

# Word and Table: The Origins of a Liturgical Sequence

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## Abstract

This article shows that the word-table liturgical sequence set forth in Justin Martyr's First Apology and attested by at least two other ancient descriptions of Christian community meals is not a departure from Greco-Roman banquet custom but has parallels in the wider culture. The evidence is examined in detail, and a possible rationale for a word-table sequence in a banquet setting is proposed.

## Keywords

Word-table sequence – ancient Christian liturgy – Christian community meals

Some fifty years ago, classicists began a fresh examination of the Greek symposion. Beginning with inquiries into the aristocratic banquet of the seventh through the fifth centuries BCE, they went on to investigate social dining more generally in classical, Hellenistic, and Roman antiquity.<sup>1</sup> These studies were not long underway before students of ancient Judaism and early Christianity began exploring the Greco-Roman banquet as a framework for interpreting the common meals of Jews, Christians, and other groups.<sup>2</sup> There is now a

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1 For a rehearsal of the modern history of research on the Greek symposion, see O. Murray, "Symptic History," in *Symptotica: A Symposium on the Symposion*, ed. O. Murray (Oxford 1990), 7-11 (3-13).

2 D. E. Smith, "Social Obligation in the Context of Communal Meals: A Study of the Christian Meal in 1 Corinthians in Comparison with Graeco-Roman Communal Meals" (Th.D. diss.; Harvard University, 1980); idem, *From Symposium to Eucharist: The Banquet*

general consensus among specialists in the field of early Christianity that a two-part format of social meals was widespread in antiquity. Guests enjoyed a meal (the δειπνον), then relaxed in an after-dinner wine party (the συμπόσιον or πότης). Activities during the symposion varied but often included such things as games, singing, dancing, professional entertainment (a piper was almost always on hand), and conversation, the last of these being the philosophical ideal for a symposion.

It is now also widely held that early Christians organized their community meals along the lines of Greco-Roman dining, adapting the format to their own particular interests and purposes. In a judicious survey of Christian worship in the first several centuries, Andrew McGowan joins this consensus<sup>3</sup> but notes that the typical church meeting described in Justin Martyr's *First Apology* "seems to depart from the Greco-Roman model by having discourse before, rather than after, eating."<sup>4</sup> Justin outlines a service of baptism (ch. 65) and a Sunday gathering (ch. 67), both of which entail the Eucharist. At one point he implies that the meetings took the same form.<sup>5</sup> The Sunday gathering he describes had Scripture readings and a homily before the Eucharist. Inasmuch as Tertullian, writing around 200 CE, is our earliest witness to a morning Eucharist, probably an innovation during a transitional period,<sup>6</sup> it is reasonable to think that Justin, writing a generation earlier, describes an evening meal.<sup>7</sup> That said, Justin does not specify the time of day, and we have to allow for the possibility that his church made the transition to a morning Eucharist earlier than the church at Carthage did.

McGowan compares Justin's word-table order to the sequence of events at the *dilectio* (ἀγαπή) described in Tertullian's *Apology* 39. That supper unfolds

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*in the Early Christian World* (Minneapolis 2003); M. Klinghardt, *Gemeinschaftsmahl und Mahlgemeinschaft: Soziologie und Liturgie frühchristlicher Mahlfeiern* (Tübingen and Basel 1996). An ongoing group on Meals in the Greco-Roman World has been underway in the Society of Biblical Literature since 2002.

3 "The communal suppers of the earliest Christians followed this or similar patterns, with the after-dinner conversations centering on issues and forms of speech (including song) appropriate to their faith." A. B. McGowan, *Ancient Christian Worship: Early Church Practices in Social, Historical, and Theological Perspective* (Grand Rapids 2014), 22.

4 McGowan, *Ancient Christian Worship*, 48.

5 Note ὡς προέφημεν in 1 *Apol.* 67.5 (referring to 65.2-5). Text in D. Minns and P. M. Parvis, eds., *Justin, Philosopher and Martyr: Apologies* (Oxford 2009), 260.

6 If McGowan is correct, Tertullian is a witness to a transitional period in Carthage when a eucharistic distribution was conducted in the morning for those who could not or did not attend the most recent evening supper. See A. B. McGowan, "Rethinking Agape and Eucharist in Early North African Christianity," *Studia Liturgica* 34 (2004): 165-176.

7 See Klinghardt, *Gemeinschaftsmahl und Mahlgemeinschaft*, 502-503; cf. McGowan, "Rethinking Agape and Eucharist in Early North African Christianity," 166 (observing that there is no evidence before Tertullian for a morning gathering that is "eucharistic").

as follows: opening prayer, meal with circumspect talk, post-supper handwashing and lighting of lamps, drinking party with individual song, then closing prayer.<sup>8</sup> This fits the current scholarly paradigm for the early Christian meal format, where activities of the word are conducted during the after-supper symposion. There is no mention here of scripture reading or exhortation, although elsewhere Tertullian does assign those practices to Christian meetings. In fact, he refers to them earlier in chapter 39. The topics of this chapter unfold in the following order: (1) Christians meet to pray, read the sacred writings, and engage in community exhortations, rebuke, and censure; (2) the Christian sect's moral habits and governance differ from (and are superior to) those of pagans, including the latter's meal customs; and (3) Christians begin their banquet (*cena*), called *dilectio*, with prayer; they eat and drink only what is necessary for bodily needs; they converse as if God were listening in; then they wash their hands, light lamps, sing one by one, and close their meeting with prayer.

McGowan suspects that in specifying what took place at Christian meetings, Tertullian has in view two different kinds of gatherings: one was an assembly for discipline and instruction (no. 1 in my list = 39.2-4); the other was the evening *dilectio* (no. 3 = 39.16-19), a community meal followed by a Christian symposion.<sup>9</sup> There is merit in this suggestion. One notes the absence of any reference to a meal in the initial remarks about a Christian meeting for prayer, scripture, and exhortation. And those statements are separated from the account of the *dilectio* by intervening discussion on a more general topic (no. 2 in the list = 39.5-15). Yet other considerations suggest that all Tertullian's statements about church gatherings in *Apology* 39 have in view a single community meeting, the evening supper. Tertullian begins the chapter by speaking of the church as a "society of religious knowledge and unity of *disciplinae* and shared hope."<sup>10</sup> He then illustrates what he means by mentioning what Christians do at their meetings. Specifically, they pray, listen to scripture readings for spiritual nourishment and moral instruction, and engage in mutual exhortation and correction. The word *disciplina* means "teaching" but can also refer to "discipline." Tertullian probably has both in mind, which is to say that the expression "religious knowledge and unity of *disciplinae*" is something of a hendiadys. Moreover, the same word shows up again in Tertullian's closing comments about the Christian drinking party. "Prayer concludes the banquet," he says, "and we go out not in rowdy bands or roving gangs or as those bent on indecent acts but with as much concern for moderation and modesty as

8 *Apol.* 39.17-18.

9 McGowan, *Ancient Christian Worship*, 95.

10 *Apol.* 39.1 in *Quinti Septimi Florentis Tertulliani Opera*, part 1, 3: *Apologeticum*, ed. E. Dekkers (CCSL 1; Turnhout 1965), 150.

those who enjoyed not so much a dinner party as *disciplinam*.<sup>11</sup> It is true that in describing the drinking party, Tertullian does not mention any activities of instruction, exhortation, or correction. But of the meal he says that Christians “converse as those who know that God listens in.”<sup>12</sup> Since this Christian gathering is more like *disciplina* than feasting, the *disciplina* must take place at the meal during the circumspect conversation. This encourages one to think that Tertullian has only one meal in view and that the things mentioned near the beginning of the chapter (reading of scripture, exhortation, etc.) are activities of the *dilectio* described at the end of the chapter, activities of the word conducted as part of the circumspect conversation during the meal, before the lamp-lighting and singing. But even if two meetings are described, the community *dilectio* includes *disciplina*, according to Tertullian, which must take place during the meal-conversation when “God listens in,” inasmuch as the discourse of the drinking party is singing addressed “to God,” not to one’s co-religionists.

## 1 Readings and Lectures over the Meal: Diversity of Format in Greco-Roman Banquets

The possibility that church suppers at Carthage had readings and instruction during the meal-time jibes with evidence in the wider culture about meals with readings and lectures. We learn from a letter of Pliny the Younger that when he dined at his Tuscan villa with his wife or a few friends, he typically provided a reading during the supper proper, then a comic actor or lyre-player for the drinking-party.<sup>13</sup> In this arrangement, the more intellectual fare was reserved for the meal, the lighter entertainment for the symposion. Aulus Gellius also mentions the custom of intellectuals to provide for readings during an evening

11 *Apol.* 39.18-19 (... *qui non tam cenam cenauerint quam disciplinam*) in Dekkers, *Apologeticum*, 153.

12 *ita fabulantur, ut qui sciant Deum audire. Apol.* 39.18 in Dekkers, *Apologeticum*, 153.

13 Pliny, *Ep.* 9.36.4. *Cenanti mihi, si cum uxore uel paucis, liber legitur; post cenam comoedia aut lyristes* (“While I am dining, with my wife or a few friends, a book is read; after supper, there is a comedy or a lyre player”). The manuscripts read “a comedy” (*comoedia* or *comoediam*), but the Agricola ms. has *comoedus*. For the text and variants, see C. Plini Caecili Secundi *Epistularum libri decem*, ed. R. A. B. Mynors (Oxford 1963), 288. Similar passages in Pliny refer to comic actors (singing actors), and a comparison suggests that a given party would have a single singer: 9.17.3 (singular *comoedus*), 1.15.2 (plural *comoedos*, but pairing the term with “readers” and “lyre-players” suggests he is speaking of categories, not an ensemble of singing actors at a given party); 3.1.9 (plural in speaking of the suppers of Spurrina). The staging of a comedy on some occasions cannot be ruled out, but it must have been more usual for a single comic actor to perform excerpts (songs).

meal. “At dinners of the philosopher Favorinus,” he says, “once they had reclined and the serving of food had begun, a slave standing by his (Favorinus’) table would begin to read, either from Greek writings or our own literature.”<sup>14</sup> Gellius recalls that on one occasion, after a portion of an erudite treatise by Gavius Bassus titled *On the Origin of Verbs and Substantives* had been read, the diners discussed it.

There is evidence that Athenaeus of Naucratis also regarded the mealtime, before the drinking party, as a suitable occasion for erudite talk and quotation of literature. In *Deipnosophists*, he uses a series of dinner parties as the literary frame for his compendium of antique excerpts on all sorts of topics connected with dining. That frame, a series of banquets put on by a wealthy man named Larensius, is quite incidental, as is the frame for telling about Larensius’ parties: a supper at which Athenaeus narrates the story of the banquets to his dinner-partner Timocrates. Aside from the conversations themselves, Athenaeus only occasionally marks the place of a discussion in the flow of the dinner-party. These signals, rare though they are, show that (1) he takes for granted the traditional division between meal and symposion, and (2) he does not confine the speeches and literary quotations to the drinking party. For example, at one point Athenaeus, narrating, remarks, “After these lengthy discussions, the decision was made to dine.”<sup>15</sup> The implication is that the guests had been sitting outside the dining room and agreed to go in and recline. Hence, the long discussions up to this point were a prelude to dining. Later in *Deipnosophists*, Athenaeus tells his interlocutor, Timocrates, that the two of them should begin their own dinner with the topic of what the *Deipnosophists* discussed next.<sup>16</sup> This implies that Athenaeus commenced his story, with all its quotations from ancient literature, before the meal and now continues it while he and Timocrates recline for the food service. Moreover, at another point Athenaeus tells Timocrates that a long discussion by the *Deipnosophists* themselves ended as the meal drew to a close.<sup>17</sup> One of the diners instructs the servants to stop bringing in courses of food since the sun has already set (sundown being the traditional time for the end of a meal and start of a symposion).<sup>18</sup> A long speech ensues; there is another reference to sundown; and as further discussion gets underway, a quotation from Theognis about the transition from meal to drinking party seems to serve as an oblique signal that the *Deipnosophists’*

14 Gellius, *NA* 3.19.1 in P. K. Marshall, ed., *A. Gellii Noctes Atticae*, vol. 1 (2 vols.; Oxford 1968), 160.

15 *Deipn.* 3.84 (116a).

16 *Deipn.* 3.101 (127e).

17 *Deipn.* 6.109 (275b)-7.1 (275c).

18 *Ibid.*, 7.1 (275c).

drinking party has begun.<sup>19</sup> Erudite conversation continues. Thus, Athenaeus has his diners conduct serious discussions through both halves of their daily banquets. Granted, he has a literary reason for placing some discussions during first tables, since he occasionally uses the appearance of a certain dish as a prompt for a discussion. But encyclopedic discussion over the meal would have been too gauche for these sophisticated diners had men of Athenaeus' social class regarded the mealtime as unsuitable for that kind of talk.

Somewhat more ambiguous but worth mentioning is an anecdote that Flavius Philostratus tells about Herodes Atticus, a Greek aristocrat and exponent of the Second Sophistic. It seems that following his daily lectures he would meet with ten of his best students, an inner circle dubbed the Clepsydrion for its use of a water-clock (κλεψύδρα). While the students "provisioned themselves," Herodes would give a lecture on "a hundred verses," going through the material "at length" while his students remained silent and withheld their praise until he was finished.<sup>20</sup> It is not entirely clear whether the clock measured only the reading or both the reading and the lecture.<sup>21</sup> There is also a question about the term ἐπεσιτίζοντο, "they provisioned themselves." This verb is not used for wine-drinking or a symposion. With reference to food it means either acquiring a supply or eating a meal.<sup>22</sup> Eating a meal must be the sense

19 *Deipn.* 7.1-79 (275c-307f) (the long speech); 7.79 (307f) (reference to sundown after the speech); 7.85 (310a-b) (quotation from Arcestratus about the close of a supper and servant bringing in water and garlands).

20 Τὸ δὲ Κλεψύδριον ὧδε εἶχεν· τῶν τοῦ Ἡρώδου ἀκροατῶν δέκα οἱ ἀρετῆς ἀξιόμυνοι ἐπεσιτίζοντο τῇ ἐς πάντας ἀκροάσει κλεψύδραν ξυμμεμετρημένην ἐς ἑκατὸν ἔπη, ἃ διήει ἀποτάδην ὁ Ἡρώδης παρητημένος τὸν ἐκ τῶν ἀκροατῶν ἔπαινον καὶ μόνου γεγονώς τοῦ λέγειν. Philostratus, *VS* 2.10 (Olearius 585) in *Flavii Philostrati opera*, vol. 2, ed. C. L. Kayser (Leipzig 1871), 90. The dative τῇ ... ἀκροάσει is used because of the ἐπι- of the verb (ἐπεσιτίζοντο) that the phrase modifies: "they dined additionally to the lecture for all." See S. Rothe, *Kommentar zu ausgewählten Sophistenviten des Philostratos: Die Lehrstuhlinhaber in Athen und Rom* (Heidelberg 1989), 94. The sentence as it stands requires that we construe κλεψύδραν ξυμμεμετρημένην κ.τ.λ. as an accusative of time, which seems awkward. Bowie suspects that something has dropped out and marks a lacuna after κλεψύδραν. See E. Bowie, "Quo usque tandem ... How Long Were Sympotic Songs?" in *The Cup of Song: Studies on Poetry and the Symposion*, ed. V. Cazzato, D. Obbink, and E. E. Prodi, 28 (28-41) (Oxford 2016). Schmid emends ξυμμεμετρημένην to ξυμμεμετρημένοι, making the students the subject of this participle (hence: "they dined, measuring a water-clock for a hundred verses ..."). W. Schmid, *Der Atticismus in seinen Hauptvertretern: Von Dionisius von Halikarnass bis auf den zweiten Philostratus*, vol. 1 (Stuttgart 1887), 194 n. 5.

21 Bowie thinks the clock measured both the reading time and the lecture time ("Quo usque tandem," 28 n. 1).

22 See LSJ s.v. ἐπισιτίζομαι. The word is not used of drinking parties, and as for Philostratus' usage, Rothe notes that he employs ἐπισιτιούμενος for "eat" in *VA* 6.15 (117) and that the simple σιτίζεσθαι has this meaning in *VA* 3.26 (117) (Rothe, *Kommentar*, 94).

here, but there is disagreement over whether the meal is literal or figurative. While Ewen Bowie, Wilmer Wright, Wilhelm Schmid, and Susanne Rothe take the verb to mean “dine” in a literal sense, Erwin Rohde suggests that a “feast of reason” is meant.<sup>23</sup> The matter cannot be decided definitively, but if Herodes conducted a reading and lecture during a meal, that would have fit the social setting in which the anecdote is placed: the world of intellectuals and their students in Athens, where in roughly the same period Favorinus used to have a slave read something during dinner so that the professor and his supper-mates could discuss it.

As an aside, it is worth pointing out that the anecdote about Herodes’ use of a clock to control the time of a reading is a caution against assuming that Justin’s statement about the scripture readings continuing “as long as time permits” is a clue to time of day—that it implies a time-constrained morning gathering before the start of the work-day and not a leisurely evening supper.<sup>24</sup> To this aside, I will add another. A Christian meal where the presider delivers edifying instruction while others eat in silence is prescribed in *Apostolic Tradition* 28: “And let those who are invited, when eating, receive in silence, not contending with words but what the bishop has exhorted, and if he has asked anything, reply shall be given to him, And when the bishop says a word, let everyone keep silent, praising him with modesty until he again asks.”<sup>25</sup> Philo gives a similar portrait of audience behavior when he describes the opening activities of a festive banquet of the Therapeutae, how the diners listen in silence to a speech by the group’s president before the start of the meal.<sup>26</sup>

Comments by Gellius suggest at least one reason why readings and serious discussion were sometimes held during the meal instead of during the drinking party. Describing dinner parties that Calvenus Taurus held with his students, Gellius says that each would bring a question for discussion during the symposion. “These questions, however, were neither weighty nor serious,” Gellius explains, “but certain neat but trifling ἐνθουσιμᾶται,<sup>27</sup> or problems,

23 Bowie, “*Quo usque tandem*,” 28; W. C. Wright, ed. and tr., *Philostratus, Lives of the Sophists / Eunapius, Lives of the Philosophers* (Cambridge, MA 1921), 223; Schmid, *Der Atticismus in seinen Hauptvertretern*, vol. 1, 194; Rothe, *Kommentar zu ausgewählten Sophistenviten des Philostratos*, 87 and 94; E. Rohde, as cited by Wright, *Philostratus and Eunapius*, 222 (note); cf. K. Brodersen, *Leben der Sophisten: Zweisprachige Ausgabe Neuübersetzung* (Wiesbaden 2014), 183 (apparently adopting Rohde’s suggestion).

24 *1 Apol.* 67.3.

25 *Ap. Trad.* 28.4 (Latin). Translation from P. F. Bradshaw, M. E. Johnson, and L. E. Phillips, *The Apostolic Tradition: A Commentary* (Minneapolis 2002), 146.

26 See Philo, *Vit. contempl.*, 75-82 (see below).

27 This word probably means something like “things to think about.”



which would pique a mind enlivened by wine.”<sup>28</sup> Sophists like Taurus felt that the conversation at a symposion should not be overly intellectual, since the purpose of a drinking party was relaxation, not taxing mental exercise. In a similar vein, Plutarch mentions how symposiasts bored by a long-winded philosopher often turn to business-talk, foolish jokes, and songs.<sup>29</sup> And at another point in *Symptotic Questions*, he has a symposiast remark that Old Comedy is unsuitable as entertainment for a drinking party because, among other things, it contains too many allusions to persons no longer known, so that each symposiast would need a grammarian at his elbow to explain the allusions.<sup>30</sup> Even men who thrived on intellectual activities preferred to unwind after supper, get a little drunk, and not turn the symposion into a lecture hall.

The idea that the symposion was meant for relaxation would explain why Pliny assigned readings to the meal and lighter entertainment to the drinking-party. Moreover, since Taurus believed that talk at a drinking party should be “neither weighty nor serious,” he may have regarded the meal as the proper place for more serious talk. And whatever Herodes or Favorinus thought fitting for a symposion, both arranged for readings at dinner, the one lecturing about selections of poetry and the other leading erudite discussions of prose works. This is not to suggest that all drinking parties were devoid of serious intellectual discussion or long speeches. What counted as relaxing and what as mentally taxing was a relative matter, dependent on the education and temperament of the group. Gellius depicts Favorinus and his friends conducting abstruse grammatical questions at wine parties; Hadrian, a former member of the Water-Clock Club, encouraged his students to take up serious matters during their drinking parties;<sup>31</sup> and the symposia depicted by Athenaeus, although not “realistic,” are just one tedious, fact-filled speech before, during, and after supper.

The festive banquet of Philo’s Therapeutae belongs to a different social world from the society of these upper-class sophists. The Therapeutae’s celebration unfolds as follows: prayers, a dinner-speech by the president, individual singing, a modest meal, and finally an all-night choral revel in song.<sup>32</sup> The revel corresponds to the Greek symposion, but the Therapeutae are abstinent: they

28 Gellius, *NA* 7.13.4 as translated in *The Attic Nights of Aulus Gellius*, vol. 2, tr. J. C. Rolfe (Cambridge, MA and London 1927), 125.

29 *Mor.* 614f-615a.

30 *Mor.* 712a.

31 Philostratus, *VS* 2.10 (Olearius 585-586) (Kayser, *Flavii Philostrati Opera*, vol. 2, 90).

32 *Vit. contempl.* 64-89.



drink only “the strong wine of God’s love.”<sup>33</sup> The dulling power of Dionysus’ grape is clearly not a factor in the sect’s banquet order.

To return to the dinner parties of the literati, we need not imagine that when lectures or readings took place “over dinner,” the guests chewed and slurped course after course while the intellectual presentations were made, or that they made their comments between mouthfuls. The food service of philosopher-hosts was modest, and references to “dinner” as the occasion for readings or other erudite talk could mean no more than the dinner time-frame before the drinking party. There is a clue in Gellius, who concludes a description of a dinner debate about the subject of congealed oil by saying that when the slave-boy appeared with a pot, “the time had come to eat and be quiet.”<sup>34</sup> This suggests that men of Gellius’ social circles consumed their food in silence, even if they carried on discussions between courses or before the serving began. In this particular case, there was just *one* course, since the host typically served his guests no more than a pot of cooked beans improved by a bit of sliced gourd.<sup>35</sup>

The meals of the early church were almost always simple, and eating would not have taken much time. The question for the leaders, then, was how to sequence the gathering in order best to accommodate the educational, exhortational, and other purposes of the gathering. Putting some things before the meal and others after would have been perfectly natural. In churches where wine was consumed after supper, the leaders had reason to put the instruction ahead of the symposion. They had to consider people’s tendency to behave with little respect for serious matters after the drinking got underway. Paul, for example, had to contend with disorderly community suppers at Corinth where “one is hungry and another is drunk.”<sup>36</sup> Leaders of a pagan voluntary association whose banquet featured a sermon and a sacred drama had to regulate for singing, cheering, and clapping at the wrong time, as well as improper and unruly behavior (taking someone else’s seat, fighting).<sup>37</sup> The club records do not disclose whether the officials had the sense to put the sermon and the drama at the beginning of the meeting, rather than reserve them for the wine party.

At evening church suppers in Tertullian’s Carthage, *disciplina* was conducted before the drinking party. The effect of wine on mental concentration and

33 *Vit. contempl.* 74 (their abstinence from wine) and 85 (God’s love is their wine).

34 *NA* 17.8.17: *tempusque esse coeperat edendi et tacendi* in Marshall, ed., *A. Gellii Noctes Atticae*, vol. 2, 515.

35 *NA* 17.8.1-2.

36 1 Cor. 11:21.

37 IG II<sup>2</sup> 1368, lines 63-78 (= PHI 3584) (a section of regulations for the banquet from the minutes and rules of the association of Iobacchoi).

mood was probably a consideration in decisions about the order of events. The same applies to Justin's church, if its eucharistic meeting was indeed an evening supper and if it entailed a wine party, two uncertainties. As for the latter question, Justin mentions no post-supper activities that might have taken place at a drinking party, and McGowan (following Harnack) has proposed that Justin's church was a water-only community.<sup>38</sup> This conclusion rests on the judgment that the expression *ποτήριον ὕδατος καὶ κράματος* in *1 Apol.* 65.3 is unintelligible or at least extremely confusing and must reflect a copyist's tampering. That is, a scribe saw "water" without any reference to "wine" and added *καὶ κράματος*.<sup>39</sup> But why would a scribe have chosen a remedy that produced a bewildering expression, when he could have added "and wine" (or "mixed with wine") to produce a perfectly straightforward sense? Or, if a scribe added *καὶ κράματος* and thought that made sense, then the expression is not so unintelligible and could have been written by Justin himself. Hence, there is no compelling reason not to accept the *lectio difficilior* as original. Whatever its exact meaning, it implies the use of wine, as does the parallel passage in *1 Apol.* 67.5, where there is no textual uncertainty.

## 2 Formats of Early Christian Suppers: Historical Hints in Texts of Different Times and Genres

Other Christian writings from the first three centuries—fictional, semi-fictional, and non-fictional—occasionally describe church meetings. Most of the descriptions are vague about sequence of activities, and the few more explicit ones are at best only indirect witnesses to actual historical practices.

A summary statement in Acts 2:42 declares that the infant church in Jerusalem "was devoting itself to the apostles' teaching and *koinonia*, to the breaking of bread and to prayers." This could reflect old tradition or current customs familiar to the author of Acts, but it is not clear that the list implies a sequence.<sup>40</sup> The story of a church meeting in Acts 20:7-12 is more specific.

38 A. B. McGowan, *Ascetic Eucharists: Food and Drink in Early Christian Ritual Meals* (Oxford 1999), 151-154; see the nice summary of Harnack's and McGowan's arguments in P. F. Bradshaw, *Eucharistic Origins* (London 2004), 76-77.

39 The best witness, Parisinus graecus 450, reads *ὕδατος καὶ κράματος*; Ottobonianus 274 reads simply *ὕδατος* but is a very inferior text (and it has the *lectio facilior*). See Minns and Parvis, *Justin, Philosopher and Martyr: Apologies*, 252 apparatus (the readings for 65.3), 3 and 6 (summary evaluations of the Parisinus graecus 450 and Ottobonianus 274).

40 It is possible that two groups of activities are meant—"teaching and fellowship," "breaking of bread and prayers"—which only complicates the question of order. Moreover, there is textual uncertainty about the placement of the first "and."

The church gathers for a meal; Paul preaches until after midnight; a sleepy boy falls out of a window and is raised to life; Paul “breaks bread” and continues preaching until morning. This story shows the table-word order, twice. That order, which puts the meal before the instruction, reflects either a very old tradition or what the author, writing perhaps as late as the early second century, took for granted about Christian community meals.<sup>41</sup>

A few meals appear in *Acts of Paul*. This work, in its earliest edition, dates to the latter half of the second century.<sup>42</sup> As known to scholarship, the book is an edition from about 300 CE, incomplete and textually uncertain at numerous points.<sup>43</sup> A brief description of a meal in *Acts of Paul* 3.5 could reflect a table-word pattern: “When Paul entered Onesiphorus’ house, there was great joy, bending of knees, breaking of bread, and a message about self-control and resurrection, Paul saying ‘Blessed are the pure in heart [sermon]....’”<sup>44</sup> Richard Pervo comments with judicious restraint: “The sentence evidently describes a service consisting of prayer, sacrament, and word (not necessarily in that order).”<sup>45</sup>

In another story in *Acts of Paul*, Paul and the family of Onesiphorus spend several days praying and fasting in a tomb, their lodging-place after expulsion from the city. A son is sent out to exchange Paul’s cloak for food. He meets Thecla in the marketplace and brings her to Paul, where the group in the tomb shares a meal of bread, vegetables, and water, celebrating “the holy deeds of Christ.” Thecla asks for baptism and Paul tells her to be patient.<sup>46</sup> Here, an extended period of fasting and prayer precedes a meal, but the time of day is not given. There is no mention of any instruction or song following the meal, and this is not a regular church gathering in any case.

41 The dating of Acts is not settled, and it is not certain that the author is in fact the same one who wrote the Gospel of Luke. After an exhaustive study that takes almost every bit of information and consideration into account, R. Pervo judges the period 115-120 CE as more likely than not. See R. I. Pervo, *Dating Acts: Between the Evangelists and the Apologists* (Santa Rosa, CA 2006), 343.

42 On introductory matters of genre, composition, dating, provenance, etc., see, among others, R. I. Pervo, *The Acts of Paul: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* (Cambridge 2014), 41-78; G. F. Snyder, *Acts of Paul: The Formation of a Pauline Corpus* (Tübingen 2013), 59-63.

43 The manuscripts of *Acts of Paul* are incomplete, and making a whole from them has led editors to reorder pages to achieve coherent correlations.

44 *Acts Pl* 3.5 = *Acts Pl Thecla* 5 in *Acta Apostolorum Apocrypha*, ed. Richard A. Lipsius and Maximilian Bonnet (3 vols.; Leipzig 1896-1903; reprint Darmstadt 1959), 238.

45 Pervo, *The Acts of Paul*, 100-101.

46 *ActsPl* 3.23-26 = *ActsPlTh* 23-26.

Another episode in *Acts of Paul* tells how the apostle was about to depart from Corinth, knowing he would face “a fiery furnace” in Rome.<sup>47</sup> If modern editorial judgments about the order of manuscript pages is correct, the components of the story are as follows. Paul and the church hold a farewell meeting, where certain church members prophesy, and a meal follows. There is an indication in one poorly-preserved sentence that the church has been fasting, whether for Paul’s sake or because it is their custom. Perhaps we are to assume that they gathered to fast and pray. Following a prophecy by a certain Cleobius, Paul breaks his fast. A meal follows, and the church sings hymns and psalms deep into the night. Despite uncertainties of textual reconstruction, the sequence of meal followed by singing is not in question, only certain other details of the setting.<sup>48</sup> There is, however, unclarity about whether Cleobius’ prophecy caused Paul to break the fast and hold an *impromptu* meal or, in the alternative, the prophecy was simply an opportune moment for Paul to begin a *planned* meal preceded by prophetic activities, that is, by “word.” The grammar of the Greek does not make this clear.<sup>49</sup> Hence, it cannot be established whether the church, in the narrator’s conception, followed a custom of breaking their fasts with a community meal following a time of prayer and prophecy.

The figure of Paul also dominates the *Acts of Peter*, a work composed in Greek sometime between the end of the second century and the close of the third.<sup>50</sup> Whatever the original date, there is the possibility of subsequent

47 *ActsPl* 12.2.

48 *ActsPl* 12. Only two manuscripts attest the story of this farewell gathering. They are the fourth-century Hamburg papyrus and the sixth-century Coptic Heidelberg papyrus. The latter includes the *Acts of Paul and Thecla*, 3 *Corinthians*, *The Martyrdom of Paul*, and various journeys of Paul. P. Heid. is very fragmentary in its coverage of the story of the farewell meal and the events leading up to it. It is not clear where Paul is or where he is going when he shares the meal. In fact, it is only the similarity of certain details—the prophecy of one Cleobius followed by a prophecy by a certain Myrta, and then a farewell meal with song—that leads the original editors, C. Schmidt and W. Schubart (see the following note), to reorder the pages of P. Heid. so that pp. 41-52 precede pp. 71ff. to produce a narrative correlation with P. Hamb. This and other re-orderings of the ms. pages are plausible but only hypothetical.

49 The meal is introduced by three genitive absolutes, and the main verb of the sentence is lost to a lacuna. Schmidt and Schubart read as follows: τοῦ [δὲ Παύ]λου κατατυγθέντος καὶ τὴν νηστίαν μετ’ αὐτοῦ ἀποθέ[ντος] προσφορὰς γενομένης ὑπὸ τοῦ Παύλου [..... α] ὑτόματος εἰς μέρη ἀν[.....]. See C. Schmidt, with the assistance of W. Schubart, Πράξεις Παύλου. *Acta Pauli nach dem Papyrus der Hamburger Staats- und Universitätsbibliothek* (Glückstadt 1936), 48. I have not included all the editors’ sublinear uncertainty dots for the last words of this sentence, where their reading suggests that the bread broke into pieces of its own accord.

50 The dating of the Greek *Acts of Peter* is problematic. An influential essay by C. Schmidt placed it in the late second century: “Zur Datierung der alten Petrusakten,” *ZNW* 29 (1930):

redaction as the writing passed through one or more editions. The earliest pieces of manuscript evidence for the *Acts* are fragments from the fourth century: P. Oxy. 849 in Greek and P. Berol. 8502.4 in Coptic. Codex Vercellensis 158, a Latin manuscript from the sixth century, contains most of *Acts of Peter* and appears to be a faithful translation of the Greek version reflected in P. Oxy. 849. Vercellensis is the primary basis for critical editions of the *Acts*.<sup>51</sup> Hence, we are probably dealing with a version that dates to at least as early as the fourth century.

At the beginning of *Acts of Peter*, Paul is in an undisclosed place in Rome. Having just been released from prison, he is preparing to head off to Spain. Describing a gathering right before his planned departure, the narrator states that “they had brought bread and water to Paul for the sacrifice so that he might pray and distribute it to them.”<sup>52</sup> The verb *optulerunt*, from *offero*, evokes the liturgical act of bringing the elements to the table to be blessed before distribution. Here people approach<sup>53</sup> to receive the Eucharist from Paul’s hand, which suggests a format like the morning distribution from the hand of the clergy, as documented for the beginning of the third century by Tertullian: “The sacrament of the Eucharist, which the Lord commanded (to be received) both at mealtime and by all, we now also take at gatherings before daylight from no hand but that of the presidents.”<sup>54</sup> After the distribution, Paul gives an exhortation. Thus, we have a table-word format. When is it supposed to have taken

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150-155. This view is followed, for example, by C. M. Thomas, *The Acts of Peter, Gospel Literature, and the Ancient Novel: Rewriting the Past* (Oxford 2003), 28-29. The foundations of Schmidt’s construction were called into question by studies published in the 1990s. See the review of the subject in M. C. Baldwin, *Whose Acts of Peter? Text and Historical Context of the Actus Vercellenses* (Tübingen 2006), 4-7 (summary of history of research on dating) and 302-314 (his own arguments that the earliest *Acts of Peter* is post-Decian, i.e., post-250). In view of the uncertainties, one has to allow a date range from the late-second-century, at the earliest, through the third century.

51 The evidence is described in Thomas, *The Acts of Peter, Gospel Literature, and the Ancient Novel*, 17-21; J. K. Elliott, *The Apocryphal New Testament* (New York 1993), 391.

52 Vercellensis 158, ch. 2, folio 328 recto in Lipsius, *Acta Apostolorum Apocrypha*, vol. 1, *Acta Apostolorum Apocrypha*, 46 (lines 12-13) (part of *Acts of Peter and Simon* in Lipsius’ reconstruction).

53 This picture of an approach is implied by the description of a woman who wished to receive the Eucharist from Paul, one Rufina, whom Paul rebukes: “As she was *approaching* (*accedenti*), Paul, filled with the Spirit, said to her...” Vercellensis 158, ch. 2, folio 328 recto in Lipsius, *Acta Apostolorum Apocrypha*, vol. 1, 46 (lines 15-16).

54 *Eucharistiae sacramentum, et in tempore uictus et omnibus mandatam a domino, etiam antelucanis coetibus nec de aliorum manu quam praesidentium sumimus. Cor. 3, 3* in *Quinti Septimi Florentis Tertulliani Opera*, part 2/21: *De Corona*, ed. E. Kroymann (Turnhout, 1954), 1043.

place? The gathering immediately precedes Paul's departure to Ostia to set sail for Spain. Since Ostia was some nineteen miles away, a several-hours walk is not something the author or readers would have imagined Paul doing at night following an evening Eucharist.<sup>55</sup> They would have pictured a Eucharist earlier in the day, probably in the morning before the start of the workday.

In a later story in *Acts of Peter*, the setting is a dining room and the story begins with Peter's arrival while the gospel is being read.<sup>56</sup> What follows seems to allude to a late-night meal for some widows but makes no mention of the church sharing a midnight meal in the dining room.<sup>57</sup> The original readers might have assumed that a meal had already taken place before Peter arrived, but since Peter has been fasting and the widows need refreshment, the implication could be that everyone has been fasting. These uncertainties prevent any inference about when a meal would have taken place had there been no fast.

Matters of sequence are more straightforward in the third-century *Acts of John*. A story in chapter 46 has the following word-table sequence: homily, prayer, Eucharist, laying-on-of-hands, miracle. In chapters 106-110, the order is similar: sermon, prayer, thanksgiving, breaking and sharing of bread. In neither account is the time of day mentioned, but in the second story, John goes out with some believers after the gathering and conducts his own funeral and burial outside the city (chapters 111-115).<sup>58</sup> The mention of these activities suggests that the author and his readers did not assume that every gathering with a sermon and the Eucharist was a supper.

Certain non-fictional passages from Christian writings of the first three centuries touch on aspects of the word or table but without referring to both in the same context: comments of Paul in 1 Corinthians, passages in various letters of Ignatius, the instructions for eucharistic prayer in the *Didache*, a letter of Pliny describing Christian practices in Bithynia, and a section of Irenaeus' *Against*

55 Assumptions about time of sailing are not relevant here since both author and readers knew that vessels sailing on the Mediterranean lifted anchor not only at dawn but at any time, including night (setting sail at night being explicitly praised in Heliodorus, *Aeth.* 4.16.10). See further J. Beresford, *The Ancient Sailing Season* (Leiden 2013), 205-207. As it happens, Paul's departure is delayed by bad weather.

56 *Acts Pet.* 20.

57 *Acts Pet.* 22 (the widows being encouraged to refresh themselves, reference to Peter's ongoing fast).

58 A Eucharist is also conducted in a tomb after John raises Drusiana from the dead. The time of day is not mentioned, and the event is not a regular church meeting but an impromptu ceremony (chapters 79-86).

*Heresies*.<sup>59</sup> Perhaps there is a clue in *Didache* 14 when it orders confession of sins before breaking of bread, which could hint at a word-table order. But lack of detail precludes any conclusion. In *De Anima*, Tertullian lists scripture-reading, psalmody, talk (or sermons), and prayers as elements of a Christian gathering, but he does not mention a meal/Eucharist in this enumeration, where the topic is utterances that prompt a charismatic woman's prophetic visions.<sup>60</sup>

One nonfictional meal-text not yet discussed that does specify an order is *Apostolic Tradition* 25/29C. In its present form, the chapter has the marks of fourth-century editing. It is probably a rewriting of an earlier set of instructions for a eucharistic supper, which the final editor has expressly classified as non-eucharistic.<sup>61</sup> The Latin translation of the Greek original prescribes the following sequence: a greeting after a lamp is brought in, a short word of thanksgiving by those present, a longer thanksgiving by the bishop, psalms by children and virgins, then blessings of the food and drink for the meal. Specifics aside, the basic word-table sequence was probably also the structure of the eucharistic supper prescribed by the earlier version.

### 3 Conclusion

Early Christian literature shows both the word-table and the table-word sequence. One nonfictional writing, Justin's *First Apology*, shows that in the mid-second century, the word-table sequence was observed by at least some churches in the city of Rome and in the countryside.<sup>62</sup> Time of day is not

59 In 1 Corinthians 10-14, Paul takes up the activities of church meetings topically without implying their order. Ignatius speaks of the Eucharist in a number of places but never situates it in a sequence of activities. *Didache* 9-10 gives instructions for eucharistic prayer but does not describe the setting or any sequence of events. Pliny refers to Christians in Bithynia gathering in the morning for recitation of a *carmen* to Christ and a moral oath, then reconvening later in the day for a meal; he says nothing about the meal except that it consisted of ordinary food (*Ep.* 10.96). Irenaeus discusses the Eucharist in speaking about offerings but makes no mention of its place in an order of liturgical activities (*Adv. haer.* 4.17.1-5.2.3).

60 Tertullian, *An.* 9.4.

61 *Ap. Trad.* 29C.16; cf. 29C.6.

62 Justin probably means that multiple churches of Rome and its wider environs came together in their own regular meeting-places to celebrate in the way he describes. On his use of the expression ἐπὶ τῷ αὐτῷ in *1 Apol.* 67.3, see Bradshaw, *Eucharistic Origins*, 67 (summarizing the lexical and logistical arguments against taking the expression to mean a single meeting in one-and-the-same locale for all the Christians in city and countryside whom Justin had in mind).



mentioned. Another nonfictional writing, Tertullian's *Apology*, implies a word/table-word order: *disciplina* during the meal, then song during the symposion. The community supper of the *Vorlage* of *Apostolic Tradition* 25/29C probably had a word-table format, perhaps the supper described in 28.4, too. Two fictional writings of the mid-to-late-third century reflect word-table and table-word orders, respectively—*Acts of John* and *Acts of Peter*. *Acts of Peter* depicts at least one eucharistic gathering, a table-word service that was not a supper. *Acts of John* depicts meetings that follow a word-table order, and in the one account that gives a clue about time of day the gathering does not appear to be a supper. It is not clear to what extent the meal stories in the apocryphal acts reflect assumptions about apostolic practice. In any case, the accounts do not depend on actual historical information and probably reflect liturgical customs familiar to the authors or, if the latter used sources, to earlier storytellers.

Overall the evidence suggests that (1) an evening meal was the primary church gathering in the early period, eventually being replaced by a morning service as the main eucharistic meeting; and (2) a predominantly table-word pattern was at some point eclipsed by a predominantly word-table sequence. One need not assume that the churches that adopted a word-table pattern all did so for the same reason or in the same circumstances or at the same moment in history. But it seems reasonable to infer that in the first few centuries, the word-table format was established in some places where the church's main eucharistic meeting was still an evening supper.

This makes perfect sense when one considers certain practical interests that must have arisen as the word activities became more formalized. Instruction and exhortation were part of church gatherings from the beginning. To whatever extent these practices were “democratic” or “charismatic” or “conversational” in the early period, by the late-first or early-second century, elders had assumed instructional and exhortative roles. Before long, they were delivering monologues. Language in 1 Tim 4:13 and 5:17 suggests this formalization, and the author of 2 Clement, writing in the mid-second century, implies that elders in his day gave instructional talks at church meetings (17.3). In fact, 2 Clement may be such a talk or at least resemble one. Moreover, 1 Tim 4:13 suggests that regular readings of sacred writings were also typical in second- and third-generation churches of the Pauline mission, at least from the beginning of the second century. The two things—scripture readings and homilies—are paired in Justin's mid-second-century apology. There is no need to assume that these arrangements were everywhere the same or that churches developed them in lockstep. But once readings and sermons had become established in a given church, its leaders must have considered whether it might not be wise to put

such things ahead of the after-dinner drinking, both to ensure better alertness during the instructional time and to discourage those who might have come just for the food from leaving before the teaching.<sup>63</sup>

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63 An earlier version of this article was presented as a paper to the Problems in the Early History of Liturgy Seminar of the North American Academy of Liturgy. This entailed no publication of the paper.