὸ ἴδιον δεῖπνον v.21)

¹⁷ Jeremias: 1987, pp. 35-6.

¹⁸ Betz, H.D., *Galatians*, Philadelphia: Fortress, 1979, p. 256 argues that the Galatians are in danger of losing not just what is promised, but what has already been obtained.

rather than the Lord's Supper (κυριακὸν δεῖπνον v.20). This abuse further manifests itself by some being hungry (πεινᾶ v.21) whilst others are "drunk" or "sated" (cf. Rev. 17.6; μεθύει v.21). It is often added that this is a division of rich and poor because of the apparent humiliation of "those who have nothing" (καταισχύνετε τοὺς μὴ ἔχοντας v.22). This scenario often is seen as the abuse of a full meal. Does, however, the text itself demand this situation? I think not. The primary objection that Paul has to the Corinthian practice is that a confusion is taking place: the confusion of the Lord's Supper with an ordinary meal. The accusation that is being laid before the Corinthians is that they are confusing the Lord's Supper with mere eating and drinking, which they could do at home.¹⁹ The question of whether they are confusing a full meal or a token meal with eating and drinking is rarely considered: my contention is that these descriptions rest on the assumption that the natural development of meal practices was from the Passover "full meal" tradition. If a "token meal" tradition is viewed as supplying the origin it is still possible to argue that the confusion taking place is one of the Lord's Supper with eating and drinking. It is also possible for people to eat and drink badly in the situation of a token meal: the care taken over celebration and preparation for reception of the Eucharist in later ages points to the possibilities for such abuses. Legislation is not made for the impossible, nor even is advice. Nor is such a confusion of eating/drinking with good thinking limited to Corinth: it supplies the basis of the first part of the teaching about the Bread of Life in John 6.25-28. None of the language used about the abuses of eating/drinking *demands* the situation of a "full meal", or indeed a meal in which everyone is satisfied. V.34 is a firm rebuttal of any views that would imply that the abuses at Corinth would have been overcome if everyone went away satisfied: ending hunger, or "good sharing" is not the primary goal of the Lord's Supper. Perhaps that consideration itself is a warning against thinking of the Corinthian meal as having to be a properly conducted "full meal"? However, such considerations are

¹⁹ Baird, W., *The Corinthian Church—A Biblical Approach to Urban Culture*, Nashville: Abingdon, 1964, p. 129; Ruef: 1977, p. 112.

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never part of a “token meal” rationale. Paul’s criticism of the Corinthian practice is not just that “some are hungry, and some are sated”, but that this is completely the wrong way to think about the Lord’s Supper: other points are incidental.

A further point can be made in passing about the nature of abuses at Corinth: it is suggested that the divisions that are shown are between rich and poor. This is puzzling: previous references to divisions refer to groups centred on individuals rather than income groups. Indeed, nowhere in the letter is a gulf between rich and poor mentioned as a fault in the Corinthian congregation except at this point. Bornkamm is typical of this: he boldly states that there is a division between rich and poor, but provides no supporting evidence for this theory.²⁰ It is possible however that we might be in a different situation and the phrase which usually is translated as having the sense “poor” (“those who have nothing” (RSV) τοὺς μὴ ἔχοντας v.22) might be a reference to the righteous, or those who have a correct view of faith and practice. Similar expressions are found earlier in the letter when the Cross is described as “foolishness” and “weakness” (1.18-25) and the true believer is also a “fool” (3.18). Paul also turns the values by which he is judged upside down, making every criticism a basis for pride in his work (4.8-13). With this background, it might be possible to read “καταισχύνετε τοὺς μὴ ἔχοντας” as a repetition of the idea of τῆς ἐκκλησίας τοῦ θεοῦ καταφρονεῖτε rather than a reference to the poor. Such a reading would make τοὺς μὴ ἔχοντας closer to the idea of πτωχοὶ τῷ πνεύματι (Matt 5.3) rather than its counterparts in Matt 25.29 and Luke 19.26. Such a reading would, however, also fit with the benefit that is shown by the divisions, that of revealing who is “genuine” (δόκιμοι 11.19). The “genuine” (v.19), the “church of God” and “those who have nothing” (both v.22) would be one and the same, those both revealed and insulted by the poor practices of their fellow Corinthians.

One major obstacle seems to remain in the way of the token meal thesis: δεῖπνον vv.20, 21) and its associated verb, δειπνήσαι (v. 25). O’Neill notes the last as a major obstacle in his arguments

²⁰ Bornkamm, G., *Paul*, London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1971, p. 192.

for a token meal origin for the Eucharist. There are two points to be made in discussing these items: firstly, the terms of reference of v. 25, and secondly the meaning and implications of the *δειπν*- words themselves.

Of v. 25, O'Neill says:-

“Unfortunately for my theory there occurs in the midst of this parallel command a time note: *μετὰ τὸ δειπνήσαι*, after having made a meal. If the cup comes at the end of a meal, the giving of the bread having come at the beginning, we seem to have to do with a ceremony inextricably linked with a meal, and one might even think, a Passover-type meal in which a last cup is particularly prominent.”²¹

O'Neill's solution is to see the insertion of the Last Supper tradition as by a hand other than Paul's, and based on a misunderstanding of the Corinthian assemblies. This seems unnecessarily complicated and it is difficult to see any justification for such a theory of composition. However, there is, it seems, an alternative. Firstly, it seems to me that O'Neill has added difficulties for himself by assuming that 1 Cor 11.23-5 refers to the Corinthian practice. It would seem to be an account of the Last Supper rather than a rubric for contemporary worship or a description of affairs at Corinth. It may even be, *pace* the longer text in Luke 22.20, that this is a part of a transmitted tradition. As such, the phrase tells us nothing about practice at Corinth itself.

Does it, however, demand that we posit a full meal (Passover type) scenario for the Last Supper, thus shredding the theory of the token meal? It need not, and this leads to a second point. The answer is not straightforward, because the meanings of the words *δειπνον/δειπνήσαι* (vv. 20 and 21, v.25) are vague: they may not give as much information as commentators would like. It is worth quoting Orr and Walther's comments:-

“it is not possible to come to any helpful conclusion about the nature of the meal from the use of the word *deipnos* for “supper”. The word usually referred to a late afternoon meal (whence the appropriateness of English “supper”). In

²¹ O'Neill: 1995, p. 178

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the Bible it is never used to mean merely an act of eating: it refers to a meal, and its appropriateness for a festal meal is ambiguous.”²²

Furthermore, δειπνον need not just be restricted to ordinary meals: it has strong associations in both Biblical and Hellenistic writings with cultic meals, especially with the sense of joining the believer to the deity.²³ If this meaning can be borne by the Greek of 1 Cor, this might raise the implication that the danger of eating privately (v.21) rather than the Lord's Supper (v.20) is that it does not bring communion with Him, only with oneself. In v.25, the phrase μετὰ τὸ δειπνήσαι could then bear the sense “after the ritual/cultic meal”, which need not carry the implication of a full meal.²⁴ None of these usages would thus demand the situation of a full meal, either at Corinth or at the Last Supper. As such the theory stands firm, and it can be argued that the Corinthian situation could be that of a token meal.

²² Ott, W.F. and Walther, J.A., *Corinthians*, New York: Doubleday, 1976, p. 272.

²³ Behm, J., δειπνον, δειπνέω in Kittel, G., *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, Vol. 2, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1968 (1964 ET), pp. 34-5. When talking of the cultic aspect, note specifically, “[the] underlying thought is that of *communio*, of union of those who eat with the deity.” (p. 35) See also the remarks of Klauck, H.-J., “Lord's Supper” and Myer, M.W., “Mystery Religions”, both in Freedman, D.N., *Anchor Bible Dictionary*, Vol. 4, New York: Doubleday, 1992, pp. 363-372 (esp. 369-70) and pp. 991-5 (esp. p. 994) for further information about Jewish and pagan background for cultic meals. The concept of *communio* might also help to explain 1 Cor 11.29-30 which are difficult to see as the result of “poor sharing” alone. Ashby: 1988, p. 107 argues that the possibility of incurring damnation by bad practice points to a sacrificial understanding of the meal. Such an identification might suggest that the Passover meal, which, classically, was not a sacrificial meal is a poor forerunner. Against that must be noted the increasing tendency in first century Judaism to see the Passover as sacrificial because of the transformation of the feast from a domestic to a Temple celebration.

²⁴ The final meaning comes close to that suggested by O'Neill: 1995, p. 178, but *via* a different route.

One possible objection must be noted. A variant textual tradition (D*, F, it, vb^{ms}, sa; Ambst) records the words εἰς δεῖπνον as part of 1 Cor 10:27. In that context, δεῖπνον would refer to an ordinary meal, a reference which might be perceived as weakening the case for the ritual meal interpretation. Two points may be made.

The first is that the textual evidence would appear to weigh against εἰς δεῖπνον as part of the text²⁵. If the text of 10:27 is taken as not containing this phrase, the only instances of δεῖπν- vocabulary in the Pauline writings are those in 1 Cor. 11:26 no other Pauline occurrence would demand that δεῖπνον must be indicative of an ordinary meal setting rather a cultic meal according to his usage.

Secondly, even if εἰς δεῖπνον were included in the text, there would still be no necessary demand that it implied a full meal setting. The work of scholars like Barr has shown that there is more to meaning than purely lexical or etymological approaches suggest: such features as the absence or presence of an article, qualifying adjectives and the context of a particular usage all may lead to variations in meaning²⁷. The difference in context, the presence of qualifying adjectives (κυριακὸν - 11:20,21 respectively) and the article (τὸ- 11:21) could point to different fields of meaning.

The English usage of the word “supper” illustrates such phenomena: there is an evident difference in meaning if we talk of “the Lord’s Supper” and of “going to supper”. We can see the difference immediately in our own language, but not in New Testament Greek which is always more remote to us. Of course, it

²⁵ Nestle, E. & Aland, K. *Novum Testamentus Graece*, Stuttgart: Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft, 1979 (26e), p.458 and Aland, K. *et al.*, *Greek New Testament*, Stuttgart: German Bible Society, 1983 (3e), p.601 both omit εἰς δεῖπνον from the final form of the text.

²⁶ Bauer, W., Gingrich, F.W. & Danker, F., *A Greek-English lexicon of The New Testament & Other early Christian Literature*. Chicago., C.U.P., 1979, p.173.

²⁷ Silva, M., *Biblical Words & Their Meaning*. Grand Rapids: Academie, 1983, pp.22-32 summarises Barr’s work and the discussion about lexical fields.

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must be added, that the above illustration should not be made the basis of any argument about the lexical fields of *δειπνον*: an identity of lexical fields between two languages should not be assumed and even less allowed to dictate the interpretative process.

The upshot of all this is simple: all that is asked that in the process of interpretation, the possibilities of meaning be fully examined, and possible fields of meaning not be excluded prematurely. Under such circumstances, it would appear possible to claim that *δειπνον* itself, and its range of meanings, need not demand either a full or a token scenario. Ultimately, the answer will be found in the context, and that must include the account of the origins of the rite, especially because the details of the actual practice remain obscure.

There is, however, one weakness to this proposal: in 1 Cor 10.27, *δειπνον* is used to describe eating with an unbeliever, and is most emphatically set in the context of an ordinary meal. Whether or not the suggestions given for thinking of 1 Cor as referring to a cultic or ritual meal will stand or fall on the possibility that the words can carry different emphases or meanings in different circumstances. If such variations are seen as permissible, the thesis can hold.

Conclusion

The proposal that the meals of the Corinthian congregation were token is based on an identification of the prehistory of the ritual and the Last Supper with a Qumran meal tradition rather than the Passover Meal. In turn this is based on a rehabilitation of the Johannine tradition as being reliable over against the Marcan account of the Passion. It is thus argued that the meal tradition being abused was of a token meal rather than of a full meal. Many of the phrases customarily assumed to refer to a full meal tradition are re-interpreted as referring rather to a cultic, token tradition. Such interpretations do not do violence to the words themselves, or to their possible parameters of meaning, but the question will finally be determined by the parameters which the reader thinks possible within one text (cf. 1 Cor 10.27; 11.20,21,25). There is no firm conclusion here, but rather an invitation to check what is so

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often assumed, and to see whether those assumptions finally can be
maintained or be replaced by a fresh theory, or be rejected in favour
of an *aporia* which admits our limitations in discovering what
really was happening in Corinth.

Revd Fergus J. King
St Mark's College
PO Box 25017
Dar Es Salaam
Tanzania