



Ebner, Martin, ed.

Herrenmahl und Gruppenidentität

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Christoph Stenschke

Missionshaus Bibelschule Wiedenest *and* University of South Africa
Pretoria, South Africa

The present collection of essays examines the New Testament references to the Lord's Supper in the context of communal meals in the ancient world. This is a promising perspective that is not always adopted for understanding early Christian meals. In addition, it focuses on the close relationship between this supper and the identity of the community that partakes of it. The following questions are raised: How did meals in general function in the ancient world for shaping communities? How do the early Christian meals relate to this larger picture?

In their introductory essay "Herrenmahl und Gruppenidentität" (10–17) M. Ebner and A. Leinhäupl-Wilke describe the current ecumenical debate on communion and outline the exegetical approach to be applied here. It focuses on constructions of identity that are reflected in the actual celebration and understanding of communion as well as in the theological comments that are made about it. The approach is strictly historical and based on cultural sciences (11). Its aim is "die ntl. Herrenmahlsfeiern aus ihrer Zeit heraus zu verstehen und deren eigene Identitätskonstruktionen freizulegen. Dazu werden die ntl. Texte im Rahmen der antiken Mahlkultur beleuchtet, wie sie sich in hellenistisch-römischer Zeit im Mittelmeerraum etabliert hat" (11–12). Common meals and the construction of identity were inseparably intertwined. Therefore every invitation to a

meal entailed a number of organizational decisions that involve the setting of boundaries and hierarchies: Who is to make up the group that eats together? Who wants to eat with whom or avoid precisely that? What topics are appropriate for conversation during the meal? How lavish or meager is the menu to be? Even the seating arrangement involves decisions, as there are more and less honorable places, which automatically leads to a ranking among the guests.

In order to read the New Testament texts against this background, three perspectives are required: (1) knowledge of the literary conventions for describing such meals; (2) insights from social history (the composition of guests, the order of events, and ritual-cultic elements) for meals in general and for behavior that is specific to particular groups in view of their temporal and geographic location; and (3) perspectives from sociology of religion, aiming to understand how various early Christian groups defined themselves through their different meal-practices over against their Jewish mother religion, pagan groups in Hellenistic cities, and other Christian groups. The aim is to discover the different constructions of identity of early Christian groups that finds expression in their meal practices:

Insgesamt geht es darum, die Pluralität der christlichen Optionen zu sichten, die Bandbreite der Begrenzung bzw. Entgrenzung bezüglich kultisch, kulturell oder sozial bestimmter Grenzlinien zu beschreiben, den gruppenspezifischen bzw. gesellschaftlichen Kontext der jeweiligen Option aufzudecken und die Funktion dieser Option in diesem Kontext zu benennen. Kurz: die identitätsstiftende Kraft der ntl. Herrenmahlskonzeptionen in deren jeweiligem sozialen, religiösen und gesellschaftlichen Kontext wahrzunehmen. (14)

The first part provides orientation from the perspectives of systematic theology and sociology: F. Nüssel and D. Sattler, “Ökumenische eucharistische Mahlgemeinschaft: Begründet erwünscht—und doch nicht gelebt?” (20–38); V. Krech, “Die semantischen und sozialstrukturellen Kontexte der Mahlfeier: Eine religionssoziologische Typologie” (39–58, eating as physiological, cultural, and social activity); and J. Werbick, “Über religiöse Ritualisierung von Gruppenidentitäten—und ihre Ambivalenz” (59–61).

Part 2 is devoted to exegesis. In “Mahl und Gruppenidentität: Philo Schrift *De Vita Contemplativa* als Paradigma” (64–90), M. Ebner begins with a thorough analysis of Philo’s detailed and clearly identity-related description of the meal of the Therapeutai in contrast to other ancient meals. What happened at their meals is compared to the conventions of communal meals in the ancient world. Next Ebner turns to the young men addressed and strongly warned by Philo, the *Sitz im Leben* of this piece of literature, and how Philo polemicizes against some ancient meal practices and immoral practices

associated with meals. Thus “Meals are decisive. With whom one eats (and spends time at meals) indicates at the same time the values one shares with other people” (87). A. Leinhäupl-Wilke writes on “Zu Gast bei Lukas: Einblicke in die lukanische Mahlkonzeption am Beispiel von Lk 7:36–50” (91–120; Jesus’ meal with Simon the Pharisee is seen as paradigmatic; there is a focus the appearance of the woman). The passage indicates that table fellowship overcomes social and religious boundaries. Communal meals are seen as an essential component of Christian group identity. Consideration of the disputes about table fellowship between Jews and Gentiles in Acts (e.g., 11:3) would have sharpened the perspective on Luke’s Gospel.

M. Theobald examines “Leib und Blut Christi: Erwägungen zu Herkunft, Funktion und Bedeutung des sogenannten ‘Einsetzungsberichts’” (121–65; including a survey of the early church development of a cult etiology and its limited application; treatment also includes the meal references in Did. 9–10). G. Theißen studies “Sakralmahl und sakramentales Geschehen: Abstufungen in der Ritualdynamik des Abendmahls” (166–86; the significance and general theories of ritual; different meal-types in early Christianity). Finally, S. Schreiber comments on “Zur Attraktivität urchristlicher Mahlgemeinschaft” (187–91; on Philo and Joseph and Aseneth: “Die Pragmatik des Textes zielt dabei auf innerjüdische Vergewisserung der eigenen Identität,” 189). One might also point to the economic attractiveness of early Christian meals in comparison to the less regular meals of ancient associations (see P. Pilhofer, “Die ökonomische Attraktivität christlicher Gemeinden in der Frühzeit,” in idem, *Die frühen Christen und ihre Welt* [WUNT 145; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2002], 206–7). In addition to the meals of Philo’s Therapeutai, an essay comparing early Christian meal practice with that of ancient associations would also have been instructive (see E. Ebel, *Die Attraktivität früher christlicher Gemeinden: Die Gemeinde von Korinth im Spiegel griechisch-römischer Vereine* [WUNT 2/178; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2004]).

Part 3 sketches some historical developments: T. Kaufmann writes on “Abendmahl und Gruppenidentität in der frühen Reformation” (194–210); B. Kranemann on “Von der Privatmesse zur Gemeinschaftsmesse: Herrenmahl und Gruppenidentität in der ‘Liturgischen Bewegung’ am Anfang des 20. Jahrhunderts” (211–29); and H. Wolf on “Von der Folgenlosigkeit der Beschäftigung mit Geschichte in der Theologie?” (230–32). The final part offers three essays on contemporary practice: K. Gabriel examines “Herrenmahl und Gruppenidentität heute—Analysen und Konfliktgeschichten” (234–53); R. Zwick, “Das Mahl des Herrn und das Mahl der Sklaven: Identitätsprozesse in Tomás Gutiérrez Aleas Film *La Última Cena*” (254–77); and U. Schmälzle, “Das Herrenmahl: Ort des Gerichts (1 Kor 11,29)” (278–82). The volume closes with a summary by M. Ebner, “Identitätsstiftende Kraft und gesellschaftlicher Anspruch des

Herrenmahls: Thesen aus exegetischer Sicht” (284–91; summary of the exegetical results and suggestions for their significance in the present ecumenical discussion).

Several essays of this volume offer interesting and fresh perspectives, but in the New Testament essays, some of the perspectives listed in the introduction (the nexus between meals and identity, their significance in the construction of identity) are not applied consistently enough. As a consequence, some essays hardly venture beyond well-known and well-debated issues. There is no discussion on how identity created through meals relates to other factors constituting and creating early Christian identity. The volume does not contain German or English summaries of the essays.