

# INTRODUCTION

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Ancient meals have become the center of study for Christian origins. This book looks at women and their roles in funerary meals and rituals as the best context for solving many vexing problems of Christian origins. We will see that the creative work of ordinary women and ordinary people fueled the origins of the Christian community. For it is funerary meals that create community, both continuity with the living and the deceased—in this case, the dead Jesus. Jesus became the special dead whose presence was celebrated in memorial meals served and organized by women. We will also see that women’s ritual laments give us the oral core of what became the passion narrative as well as the belief that Jesus was “raised and appeared” within the Christian community.

Chapter 1 reviews the place of women in meals and New Testament texts, including the four Gospels and Paul. The New Testament betrays controversy over the place and roles of women in meal situations and public banquets. This is because women's roles were undergoing flux and change from 300 BCE to 200 CE, and their position and posture at meals was being negotiated: separate from men or together with men, seated or reclining. The behavior of women at banquets can be used to chart an ongoing social innovation for women's roles generally, from the late Hellenistic era until the mid-third century CE. As one of the most conservative aspects of a culture, change in meal etiquette can be used to chart social progress for women during these centuries.

A further avenue of cutting edge research that can be used to reconstruct the practices of the earliest Christian groups is the correspondence between early Christian communities and Greco-Roman associations. Much leadership and community terminology of Christian groups can be shown to reflect the organizational language of early Christian groups, which would have been perceived as local associations by their Greco-Roman neighbors. Further, associations, like earliest Christian groups, were class- and gender-inclusive and provided for the funeral and funerary meals of their members. Funerary meals are thus the best social and ritual location to chart the creative influence of women in shaping New Testament traditions about the passion, Gospel meal stories, and the beginnings of resurrection beliefs.

Women can be shown to be the central participants in ancient funerals and funerary meals, the collection of rituals referred to as the "cult of the dead" in Greek, Roman, and Jewish practice. Women lamented the dead, composing elaborate narratives about the life and cause of death of the deceased, prepared and served funerary meals, and made offerings to the dead at tombs. Funerary rites were regularly held on the third day after death, the ninth day after death, the thirtieth day after death, and then annually throughout the ancient Mediterranean world. The emphasis in these rites was on communing with and propitiating the spirit of the deceased, who was thought to be present in the memorial meals and whose presence was invoked by the lament of the women. At such times, stories of the deceased were told, laments and songs were sung, and toasts were made to the dearly departed. Not surprisingly, women also feature prominently in

the lamenting of heroes and heroines and in the various mystery religions. Due to their common association with the cult of the dead and funeral rites proper, women are also featured prominently in noble death scenes, such as those of Socrates, Hercules, and Moses. This evidence is fleshed out in chapter 2.

Chapter 3 brings us to the New Testament texts proper and the earliest source for Christian ritual and practice, the *Didache*. This chapter charts a trajectory from the meal practices of the Jesus movement around Jesus to the eventual recitations of the Lord's Supper in Mark and Paul that have the "words of institution." The Jesus movement itself did not practice meals of Jesus' presence, but celebrated inclusivity and class equality at their meals. Men and women, free and slave, gathered for these meals of the kingdom of God, instituted by Jesus during his lifetime. Both the Q community and the Thomas community continued these celebratory meals of the kingdom of God (*basileia*). Jesus himself rejected excessive attention to the dead at funerals by declaring, "Let the dead bury their own dead!" and by saying, "Become passersby," which meant bypassing graveyards and tombs and ignoring the epitaphs of the dead.

In contrast to the Jesus movement which did not practice meals that celebrated Jesus' presence, the *Didache* contains two separate meal rituals that do celebrate the presence of Jesus. The earliest proclaims, "Maranatha"—"Our Lord, come!" (to the meal: Did. 10:6). The second is called a eucharist but does not contain the words of institution. Finally, this chapter overviews the early oral tradition behind the two recitations of the last supper accounts in Mark and Paul, which have Jesus (a man) instituting this memorial meal for the dead Jesus, not women.

Chapter 4 gives attention to the Gospel miracle stories in which the themes of funerals, women and meals intersect, including the miraculous feedings in Matthew, the story of the Syro-Phoenician woman, and the anointing story in all four Gospels. The chapter ends with further attention to the last supper narratives in Mark and Paul. The miracle stories suggest the practices of oral storytelling about Jesus, miracles, funerals, and meals by women, whereas the last supper narratives attribute the storytelling to a man, namely, Jesus.

Chapter 5 addresses the likely origin of the passion story and the idea that Jesus was "raised and appeared on the third day" in the context

of women's ritual funerary laments. Cross-cultural evidence is amassed to locate oral traditions behind the Passion accounts in the Gospels. Scriptural proofs and scribal activity are not enough to explain the development of the narrative core of the Passion account. Further, this chapter makes the bold suggestion that the announcement that "he was raised and appeared" "on the third day" (1 Cor 15) has its roots in women's grassroots practice of funerary rituals, meals, and lament, rather than in the experiences of a list of elite leaders and male apostles.

The entire book thus makes an argument for the nonsupernatural origins of early Christian communities, Gospel traditions, and the idea of a "raised and appeared" Lord. The cults of the dead involved common human religious experiences that do not require divine intervention of any sort. In the cult of the dead, participants only imagine they are communicating with the dead, but having a sense of the presence of the dead is a quite normal experience and part of the grief process. This was a grassroots movement among ordinary people, the lower classes and women, not a movement spearheaded by an all-male elite leadership as the Gospels suggest.