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The Lord's Supper as Symposium in the Gospel of Mark

Peter J. Scaer

Does it really matter which Gospel was written first? For what it is worth, the prevailing opinion, among liberals and conservatives alike, is that Mark was written first.¹ This is not without reason. The gospel is marked by a primitive, primal, even jarring nature. Mark portrays Jesus as the misunderstood Messiah. The religious establishment is convinced he is demon-possessed, his family thinks he is out of his mind, and the crowds never move much beyond open-mouthed amazement. Even his hand-picked disciples are riddled with ignorance and unbelief.² Jesus is powerful and mysterious. No wonder the Gospel of Mark is traditionally designated by the lion, majestic and somewhat frightening.³ More than any other Gospel, I think Mark challenges our preconceived notions of Jesus. Here is Jesus raw and unvarnished by literary flourishes or sentimentality.

It is little wonder why the academy has found Mark so appealing. Higher critics happily sought refuge in a Gospel omitting "the legend" of Christ's birth, and "the myth" of his resurrection.⁴ Rudolf Bultmann could find in Mark a stripped down Gospel, focusing on the kerygmatic quality he associated with Pauline preaching. Placing Mark first was part of a theological paradigm laid down by Wilhelm Bousset.⁵ For him and several

¹ See David Laird Dungan, *A History of the Synoptic Problem* (New York: Doubleday, 1999).

² See, for instance, Bart Ehrman, *The New Testament and Other Early Christian Writings: A Reader* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), 40.

³ See esp. Richard A. Burridge, *Four Gospels, One Jesus? A Symbolic Reading*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005), 35-65.

⁴ The dating and ordering of Mark are surely tied to form criticism and the idea that the "myths" and "legends" of Christ's life must have developed later; see Rudolph Bultmann, *A History of the Synoptic Tradition*, trans. John Marsh (Oxford: Blackwell, 1963). Richard Bauckham, though, notes this irony, "It is a curious fact that nearly all the contentions of the early form critics have by now been convincingly refuted, but the general picture of the process of oral transmission that the form critics pioneered still governs the way most New Testament scholars think." See Bauckham, *Jesus and the Eyewitnesses: The Gospels as Eyewitness Testimony* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2006), 242.

⁵ Bousset originally laid down his theory in 1913. For an English translation of his major book on Christology, see Wilhelm Bousset, *Kyrios Christos: A History of the Belief in*

others, Christology worked in a kind of Darwinian way: As monkey became man, so did the recognition of Jesus as prophet evolve into the confession that Jesus was God, or so went the thinking.⁶

Even if the critics have enjoyed Mark for its omissions, at least they have read it. For the very same reasons scholars have embraced Mark, the early church neglected it. Pick up the Markan volume of the Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture, and you are bound to notice how slim the book is.⁷ The editors clearly had little with which to work. As Thomas Oden notes, "Whereas Matthew, Luke, and John have all benefitted from being the subject of several line-by-line patristic commentaries, there are not complete commentaries of Mark that have survived the patristic period."⁸ In fact, the first commentary on Mark appeared in the sixth century, and the next one was not produced until the ninth.⁹ From earliest times, Mark was considered, at best, a complementary abridgement of Matthew, poorly suited to the liturgical and catechetical needs of church. Furthermore, within the church Mark's reputation has suffered from invidious comparisons. Papias, quoting the Elder, (perhaps John) says that Mark was not an orderly presentation.¹⁰ Mark certainly is not as orderly, as Matthew. Papias proceeds to offer this assessment of the second Gospel: "Mark committed no error while he thus wrote some things as he remembered them. For he was careful of one thing, not to omit any of the things which he had heard, and not to state any of them falsely."¹¹ So, from the Elder we have the assurance that the evangelist Mark did not sin in writing his Gospel and did not record any false statements. Hardly a ringing endorsement. Later, Mark was given the dubious moniker, "the

Christ from the Beginnings of Christianity to Irenaeus, trans. J. E. Steely (Nashville: Abingdon, 1970).

⁶ For the most recent dismantling of Bousset, see Larry W. Hurtado, *Lord Jesus Christ: Devotion to Jesus Christ in Earliest Christianity* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003).

⁷ Thomas C. Oden and Christopher A. Hall, eds., *Mark*, Ancient Christian Commentary On Scripture, New Testament 2 (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2005).

⁸ Oden and Hall, *Mark*, xxxi.

⁹ For a brief discussion of the matter of Markan neglect, see Luke Timothy Johnson, *The Writings of the New Testament* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1999), 159-160.

¹⁰ Papias's comments on Mark are preserved in Eusebius, *Historia ecclesiastica* 3.39.15; see *A Select Library of the Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church*, Second Series, 14 vols., ed. Philip Schaff and Henry Wace (1952-1957; repr., Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1979), 2:172-173 (hereafter *NPNF*²).

¹¹ Eusebius, *Historia ecclesiastica* 3.39.15, in *NPNF*² 2:173. For a provocative and insightful discussion of the Elder's understanding of Mark, see Dungan, *A History of the Synoptic Problem*, 18-27.

stump-fingered" evangelist, perhaps because of short digits, or more likely, due to the truncated form of his Gospel.¹² As Augustine sees it, "For although he is at one with Matthew in the larger number of passages, he is nevertheless at one rather with Luke in some others."¹³ In other words, what Mark wrote can be found elsewhere. Known as the interpreter of Peter, Mark's Gospel was assured an invitation into the canon; nevertheless, he was thought to bring little to the party.

So it would seem that this short Gospel has been given short shrift by academy and church alike. Treating Mark as a compilation of primitive, oral history, both scholars and churchmen have tended to neglect this Gospel's theological sophistication and ecclesial, sacramental character.¹⁴ It is encouraging that some scholars are coming to see Mark as, in the words of Brevard Childs, "a highly theological composition."¹⁵ Confirmation of this can be seen, for instance, in Joel Marcus's new Anchor Bible Commentary, which stresses Mark's sophisticated use of the Old Testament.¹⁶

So, we ask, "Is Mark really the first Gospel, with the most primitive theology?" To be sure, Mark omits a lengthy retelling of the resurrection, but he does so, it would seem, for theological reasons. His is, in good Lutheran fashion, a theology of the cross.¹⁷ Is Mark, however, really an abridgement of Matthew? In places where Mark runs parallel with

¹² For an interesting discussion of Mark's unfortunate nickname, see C. Clifton Black, *Mark: Images of an Apostolic Interpreter* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1994), 115-118.

¹³ Augustine, *De consensus evangelistarum* 4.10.11, in *A Select Library of the Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church*, First Series, 14 vols., ed. Philip Schaff (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1969-1976), 6:230.

¹⁴ C. S. Mann made a breakthrough, positing Mark as a later Gospel, written to a church under persecution; see *Mark* (New York: Doubleday, 1986).

¹⁵ Brevard S. Childs, *The New Testament as Canon: An Introduction* (Valley Forge: Trinity Press, 1994), 82.

¹⁶ Joel Marcus, *Mark 1-8*, Anchor Bible 27 (New York: Doubleday, 2000). This is the replacement of the C. S. Mann volume in the Anchor Bible Series. See also Joel Marcus, *The Way of the Lord: Christological Exegesis of the Old Testament in the Gospel of Mark* (London and New York: T & T Clark International, 2004).

¹⁷ See, for instance, Robert H. Gundry, *Mark: A Commentary on His Apology for the Cross* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993), esp. 1022-1026.

Matthew and Luke, Mark is actually longer.¹⁸ C. S. Mann noted that Mark bears the marks of a literary conflation.¹⁹

What, therefore, should we do with the fact that Mark seems to expand on the narratives of Matthew and Luke? Some attribute this to a kind of quirkiness, associated with orality.²⁰ Mark is then understood not so much as a theologian but as an engaging story-teller. As R. T. France, typical of many commentators, writes, "Much of the graphic detail in Mark's storytelling may derive simply from his imaginative skill as a raconteur."²¹

I. Mark as a Churchly and Sacramental Gospel

Still, should we simply attribute quirky Markan details to Peter's, or Mark's, ability as a story teller? In any number of ways, it seems, Mark is a theological advancement on Luke and Matthew. Time and again, the details Mark includes not only keep the audience interested but they communicate theologically and make full sense only when seen in the context of the church. His sacramental theology, I would argue, builds and advances that offered in Matthew. Baptism, for Mark, is front and center. John not only baptizes, but he preaches Baptism (Mark 1:4), and he summarizes Jesus' entire ministry by the fact that he will baptize with the Holy Spirit (Mark 1:9). By driving out demons, Mark shows us how the devil is driven out in Baptism (Mark 1:21-28). As he tells the story of Jesus cleansing leprosy, Mark illustrates how Baptism cleanses us from our sin (Mark 1:40-45). In the healing of the paralytic, we learn how others, in faith, bring their loved ones to the baptismal font (Mark 2:1-12). In the healing of the deaf and mute man by the saliva of Jesus, we are reminded how the healing baptismal waters come from the body of Jesus himself (Mark 7:31-37). So also do we see how Baptism opens up our ears and loosens our tongues, in order that we can profess the faith rightly. In the transfiguration, we see how the cloak of Jesus, which—whiter than anyone can bleach it—becomes the baptismal cloak of our righteousness (Mark 9:2-16). Although more examples could be given, the point is clear: Mark's Gospel reflects and supports the baptismal life of the church in which it was written.

¹⁸ As R. T. France, for instance, notes, "Typically, the Markan version of a miracle story may be twice as long as the equivalent pericope in Matthew." *The Gospel of Mark* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002), 17.

¹⁹ Mann, *Mark*, 66.

²⁰ See Vincent Taylor, *The Gospel According to St. Mark* (London: Macmillan, 1952), 44-54.

²¹ France, *The Gospel of Mark*, 19.

II. The Feeding of the Five Thousand: The Mark of Sophistication

Mark also has a developed sense of the Lord's Supper, as well as its place within the church and the Christian life. A good example of this can be seen in Mark's telling of the feeding of the five thousand (Mark 6:30-44). Mark, as do the other evangelists, paints his picture of the feeding of the five thousand with Old Testament brush-strokes. The Lord who multiplies bread for the multitudes in the wilderness brings to mind Yahweh, the Lord who fed the children of Israel with manna in the desert. The feeding of the five thousand also recalls 2 Kings 4:42-44, where Elisha feeds one hundred men and has food left over.²² The apostles bring to mind the twelve tribes of Israel. The twelve baskets of leftovers underline this Israel-New Israel typology.

Scholars have long recognized that the Markan feeding of the five thousand is eucharistic in tone and content.²³ As do the other evangelists, Mark narrates the feeding of the five thousand with the four-fold liturgical action. We are told that after Jesus took the five loaves of bread (*λαβών*), he blessed it (*εὐλόγησεν*), broke it (*κατέκλασεν*), and gave it (*ἔδιδου*) to his disciples, so that they might, in turn, give the bread to the crowd (Mark 6:41). The telling of the story tightly corresponds, as Joel Marcus notes, to the "relatively fixed form of the eucharistic liturgy."²⁴ Mark also mentions the temporal setting of the meal, twice noting the lateness of the hour (Mark 6:35). Sanae Masuda notes that the word "hour" (*ώρα*) is used elsewhere in the Gospel only to refer to Jesus' passion and parousia.²⁵ Thus, Mark may be further linking this evening meal in the desert to the Last Supper, which also took place at the onset of the evening (Mark 14:17). In Mark, the feeding of the five thousand, with all of its eucharistic coloring, becomes a type of dry-run for the Lord's Supper, an important miracle account from which the church was to understand the greater ongoing miracle of the Lord's Supper.

There are a number of Markan accents in the account of the feeding of the five thousand not found in the other Gospels. In the Markan feeding alone, Jesus looks at the crowd and sees that they are "as sheep without a shepherd" (Mark 6:34). The story brings to mind Psalm 23, and Jesus is pictured as the Shepherd of Israel. This intertextual relationship is

²² Marcus, *Mark 1-8*, 415-416.

²³ For example, Jerome Kodell, *The Eucharist in the New Testament* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1988), 84-85, and France, *The Gospel of Mark*, 262.

²⁴ Marcus, *Mark 1-8*, 409.

²⁵ Sanae Masuda, "The Good News of the Miracle of the Bread: The Tradition and Its Markan Redaction," *New Testament Studies* 28 (1982): 193.

furthered in Mark's seemingly incidental addition to the story, namely that the crowds were positioned upon the "green grass" (Mark 6:39). Green grass in the desert? Origen looks at this odd detail and lamely comments that "all flesh is grass."²⁶ The unexpected green grass is meant to bring to mind again Psalm 23, where "the Lord makes me lie down in green pastures" (Ps 23:2). Thus, Mark enhances the Old Testament background of the feeding miracle and shows how this Davidic psalm finds its fulfillment in Jesus, the Shepherd King, who feeds and cares for his sheep.

Mark additionally enhances the intertextuality of this account with the Old Testament by noting that the five thousand were grouped in hundreds and fifties, recalling the military camps into which the Israelites were divided in the Exodus wilderness (Exod 18:21, 25; Deut 1:15). This detail and other allusions in Mark point to the new exodus in Christ.²⁷

Yet there is more to this scene. It is only in Mark that Jesus commanded the crowd to sit *πρασιαὶ πρασιαί* (Mark 6:40). Most translators have done little with the phrase. Indeed, there seems to be a translators' bias against the second Gospel, evidenced by a tendency to take Mark's interesting, quirky, and provocative words and translate them in a generic way—as if Mark did not know what he was doing. The NIV, RSV, and Beck unimaginatively say that the crowd sat down in "groups" of hundreds and fifties. The term *πρασιαί*, far from being generic "groups," is actually "garden plots" or "garden beds."²⁸ Jesus had the crowds organized "garden plot by garden plot." From an Old Testament point of view, garden plots hearken back to Eden. Mark may be drawing upon a tradition similar to Sirach, where it is written, "I will water my plants and my flower bed I will drench; and suddenly this rivulet of mine became a river, then this stream of mine, a sea. Thus do I send my teachings forth shining like the dawn" (Sir 24:29–30). Thus, according to Sirach, the coming Messiah would reestablish paradise through his teaching. Even so, when Jesus sees that the people are like sheep without a shepherd, Mark tells us that Jesus "began to teach them many things" (Mark 6:34). From a New Testament perspective, Mark may be thinking of garden plots as a picture of the church. Commenting on Mark's use of *πρασιαὶ πρασιαί*, Joel

²⁶ Origen *Commentary on Matthew II*, quoted in Oden and Hall, *Mark*, 90–91.

²⁷ For the relationship between this account and the hope for a new Israel as expressed in the Qumran literature, see Marcus, *Mark 1–8*, 419. For the new exodus theme in Mark, see Rikki E. Watts, *Isaiah's New Exodus in Mark* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2000).

²⁸ Henry George Liddell and Robert Scott, *A Greek-English Lexicon*, 9th ed., rev. Henry Stuart Jones and Roderick McKenzie (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1968), s.v. "πῤασι-ά."

Marcus writes, "When the God of the new exodus manifests himself, Mark implies, human disorder is transformed into organic paradisiacal order."²⁹ Though the church itself may be large (in this case five thousand men, plus women and children), it is actualized in smaller congregations of one hundreds or even fifty, each of which is a little garden plot, a little paradise, where Jesus the gardener speaks wisdom and cultivates his church.

There is one more intriguing detail from which few commentators have made much hay. Mark 6:39 states that Jesus instructs all the people "to recline" (ἀνακλίνειν). Again, the KJV, NIV, RSV, and ESV all say that Jesus ordered the people simply "to sit." Yet, there is a significant difference between "reclining" and "sitting." In the Greco-Roman world, people routinely frequented taverns and cookshops, called *popinae* or *cauponiae*, where they would eat while standing, or sitting on stools or high benches. As Matthew Roller writes, "In *popinae* people come and go as they please, and pay for their food according to what they eat, as in a modern restaurant. There are no invited guests, for there is no host to invite them, hence no one to provide food, entertainment, and the like at his own expense."³⁰ The position of reclining implies something different. This is not the posture normally associated with utilitarian eating. Reclining is the posture appropriate for a banquet, a meal marked by leisure and conviviality. As the disciples suggested, the five thousand could very well have gone to neighboring towns to buy their own food (Mark 6:36). There is no indication that they were all that impoverished. This meal would be more than meeting their basic dietary needs; it would be a banquet in which there is a host, as well as invited guests, eating at no cost. So they recline.

III. The Meaning of Symposium

Mark 6:39 states that Jesus has them recline "symposia by symposia" (συμπόσια συμπόσια). This language is remarkable on at least a couple of levels. First, we note the obvious etymology of the word "symposia," which means "drinking together." As Liddell and Scott note, a "symposium" is, in its most basic sense, "a drinking party."³¹ This is surely an odd way to describe a meal in which Jesus offers bread and fish, without mention of wine, or, in fact, any other libation. Perhaps it is not quite accurate after all to describe the Markan feeding of the five thousand

²⁹ Marcus, *Mark 1-8*, 419.

³⁰ Matthew B. Roller, *Dining Posture in Ancient Rome: Bodies, Values, and Status* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006), 93.

³¹ Liddell and Scott, *A Greek-English Lexicon*, s.v. "συμπόσι-α."

as a "dry run" for the eucharist. By using the term "symposia," Mark may be hinting at the fact that this meal of bread and fish anticipates a meal in which drinking, not just eating, will be constitutive.

There is also a second thing to think about. According to the second-century Clement of Alexandria, Mark wrote his Gospel, based upon Peter's preaching, in Rome.³² Whether or not this Gospel was penned in Rome, commentators have often noted its distinctively Roman characteristics. As Raymond Brown notes, "The presence in Mark of Greek loanwords derived from Latin and of expressions reflecting Latin grammar, may suggest a locale where Latin was spoken."³³ Mark, for instance, uses the Latin equivalents for such words as legion, centurion, and denarius. Mark is writing for and in the Greco-Roman world. The distance of the Gospel from the Jewish worldview can be seen in the fact that Mark has to explain to his audience the ceremonial washing traditions of the Jews (Mark 7:3-4). Where Mark was written cannot be known. We can, however, say that the author and his audience were clearly living in a world shaped by Hellenistic culture. We might add that in the Gospel of Mark it is a centurion who first confesses Jesus as God's Son (Mark 15:39).

Given Mark's Greco-Roman elements, what might his reference to "symposia" mean? The symposium was, first and foremost, a Greco-Roman banquet, at which people would be gathered at a meal, and conversation would be enhanced by wine. Mention the word "symposium," and we are brought into the world of togas, banquets, and Greco-Roman philosophers; a world in which Socrates could be found, reclining at table with friends, talking about life in all of its dimensions.

The symposium served not only as a meal, but also a literary tradition. Famous literary symposia include works by Plato and Xenophon, as well as Plutarch's *Table Talk*.³⁴ A symposium was essentially a narrative that told the story of a dinner-party, at which there would be food, wine, and good conversation. As a literary device, the symposium was typically employed to demonstrate the wisdom of a particular philosopher and the movement that he led. What better way to demonstrate the wisdom of, say

³² Eusebius, *Historia ecclesiastica* 6.14.6, in *NPNF*² 2:261.

³³ Raymond E. Brown, *An Introduction to the New Testament* (New York: Doubleday, 1997), 161.

³⁴ For *Table Talk*, Books 1-6, see Plutarch, *Moralia VIII*, trans. Paul A. Clement, Loeb Classical Library (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1959); for Books 7-9, see Plutarch, *Moralia IX*, trans. Edwin L. Minar, Jr., Loeb Classical Library (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1961).

Socrates, than by showing how he interacted with others around the dinner table?

Typically, a literary symposium would feature, as E. Springs Steele notes, "a common cast of characters," including a "a host notable usually for wealth," as well as a chief guest whose "distinguishing characteristic" was his wisdom; "All other guests are typically cultivated and of high social standing."³⁵ The literary structure of the symposium was simple: an invitation to the meal, followed by a *fait divers* (i.e., something that happens at the meal), which results in a discussion.

Since the topics for discussion would arise from the meal setting itself, conversation would often revolve around such topics as food, wine, and table etiquette. Table talk typically led to a discussion of deeper subjects, including wisdom and ethics. In Plato's *Symposium*, for instance, there is a discussion as to who will have the honor of reclining next to Agathon, as well as who will be placed next to Socrates.³⁶ This leads to a discussion about honor and pride, and then, finally, to the nature of true love.³⁷ Similarly, in Plutarch's *Dinner of the Seven Wise Men*, a certain Alexidemus is insulted by his poor place at the table, at which point he is told that such objections are an insult to host and guests alike.³⁸ The talk then proceeds to such lofty themes as time, the universe, truth, light, death, and God.³⁹ Again, in *Table Talk* the participants argue that good order is necessary for pleasant dining.⁴⁰ So also do the guests discuss food and drink, and, most amusingly, why three or five drinks are better than four.⁴¹ This is followed, somewhat incongruously, by a discussion of the evils of drunkenness, which then turns into a conversation on the deities and upon the divine, geometrical order of the universe.⁴²

This Greco-Roman literary genre was appropriated by the Jewish authors in such works as *Letter of Aristeas*, which tells the story, in the form of a symposium, about the translation of the Septuagint. Typical of the symposium genre, there is a notable host, in this case King Ptolemy II

³⁵ E. Springs Steele, "Luke 11:37-54—A Modified Hellenistic Symposium?" *Journal of Biblical Literature* 103 (1984): 381.

³⁶ Plato, *Symposium* 175C. See Plato, *Lysis, Symposium, Gorgias*, trans. W. R. M. Lamb, Loeb Classical Library (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1953).

³⁷ Plato, *Symposium* 177A.

³⁸ Plutarch, *Dinner of the Seven Wise Men* 149. See Plutarch, *Moralia II*, trans. Frank Cole Babbitt, Loeb Classical Library (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1956).

³⁹ Plutarch, *Dinner of the Seven Wise Men* 152-153.

⁴⁰ Plutarch, *Table Talk* 1.2.617.

⁴¹ Plutarch, *Table Talk* 3.9.257.

⁴² Plutarch, *Table Talk* 8.2.718.

Philadelphus. The distinguished guests are the 70 translators of the Septuagint, each of whom receives a place of honor around the table. Then the discussion moves around the table as each of the 70 offers a bit of wisdom. Appropriately then, when asked how to conduct oneself at a banquet, one of the guests answered, "One ought invite lovers of learning and men capable of suggesting what may be useful to the realms and the lives of its subjects—much more harmonious and sweeter music you could not find."⁴³ The discussion then turns to such topics as truth, good leadership, and "To whom should favor be shown?"⁴⁴ Thus, the author of *Letter of Aristeas* was keen on demonstrating that the translators of the Septuagint were wise according to Greco-Roman standards, and that this translation should be taken seriously as divine literature that imparted wisdom.

The question at hand, I suppose, would be: was Mark thinking of any of this when he wrote his story of the feeding of the five thousand and described the people reclining "symposia by symposia"? Although the idea may appear strange at first blush, we should note Mark's place within the Greco-Roman world, the ubiquity of the symposium in the cultural and literary world of the time, the fact that the symposium genre was already being used by Jewish authors, and the fact that there is another evangelist who seems to be thinking in these Greco-Roman terms. So, we turn to Luke.

IV. Meals, Table Fellowship, and Symposia in Luke

As many commentators have observed, the theme of table fellowship permeates the Gospel of Luke. Arthur A. Just defines this table fellowship as "the gracious *presence* of Jesus at table, where he teaches about the kingdom of God and shares a *meal* in an atmosphere of acceptance, friendship, and peace. His usual table fellowship practice combined those three ingredients: his presence, his teaching, and his eating."⁴⁵ The meal scenes in Luke, according to Just, teach us about fellowship and forgiveness, as well as illuminate our understanding of Christ's ongoing presence in the church in the eucharistic meal. As Just puts it, "Jesus'

⁴³ *Letter of Aristeas* 286–287, in *Aristeas to Philocrates: Letter of Aristeas*, ed. and trans. Moses Hadas (New York: Ktav, 1976), 213.

⁴⁴ *Letter of Aristeas* 228, in *Aristeas to Philocrates*, 189.

⁴⁵ Arthur A. Just Jr., *Luke 1:1–9:50*, Concordia Commentary (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1996), 231.

continuing practice of teaching and eating with his disciples at table has given the church the pattern for its eucharistic worship."⁴⁶

It should also be noted, however, that Luke's Gospel has a decidedly Greco-Roman flavor. Luke aimed to place Christianity onto the world stage and demonstrate how the Galilean movement would one day conquer Rome. The message of the new Israel would reach to the very ends of the earth. As Jesus stood among the Pharisees and Saducees, Paul would one day stand up among the Stoics and Epicureans (Acts 17:18). Jerusalem had lost its gravitational weight. Members of the new Israel would now have to think of themselves as citizens of the world. Accordingly, part of the early church catechesis included teaching what it meant for a Christian to be a citizen within the Greco-Roman world and its cultural values.

As such, it is interesting to note that the Lukan meal scenes bear striking resemblance to Greco-Roman precedents. Gregory Sterling, among others, has argued that the third evangelist presents four banquets in "terms reminiscent of symposia, Lk 5:29-39; 7:36-50; 11:37-54; 14:1-24."⁴⁷ Sterling notes:

These four units in Luke all share the same structure: a setting at a banquet (5:29; 7:36; 11:37; 14:1), *fait divers* (5:29; 7:37-38; 11:38; 14:2-6), reaction (5:30; 7:39; 11:38; 14:2-6), Jesus' response (5:31-32; 7:40-48; 11:39-44; 14:7-14 [7-11, 12-14]), further question or statement (5:35; 7:49; 11:45; 14:15); and Jesus' response (5:34-39 [34-35, 36-39]; 7:50; 11:46-52; 14:16-24). The result is that Jesus becomes the best of all philosophers, imparting his wisdom at the banquet. . . . The parallels between the structure of a symposium and these banquets suggests that the author utilized a known Hellenistic form which the readers would find meaningful.⁴⁸

It is interesting to look at the four meal scenes in Luke, his little symposia, and see what types of topics are addressed. In Luke 5:27-39, Levi the tax collector holds a banquet. This leads to a discussion as to who are worthy guests, in this case, tax collectors and sinners. Next, as is typical at a symposium, there is a discussion about eating and drinking, at which point Jesus describes his message in terms of "new wine" (Luke 5:37). In Luke 7:36-50, a Pharisee invites Jesus to recline at banquet. A woman proceeds to anoint Jesus' feet with her hair. This leads to a discussion of the nature of hospitality, which then turns into a discourse on love and

⁴⁶ Just, *Luke 1:1-9:50*, 241.

⁴⁷ Gregory E. Sterling, *Historiography and Self-Definition: Josephus, Luke-Acts, and Apologetic Historiography* (Leiden: Brill, 1992), 370.

⁴⁸ Sterling, *Historiography and Self-Definition*, 371.

forgiveness. In Luke 11:37-54, Jesus again reclines at table. Once more drawing upon the circumstances of the meal, Jesus launches into a discussion of the true nature of purity. He also talks about the ethics of doing justice for the sake of the poor, the societal sin of seeking the best seats in meetings, and the pride of desiring greetings in the marketplace. Over and against the so-called experts in the law, who take away the key of knowledge (Luke 11:52), Jesus shows himself to be the true wise man. Again, in Luke 14:1-24, Jesus takes the occasion of a feast to speak about the counter-cultural values of God. In a discourse, reminiscent of Plato and Plutarch, Jesus speaks about the place one should take at a table. Radically, Christ exhorts the guests not to take a seat of honor, but the lowest place (Luke 14:10). As the wise men discussed to whom favor should be shown in *Letter of Aristeas*, so also does Jesus. Except, he encourages his guests to host dinners in which they invite the lowly. He then goes on to compare the kingdom of God to a great banquet held by a certain man who, having his invitation rejected, sends his servant to invite "the poor, the crippled, the blind, and the lame" (Luke 14:21).

These four banquet scenes are striking in the ways that Jesus, the teacher of wisdom, speaks of things both earthly and heavenly. The topics which he discusses (i.e., old and new wine, whom to invite to banquet, proper hospitality, seating arrangement, as well as other things which happen during the meal) would have been very familiar to readers of Plato's and Plutarch's symposia. Yet, he uses these familiar subjects to introduce a new code of Christian ethics, which is based upon humility. Jesus claims a privileged place in society for those who cannot help themselves, namely the poor. Finally, he notes how these new values are based upon the heavenly reality, which is evidenced in himself. Thus, through his use of little symposia, Luke roots Christian ethics to Christology. By using the commonly known genre of the symposium, Luke begins to turn the world, with its values of honor and shame, "upside-down" (Acts 17:16).

Although Sterling does not discuss the matter, I think that Luke's account of the Lord's Supper also may be classified as a type of little symposium. It is worth noting that Luke, alone among the Synoptic Gospels, incorporates a significant amount of teaching material into his Lord's Supper account. Typical of symposia literature, Jesus comments on an event which has happened at the table: in this case, a dispute among the disciples as to who is the greatest (Luke 22:24). Jesus then proceeds to speak in very Greco-Roman terms about the nature of Christian greatness, and what it means to be a true benefactor: "The kings of the Gentiles lord it over them; and those who exercise authority are called benefactors. It is

not this way with you" (Luke 22:25). As Christ came to serve, so also should Christians serve others. Again, Christian ethics proceed from a discussion of Christology. And the Lord's Supper is the place where Christians, gathered around food and wine, discuss the things of God and shape their lives around the counter-cultural values of Christ, their teacher.

V. The Lord's Supper as Symposium

So it is, Luke seems to make use of the symposium tradition, and Mark appears to nod to the tradition as well. Mark links it to the feeding of the five thousand, and Luke uses it in the meals scenes. It is generally acknowledged that both the meal scenes in Luke and the feeding miracles in Mark point to the Lord's Supper. Thus, both Mark and Luke would have us see the Lord's Supper, at least in part, as a type of Christian symposium. What might be the implications of this, especially in terms of the shaping of Christian identity?

I suppose that seeing the Lord's Supper as a type of symposium would reinforce some things that we probably take for granted. For starters, the Lord's Supper is a type of meal at which people recline. That is to say, it is not fast food. It is more closely akin to a banquet, at which there is a host and there are guests. This is not a meal bought at a price, but one that is provided for by the host.

Besides eating and drinking, what happens at a symposium? Well, there is conversation and the sharing of wisdom. It is the kind of thing that goes on, I suppose, in almost any good Bible study. The primary teacher or wise man at the Christian symposium is Christ. Though we may learn from many, Christ remains the church's primary teacher. This function of teacher continues in apostolic ministers, who teach all that the Lord has commanded (Matt 28:20). Yet, all are invited to join in the conversation.

Thinking about the Lord's Supper, at least in part, as a symposium, may also shape the way we think about the worship service, the topics which our church addresses, and the symposia we attend.⁴⁹ First, concerning our symposium, I must admit that I enjoy the irony of speaking about symposia at a symposium. For us the symposium is not primarily an academic enterprise. Any discussion of the Bible finds its most natural setting not in the academy but in the church. The academy has increasingly claimed biblical literature for itself. So too, the church has often retreated, leaving weightier questions of the Bible to be answered by the so-called

⁴⁹ This study was first presented at the 2007 Symposium on Exegetical Theology in Fort Wayne, Indiana.

experts. True biblical scholarship, however, is the rightful task of the church. The seminary is not a foreign body or addition to the church, but a natural extension of the church, an ongoing symposium where the church intentionally gathers and speaks about the things of God. The seminary life, in its teaching and scholarship, is a natural outpouring of the eucharistic life of the church in the Divine Service.

The reverse is true also. As the symposia and the seminary are a natural extension of the church's eucharistic worship, so is each and every eucharistic gathering a little symposium. The Lord's Supper is the place to speak about distinct Christian values and what it means to live life as a Christian. Luke's Gospel, in particular, takes aim at widely held Greco-Roman values, and turns them upside-down in light of Christ. So also, the church today must help her members understand what it means to be a Christian in a world whose values are often inimical to the way of Christ.

What might be discussed at a little Christian symposium? Concerning discussion topics for a symposium, Plutarch writes,

Then, too, there are, I think, topics of discussion that are suitable for a symposium. Some are supplied by history; others it is possible to take from current events; some contain many lessons bearing on philosophy, many on piety; some induce an emulous enthusiasm for courageous and great-hearted deeds, and some for charitable and human deeds.⁵⁰

Certainly, we do not take marching orders from Plutarch. Still, the Lord's Supper, as the Christian symposium, is the place where we speak about the things of the world and put them into their proper perspective. This Sacrament is a place to speak of divine wisdom and Christian piety. It is a place to spur one another on to courage and good deeds; it is a place to promote charity and giving to the poor. The topics discussed are often those that simply come to mind or are based on things happening within the life of the church or the community at large. What are Christians to think about abortion, stem-cell research, cloning, homosexuality, marriage, family, and the host of other topics which are hot topics within our culture? The Lord's Supper, the Christian symposium, is the place to speak about these things. It is the place to discuss and show the relationship between our life, as we live it today, and the life of Christ.

It is often said that Lutheran pastors speak too often of the things of God, and not enough about life as it is lived day by day. Maybe our critics have a point. Yet, to speak about Christ is to speak about the Christian life. Christians gather around food and wine to speak about things earthly and

⁵⁰ Plutarch, *Table Talk* 1.1.614, in Plutarch, *Moralia VIII*, 15.

things divine. There Christians drink the new wine which is better than the old, and they learn to live a life defined by the humility and service of Christ. Thus, the Lord's Supper, the place where Christ's body and blood is received, is also a little symposium, where Christian identity is shaped through teaching and the imparting of wisdom from the one who is Wisdom. It is the banquet where one dines with Christ, who is the host and teacher. Perhaps, we suffer because our teaching, as done in the Bible study, is seen as somehow separate from the church service proper. The seminary likewise is seen as something other than the church. There is an unnatural disconnect between teaching and preaching. So also is there a disconnect between doctrine, narrowly defined, and the life that we live from day to day. Yet, eucharistic worship is precisely the place where not only our hearts, but also our minds, are formed into the image of Christ. It is the place where the Christian life is given form and content.