

WOMEN AND EARLY CHRISTIAN MEALS AND ASSOCIATIONS

Meals and commensality have become the main focus in the study of the origins of the Christian community. Like other ancient clubs and religions, Christians met regularly for meals. In the earliest times, these were complete meals with the standard pattern of the formal meal, the *deipnon*, followed by the drinking portion of the banquet, the *symposion*. The drinking portion—though regularly the occasion for heavy drinking, frivolity, entertainment, games, dramas, and sexual goings on—was in many religious and philosophical groups the occasion for philosophical discourse, liturgy, and worship. This is no doubt the case with Christian groups, though as 1 Corinthians attests, Christian banquets could also get out of hand and need to be reined in. Rules for clubs often included fines for misbehavior at community gatherings due to the erotic and frivolous nature of the symposium itself, going

back to ancient Greek times. Literary and pictorial representations of the banquet attest to the erotic and meretricious overtones that any such gathering might entail. Due to the reputation of the banquet as a location for sexual and entertainment purposes, the legitimacy of the presence of women was disputed and negotiated from 200 BCE to 300 CE. Women, if present, were often assumed to be prostitutes of some sort, as respectable women in ancient times were excluded from such banquets, especially in the Greek East. However, social customs were undergoing change from 200 BCE to 300 CE, and respectable women began to attend formal banquets, with or without their husbands, and even took the reclining position rather than the ancient seated posture depicted in most funerary representations of the banquet scene. Still, if present and reclining, such women could be assumed to have a sexual connection to the men they reclined with, and for this reason, in many cases, women reclined separately, on separate couches or in separate banquet rooms. Women were often present for family meals and gatherings, such as weddings and funerals, as well as religious festivities, but their presence and position was a matter of great debate and negotiation—seated or reclining, separate, or next to men and husbands on the banquet couch. Evidence now suggests that as early as 300 BCE respectable married women could be expected to recline with their husbands for banquets, though literature still attests to the backlash against this practice, which was seen as threatening to the ideals of women’s proper roles in the public and private spheres.¹

The New Testament itself shows differing opinions on the place and role of women in meals scenes. Mark shows little concern for the presence of women in the meal scenes in his Gospel. Women appear as members of the group of disciples, and a female triumvirate, Mary, Mary, and Salome, mirrors the male triumvirate of Peter, James, and John. Women appear at meals as table servants and do “table service” for the community, especially Jesus. In Mark’s version of the anointing of Jesus at a meal by an unnamed women, the disciples do not object to her presence because of its impropriety but because of the high cost of her ointment, which could better be used and sold to give help to the poor. Likewise, Jesus does not reject the Syro-Phoenician woman, who requests “crumbs” under the table, because she fits a stereotype of a “promiscuous” woman but because she is a Gentile. Jesus was known for eating and drinking with “tax collectors and sinners,”

which included women, but Mark does not emphasize the presence of women at these meals. As “table servants,” the women exemplify Markan discipleship. Thus, in Mark, the male disciples are encouraged to take on the role of lower-class women and slaves.

Mark is no liberal, however, as it is unlikely that Mark depicts women as “leaders,” as many have suggested. Further, women are never depicted as openly reclining or eating with men in Mark’s Gospel. Women are rarely portrayed as speaking in public, the hemorrhaging woman being the one exception. All other scenes with women are set in private homes, such as the scene with Peter’s mother-in-law, the story with the Syro-Phoenician woman, and the anointing story. When Jesus eats and drinks with “tax collectors and sinners,” it is in a private home. And although we can assume women were present for such scenes, Mark does not comment on it. The only woman clearly depicted as a meretricious “courtesan” is the stepdaughter of Herod, who dances like a prostitute for Herod’s birthday party and requests the head of John the Baptist as a birthday boon. All other women around Jesus are in contrast to her. They are present for meals, but respectable.

Luke also shows ample presence of women in his literary portrayals of meals, both in the Gospel and in the book of Acts, which portrays the early Hellenistic mission. Like Mark, Luke has Jesus accept “tax collectors and sinners,” but in Luke this category clearly includes women. This can be seen in the Lukan version of the anointing story, where Jesus is anointed by a “woman known in the city as a sinner,” whom Luke probably intended to be a prostitute of some kind. Still, this woman “sinner” does not join Jesus at the table, nor are women explicitly shown as reclining with men for meals. Nor is the anointing woman called a *pornē*. If Q had this term for this tradition, Luke omits it. As part of a larger omission, Luke also omits entirely the story of Herod’s birthday banquet and dancing courtesan and the story of the Syro-Phoenician woman. He probably keeps the tradition that Jesus dined with “tax collectors and sinners” because of its antiquity—it is in his sources, both Mark and Q.

Luke is also careful to protect the reputation of the women most often around Jesus, lest their reputations be besmirched. Even respectably married women follow Jesus and do so out of gratitude for their healings. These women are the major philanthropists of the groups and support Jesus and his disciples financially. They are respectable

patronesses. In a special Lukan passage, Mary and Martha join Jesus for a meal, but it is the private and old-fashioned Mary, who sits silently at Jesus' feet, who is set apart for Jesus' praise, not the active, vocal Martha who is doing *diakonia*, what the men in ministry are described as doing in Acts. Luke thus portrays a conservative meal posture for Mary and preserves a private role for the women in his community.

It is Matthew who varies from this pattern, which is surprising, since Matthew's Gospel is usually set apart as the most conservative and therefore "Jewish" of the Gospels—Judaism often being cast as more patriarchal during this historical period. Only Matthew adds women and children to his miraculous feeding narratives, which become eucharistic family feasts where all attend. The feast parable depicts the messianic feast as a wedding, which women family members would have attended. In his version of Herod's birthday party, Matthew casts blame on Herod, not the women, for the death of John the Baptist. The story of the Canaanite woman is rendered more naturally outdoors, and she is favored for her "great faith." Only in Matthew are the women at the end of the Gospel story examples of true discipleship. The women do not flee the tomb, but report what they have seen, unlike the scene in Mark.

Furthermore, only Matthew is unafraid of connecting women in his narratives with meretricious women. Jesus' group is joined by "tax collectors and courtesans"—clearly women of ill repute. Plus, he puts women with bad reputations right up front in his genealogy. Like Mary, who was accused of adultery, Jesus' lineage included women who were known for bad sexual behavior. Matthew's portrayal of women is more class inclusive and shows less concern for traditional Greco-Roman ideals of women's proper behavior at meals.²

In John, there are six major meals where Jesus is present, several of which feature both respectable and unrespectable women prominently. In the first meal, the wedding at Cana, Jesus miraculously provides wine at the request of his mother. This is a messianic meal, being a wedding, and women, especially Jesus' mother, are present. John makes no comment on the presence of women for this meal, and their respectability is assumed. The second scene in which food figures is the story of the Samaritan woman, who offers Jesus water while his disciples go to buy him some food. Mealtimes are the setting. The water Jesus provides, however, is superior to the woman's, as it is "living

water” that brings “eternal life.” The woman, though functioning as an evangelist who brings her community to belief in Jesus, is a woman of ill repute, having had several husbands and is living with one who is not her husband. John makes no comment on this but uses her as a type of evangelist. In the final meal scene that features women, Jesus is served at a family meal with Mary, Martha, and the risen Lazarus. Martha serves the meal, and Mary anoints Jesus with ointment. The propriety of the women is in no way questioned in this scene, even though the banquet scene is fraught with erotic overtones. As in Mark, it is the cost of the ointment that is objectionable, not the propriety of Mary’s action.³ Thus, John seems comfortable with women in his meal scenes, though in no place does he depict women reclining with men for meals.

Community meals figure also in the Pauline churches. There are two major passages showing that Paul’s churches met regularly for meals, the incident at Antioch recorded in Gal 2:11-14 and the material from 1 Cor 11:20-22, 33-34a. The earliest description of a meal is described in the letter to the Galatians. The traditions practiced there seem to predate Paul. Paul’s description suggests that similar meals were being held at Jerusalem. The problem Paul is dealing with is Jewish dietary restrictions. Apparently, the group at Antioch was holding meals where both Jews and Gentiles were present, but Peter had stopped eating in these corporate meals after some emissaries from Jerusalem approached him and told him not to join the Gentiles for meals. The concern was for the foodstuffs being eaten, not the people themselves. There were various foods that Jews were not to eat, including pork, shellfish, and meat, that had not been butchered according to Levitical requirements. Paul does not want to have “works of the law,” namely, Sabbath observance, dietary restrictions, and circumcision, serve as boundary markers in the community but wants all, Jews and Gentiles alike, to come to the table freely.⁴ These restrictions may have had some effect upon women in the community, although they were not circumcised. Jewish Christian women would have been essential in preparing kosher food for the community and would have had relevant roles in preparing for Sabbath and lighting Sabbath candles.

The second section of Paul that deals with meal practice in the early Pauline churches is found in 1 Corinthians 8 and 10. These

chapters deal with the issue of idol meat being consumed in the community and the controversy over this practice. The terminology Paul uses reflects again Jewish sensibilities. He speaks of *eidōlothyton*, “meat sacrificed to idols.” A Gentile would be unlikely to have concern for idol meat in this way. Paul is concerned about “the weak,” who now refuse this practice and the “strong,” who still eat the meat. The most common interpretation is that the “weak” were lower-class members of the community who were unaccustomed to eating meat except on feast days, and the “strong,” upper-class members who could afford to eat meat regularly.⁵ The controversy is probably over the meals of the community and the appropriateness of meat being served. Paul wants the “strong” to abstain out of conscience for the “weak.”⁶ A similar problem seems to have occurred at Rome. In Rom 14:1—15:13, Paul addresses a situation that seems similar to that of 1 Corinthians 8. The issue is more clearly that of Jewish dietary laws and the table fellowship of the Roman community. Some have chosen vegetarianism. Paul again encourages those who are “strong”: “it is good not to eat meat or drink wine or do anything that makes your brother or sister stumble” (Rom 14:21).⁷ Again, women would have played a role in preparing these meals for the community, so the admonitions of Paul speak directly to their concerns and activities.

In 1 Corinthians, Paul indicates that meals were a common part of community gatherings. He writes, “when you come together as a church” (1 Cor 11:17-18) and “when you come together to eat” (1 Cor 11:20-21, 33), both of which seem to be synonymous for community gatherings. We can assume that the Corinthian church met regularly together for meals and probably worshiped at table.⁸ This gathering is called “the Lord’s Supper,” and Paul says that this tradition, in which a memorial meal is given that reflects the last meal of Jesus, “the Lord,” has been passed on to him (1 Cor 11:23-25). This suggests that this meal is done in all the communities of which he is aware. This meal is clearly also a full banquet and shares elements with the meals described in Galatia, Antioch, and possibly Jerusalem.⁹ These meals were probably held in homes of prominent members of the church (patrons). Such a house would have to have been large enough to have a substantial dining room or rooms, or a courtyard that could hold many people. As Paul describes these meals, they are full-course meals with a *deipnon*, the dinner course, followed by the *symposion*, which would have been

for Christians a time of worship and reading of Scriptures rather than the entertainments of more frivolous events.¹⁰ However, Paul complains that equality is not being practiced—some eat their fill while others go away hungry. This seems to have been a sort of “potluck,” but those who brought lots of food were not sharing it.¹¹ The worship of the community was also at the table. Women were obviously present for these times of worship according to 1 Corinthians. Paul mentions women prophets in 1 Corinthians 11 and allows them to use this “highest gift,” though he prefers that they be properly clothed by wearing a veil while prophesying. Some concern for women’s presence is also found in 1 Cor 14:35–38, where Paul wants women to be silent and ask their husbands questions at home. This probably reflects the common practice of separate seating for women and men. Paul would rather not have women and men shouting back and forth during what seems to be an already disorderly meeting. The New Testament itself thus reflects that early Christians met together for meals and that the presence of women was assumed, though being negotiated as it was throughout the Hellenistic world in which women’s roles at table were undergoing flux and change.

Voluntary Associations: Cultic and Community Contexts

Cutting edge research has now identified the organization of the Greco-Roman voluntary associations as the best analogue for understanding the organization of early Christian groups. Although Meeks and others have made objections to this comparison,¹² recent studies have affirmed the comparison of early Christian communities and Greco-Roman voluntary associations.¹³ Voluntary associations included various groups that met for professional and religious reasons, although even in professional associations there was always a cult aspect of some kind, as meetings were held in the honor of a patron god or deity. Shopkeepers, weavers, coppersmiths, bakers, purple sellers, and the like gathered together for primarily social purposes, as did members of various mystery cults and

other religious sects. Groups provided for conviviality, in the celebration of monthly feasts, as well as providing for the burial and burial feasts for members. Members paid dues to support the activities of the group. Although one could be a member of more than one group, finances for those who joined such groups, usually the lower classes, often precluded membership in more than one association at a time. Further, group identity and cohesion made members somewhat exclusive in their preference of their own associative organization.

There are many reasons why voluntary associations are now used as the primary analogue for understanding early Christian group formation. First, the group terminology for leadership and organizational roles is similarly diverse, and the title *ekklēsia* is found for associations as well as for early Christian groups. This is not the only designation for an association, however, as groups could use a number of various names. Names might come from their common association, such as *Aigyptioi*, *Salaminioi*, *Molpoi*, *Porphyobaphon*, or from their patron deity, such as *Dionysistai*, *Herakleistai*, or *Asklepiastoi*. *Thiasos* is a common name for an association in Macedonia; in Latin *collegium* is found. We also find the use of *synētheia*, as well as *symposia*. Often, adherents named their own associations. *Mystai* is the most common, found six different times in Macedonia, four used for groups worshiping Dionysius. Other terms found are *Maenads* for a group of women worshipers of Dionysius, *Consacrani*, *Synthiasitai*, *Theskeutai*, and *Suetheis*. This diversity of group designations suggests that there was no single designation for an individual voluntary association. This brings us to the use of *ekklēsia*.

The use of *ekklēsia* is widely attested within the New Testament as a designation of Christian groups. It is found in Acts, Matthew (Matt. 16:18; 18:17), and Paul (Rom 16:16; 1 Cor 7:17; 11:16; 16:19; 2 Cor 8:1; 11:28; Gal 1:22 in the plural; 1 Cor 10:32; 15:9; Gal 1:13; Phil 3:6 for the singular universal church; Rom 16:1, 5; 1 Cor 1:2; 11:18; Phil 4:15; 1 Thess 1:1 for the local community). Scholars often use the LXX to explain this usage, in that *ekklēsia* is used over one hundred times to translate the Hebrew *qhl*, “assembly.” This underscores the Jewish background of early Christian groups. However, those same scholars do not explain why early Christian groups did not choose the more common Jewish term *synagogē*. Actually, *synagogue* occurs more frequently in the LXX as a translation of *qhl*. Thus, *synagogue* would

have been the more likely choice if Christian groups were invoking their Jewish background by their choice of self-designation.

However, *ekklēsia* is found as a designation for voluntary associations. It is not found frequently, but it is one of the many self designations of associations derived from civic terminology. Thus, Ascough is no doubt correct when he claims that for urban-based Christian communities the term *ekklēsia* would have been understood as the designation of a voluntary association, particularly by Greco-Roman outsiders.¹⁴

Other terminology is common to Christian communities and associations. In Paul, the common name for members of a community is *adelphoi*. This occurs often as a fictive kinship term for Pauline communities. It is noteworthy that this fictive kinship term also occurs in associations for members. Ascough cites examples from mid-first-century Rough Cilicia, third-century-BCE Manshiyeh, and for members of a Serapeum at Memphis. In Latin inscriptions, Ascough also cites the use of the term *fratres*.¹⁵ Further, leadership language is also common between voluntary associations and Christian communities, particularly in the use of *episkopos* and *diakonos*. These are the titles for leaders that Paul uses in Phil 1:1. The letter itself makes no clear identification of the actual duties of those so titled. Again, scholars usually cite the LXX as the background for these terms. The verb *episkopein* is a common LXX translation for *bqr* and *pqr*. The noun *episkopos* occurs in the LXX as a term for “overseer” or “inspector.” Or they invoke the use of *mbqr* in the Damascus Document of the Dead Sea Scrolls, which means “shepherding of the flock and returning the lost” (CD 13.7-9). Again, these scholars are invoking Jewish sources to explain New Testament usage. However, the Philippians would not have found such backgrounds in their predominantly non-Jewish environment, as the Philippian church was predominantly Gentile. Rather, it is the classical use of *episkopos* that is far more likely to be the source of the Christian use of the term. In general, *episkopos* meant “overseer” and was used for supervisory officers in the state, in societies, and in other Greco-Roman groups. The title usually designated one with financial responsibility. Again, it is found for financial officers in associations. Ascough cites inscriptions from Thera, Bostra, Kanata, Mykonos, Thrace, and Delos. Though the use of the title is clear, Ascough says the function of these officers is ambiguous.¹⁶ These various officials could have had different functions in different groups.

Again, with the case of the title *diakonos*, scholars have attempted to find a Jewish background for its occurrence in the New Testament. These attempts have failed in light of the common usage of *diakonos* in guilds and associations for those who assist in the cult of the group.¹⁷ Ascough cites numerous inscriptions using this term for sacred officers in various club organizations. It is also found in private associations, where both men and women can hold the title. This usage in the associations is the more obvious choice for the background of the term in Christian communities than any kind of Jewish usage, for which evidence is at best negligible. The Philippians would have been far more likely to have adopted the language found in the many voluntary associations in their surrounding city community and the larger Greco-Roman world. Even though these titles are not used across the board, there is enough evidence that they did occur in voluntary associations to account for their usage in Philippians, in that there is generally no clear consistency in official titles for voluntary associations to begin with.¹⁸ Again, the nature of these offices and what such officials' functions were remains unclear.¹⁹ Other titles found in the associations do not occur in the New Testament, such as "priest/priestess" or "president" and "treasurer." Ascough says it is unclear that there is an interest in avoiding such titles (Matt 23:6-12) or that perhaps such titles only come into use at a later date for Christians (1 Pet 2:9).

Christian communities also mirror the associations in other ways. One clear example is the social makeup of these groups and their maintenance of both a hierarchical leadership structure and an egalitarian membership base. Both had patrons and leaders based on hierarchical models, and both had membership that came from a wide social stratification and network, including men and women, slaves and free. Further, both Christian groups like Corinth and voluntary associations had similar problems with wealthier members taking one another to court over matters best settled within the individual community (1 Cor 6 1-11).²⁰ It is also the case, however, that associations could be gender exclusive, particularly professional guilds, which were often made up of members from trades that were numbered by members of a particular sex.²¹ Textile work, for example, was dominated by women; other professions, such as metal work, by men. Religious groups were more likely to have membership of both men and women. The crux of this debate is clear. Many scholars prefer to find "Jewish"

backgrounds (read inspired) for Christian usage, but the evidence is much better explained on the basis of Hellenistic sources, a point well made in the past by Jonathan Z. Smith.²²

It is also the case that members of Christian groups were not exclusive in their membership, as is the case with those who joined other associations. It was possible to be a member of more than one group. “Membership in one association did not preclude membership in another.”²³ Ascough cites many instances where association members had dual memberships. This occurred to the point that officials saw it as a problem and enacted laws to preclude membership in more than one guild. Enforcement of these laws, however, did not occur.²⁴ Meeks and others usually argue that membership in Christian and Jewish groups precluded allegiance to any other group, thus differentiating them from Greco-Roman associations.²⁵ However, there was no true monolithic Christianity or Judaism during these early centuries, but rather great diversity among Christian and Jewish groups. Again, separating Jews and Christians from their “pagan” environment is the interest of those scholars making such claims. Rather, the New Testament evidence itself suggests that Christians did indeed participate in other cultic associations, and this was particularly a problem at Corinth. In 1 Cor 8–10 Paul deals with the “strong,” who are attending temple sacrifices and banquets (1 Cor 8:10—10:14). Paul does not disallow the practice but seems to affirm it. Someone like Erastus in Corinth, being the city treasurer, would most certainly have attended other civic functions. Thus, it seems that Christian groups did not require exclusive participation.²⁶ Jews also could affiliate with guilds of their individual professions. Jews were shippers and merchants and artisans, and no doubt went to groups and clubs associated with these lines of work.²⁷ In fact, Philo affirms this practice by opposing the participation of Jews in clubs and guilds in Alexandria:

There exist in the city associations (*thiasoi*) with numerous members, and there is nothing healthy in their fellowship (*koinōnia*), which is based on unixed wine, drunkenness, feasts, and the unbridled conduct which results from these.²⁸

Obviously, Philo is opposing the practice of actual Jews in Alexandria who attended such functions. Harland notes the connection of Jews

with associations in numerous locales, including Miletus, Smyrna, Sardis, Ephesus, Alexandria, and Hierapolis.²⁹ Thus, Jews as well as Christians participated in these so-called pagan groups. Although primary allegiance was probably due to the costs incurred by membership, Jews and Christians did participate in the civic life of the city, including religious and professional clubs.³⁰

Meeks also argues that Jewish and Christian groups differed from Greco-Roman associations by having a moral focus. Clubs and guilds, he argues, did not.³¹ However, there is evidence for the moral interest and regulations for certain Greco-Roman clubs. Moral regulations came from dreams from the gods and include, even rules against adultery on the part of members. The club imposed penalties for infractions.³² Women, of course, faced harsher penalties for marital infractions.³³ Inscriptions also show an interest in the purity and impurity of club members, both for men after sexual intercourse and for women following menstruation or abortion or miscarriage. Contact with a corpse also required purification before participation in the cultic activities of the group.³⁴ The cult of Mithras also had moral codes, which were required for elevation in the higher ranks of the group.³⁵ Although not all associations had such an interest in morality, it is not true that Jewish and Christian groups' interest in morality separated them from other Greco-Roman groups. The immorality of Greco-Roman groups is exaggerated and is part and parcel to common slander of groups involved in communal meals, which often included both men and women.³⁶

Another way certain scholars differentiate Jewish and Christian groups from their so-called pagan environment is to point out the supposed absence of cultic activities in Jewish and Christian groups. This again can be disclaimed. Christian gatherings did include some rituals, such as baptism and the eucharist. Both have a cultic function.³⁷ Further, the language of mystery and purification does occur in some New Testament texts (Rom 16:25; 1 Cor 2:1; 4:1; 15:51; Phil 2:17; 4:12). And, of course, prayers, hymns, teachings, and communal meals were all a part of Jewish and Christian gatherings.³⁸

For our purposes, the most important way in which Christian and Jewish groups were similar to voluntary associations was in their provision of burials of members and a burial feast. Such activities were provided for out of the dues the members paid. Going without a proper

burial was horrifying in antiquity, and many poorer members of society joined such groups precisely to make sure their burials would be properly attended to. Although the purpose of all associations was primarily social, the provision of proper burials and burial services was a large part of what made membership in such groups so attractive. Both the burial proper and reception with members present were part of the funerary activities of the group. Associations also set up epitaphs for deceased members to commemorate their lives. Again, Christians also provided these services for their members.³⁹

Ensuring such burials would have been of more importance to poorer members of these clubs, who would have had fewer means to ensure their proper burial rites. Regulations of some associations gave extensive attention to issues relating to the proper burial of members precisely for this purpose.⁴⁰ Wreaths were often stipulated to be provided for graves on death anniversaries as well.⁴¹ Associations of all sorts provided for the upkeep of members' graves, including Jews, silversmiths, physicians, and hemp workers in Ephesus alone.⁴² Christians, too, gathered on death anniversaries of members, and these gatherings were closely related to the funerary function of Christian groups.⁴³ Thus, according to Harland, "These funerary functions were an integral part of the varied social and religious purposes of associations that helped to provide members with a sense of belonging and community."⁴⁴

Thus, we can see that the intersection of meals, associations, and funerary activities in the Greco-Roman world provides the best context for understanding Christian origins. Such groups were often inclusive of men and women, provided for communal meals, which included men and women, and provided funerary rituals and banquets for the deceased of the community. These funerary rituals are what created community, by solidifying the relationship between the living members of the community and by connecting them with the deceased of the community. There is connection, there is presence, both of the living and the dead. We will see that it is women who were the primary actors in these funerary rituals and meals, which were so important to the communal lives of the earliest Christian groups, and therefore it was the women who generated the central elements that created the Christian community: memorial meals for the dead Jesus, the passion narrative, which memorialized Jesus' death

in narrative form, and the notion that the dead Jesus was “raised and appeared” in the midst of the community in their memorial meals and rituals through the lament of ancient Christian women.

*Funerary Meals as the Context for Women’s Participation
in the Process of Christian Origins*

Women’s participation in funerary feasts for the dead goes back very early, to at least 200 BCE.⁴⁵ At Greek funerary feasts, food would be offered at the tomb for the deceased, including milk, honey, water, wine, celery, and dried fruits. The living would probably not have eaten the food at this point, for fear of passing “under the influence of the spirit world.”⁴⁶ The ritual meal shared by the living took place at the deceased’s home immediately following the funeral, the *perideipnon*, on the third day after death.⁴⁷ Mourners said eulogies, sang laments, and remembered stories about the life of the dead person, who was thought to be present for this meal. The purpose of the meal was for the family and friends to form a “united group in the aftermath of their loss.”⁴⁸ Further offerings were made at the tomb on the third, ninth, and thirtieth days following death, and after one year. The emphasis was on propitiating the spirit of the deceased. Later writers mention a meal known as the *kathedra*, which friends and relatives shared, marking the end of the mourning period.⁴⁹ Romans also practiced an elaborate ritual series of meals and celebrations surrounding the time of mourning, and art and iconography attest to this practice of the *Totenmahl*—the “meal of the dead.”⁵⁰ The living honored the dead by dining with them, thus confronting the transitory nature of life. Funeral banquets were held first on the day of burial, then on the ninth day after the funeral. The major foodstuffs appear to have been bread and fish. Some writers recommend modest gifts for the dead, but neglecting these rites would cause disaster and the release of malicious spirits of the dead. Other festivals for the dead were held by Romans—there was an annual festival set aside for honoring ancestors,

on their birthday (*dies natalis*) and on a special festival day (*parentalia*), which was between February 13–21. On these days marriages were prohibited and the hearth was not lit. Another festival that was known for commemorating the dead was the *dies rosationis* or *rosalia*, in May or June, when family members brought roses to the graves of their loved ones.⁵¹ Christians continued these traditional funerary practices, “probably because they did not view giving honors to their dead relations as having anything to do with a pagan god, religion or idols.”⁵² Church officials, however, objected to these practices and encouraged mourners to observe mourning rites by giving alms to the church or giving eucharistic offerings rather than by sharing food at the tomb.⁵³ Paintings of banquet scenes found on the walls of Christian catacombs or carvings on Christian sarcophagi give ample attestation to the continuation of these Christian family funerary feasts, and we can assume that such celebrations were practiced in earlier centuries. Though these representations are often thought to be pictures of Christian *agapē* feasts, or the eucharist, they are probably scenes of funerary banquets, with offerings of bread and fish. Inscriptions give additional evidence for the continuation of the funerary feasts among Christians, which describe the laying out of food and drink, reciting of eulogies and stories of the deceased, which went long into the night.⁵⁴ The spirit of these banquets was optimistic and fun, with pictures of family members holding up their glasses for refills of wine.⁵⁵ Christians thus honored their “ordinary” dead but also extended such practices to include the honoring of dead clergy, and eventually martyrs.⁵⁶ The bawdiness of these repasts became a problem for church officials, who began to instruct Christians to have calm and charitable funeral banquets.⁵⁷ There was definitely a move to squelch Christians’ riotous banquets at cemeteries.⁵⁸ By the time of Augustine, it was expected that funerals for the ordinary dead would come to an end, and that family members would “voluntarily replace the feasts with almsgiving to the poor and commemorate their ‘dear ones’ inside the church, rather than at the tomb.” Augustine clearly wanted to get the funerary banqueting out of the cemeteries and into the quiet solitude of the church.⁵⁹ That this was a concern as late as the time of Augustine in the fifth century shows the long history of Christians feasting at the tombs of their dead. Jensen suggests that even the eucharist “never really ceased to be

a certain kind of funeral meal—a meal at which the once dead host is now living and present.” These practices were not easily eradicated.⁶⁰

We will see upon further exploration of the evidence that women figured most prominently at these all-too-common funerary feasts and rituals, and had the major liturgical roles in the lamentation of the dead loved one, which contributed the telling of the tale of the death of the loved one. Women were also the ones who enacted the majority of funerary rituals all over the Mediterranean world. These funerary rituals were often held in corporate groups and associations, and Christians were no different from their pagan neighbors in their celebrations of mourning throughout the year and on special holidays on which the dead were honored and remembered. The context of the Christian associations, with their provision of funerary rituals for members of the group, is thus the best location for finding the source of early Christian traditions such as the eucharist, the passion story, and the idea of the “raised and appeared” Jesus, who was thought to be present for these celebrations, as the “ordinary” dead were thought to be present at theirs.⁶¹