

THE MEAL IN BIBLE AND LITURGY

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ABSTRACT

In the Bible, having a meal is not equal to filling one's stomach. Far from it. Meals are held in high regard in the Bible. Because of that, meals have a special place in Jewish and Christian liturgy as well. In this article, I would like to sketch the outlines of the Biblical characteristics of meals.

The main aspects go back to the Passover meal, which, in the Bible, functions as a basic model for all meals. Starting from the Passover meal, I would like to deal with the various aspects of meals in the Bible. I will mention four characteristics in particular: community, hospitality, liberation, and bread and wine. Subsequently, I would like to make clear that these Biblical elements have got their place in the celebration of the Eucharistic meal.

THE BASIC MEAL IN THE BIBLE: THE PASSOVER

The Biblical theology of meals is connected to the Passover. Four primary features of the Passover meal become visible in the book of Exodus.¹

Firstly, the meal does not occur on people's own initiative. God commands his people to take part in the meal. The initiative is taken by God. The people are performers by obeying God's commandment, as is indicated both at the beginning of Ex 12, by telling that it is the Lord who speaks to Moses and Aaron about the Passover (verse 1), and at the end of chapter 12, by telling that the people did according to the Lord's command (verse 50).

Secondly, the meal is an expression of redemption and liberation. It marks the deliverance of God's people, the firstborn of all nations. The people are saved from the slavery in Egypt, saved from oppression, submission and death (e.g. Ex 12:23).

Thirdly, a meal is not a private, individual thing. Like God does not save just an individual, but his entire people, the meal is not meant for just a single private person, but for everyone. The book of Exodus pays much attention to this aspect. In case a family is too small for having a meal, they should share the meal with their neighbours (Ex 12:4). The family ties do not determine the groups sharing the meal, but rather their being physical neighbours.

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¹ See especially: Samson Raphael Hirsch, *The Pentateuch*, Vol. 2 Exodus, 2nd ed. (Gateshead: Judaica Press, 1976), 121-161.

Fourthly and finally, the meal is of lasting value. The book of Exodus emphasizes that the meal should be repeated liturgically. The liturgical repetition is a guarantee for the continuation of the meal and its theological aspects.

THE FIRST CHARACTERISTIC OF THE BIBLICAL MEAL: COMMUNITY

Against this background of the Passover, the theological characteristics of each meal become clear in the Bible.

It is not surprising that, first of all, a meal is characterised by community. On the one hand, a meal is the result of the community, also the religious community, the community of the faithful; on the other hand, a meal creates community as well. This community aspect is present in the Bible time and again, in both the Old and New Testaments.

When Jacob makes peace with his uncle Laban in Gen 31, the peace treaty is confirmed by a joint meal, as told in verse 46.

In the gospels, we read many stories about Jesus and sharing bread together. In many European languages, these stories are popularly called the stories about “the *miracle* of the multiplication of the loaves of bread.” These stories, however, do not distinguish themselves as being miracles. They are not about the fact that only a few loaves of bread become a lot of loaves of bread; they are about the fact that everyone can eat and that no one has to starve. The English tradition calling these stories ‘the stories about Jesus feeding the crowd’ is much better!

It is for that reason that John mentions in 6:10: *Now there was much grass in the place*. He does not mention this to give the impression of a cosy picnic. Such a pastime did not exist in Antiquity. John mentions the green grass to emphasize that the story is not situated in the desert. In the desert, nothing grows; in other words: in the desert, no harvest is possible. And no harvest implies no food, thus hunger. However, in a green world, there should be food enough for everyone. Unfortunately, this is not the case. When, however, Jesus breaks bread and hands it over, the situation changes and everyone has enough to eat. Even more, there is still bread left over. A very meaningful amount: twelve baskets.

Matthew 9:9-10 tells in his gospel, how the publican Matthew is called by Jesus to being one of his disciples. Jesus calls the publican and the publican stands up (ἀνίστημι), rises to new life. Next, this new life is celebrated in the house by having a meal.²

² Confer also: Solomon Pasala, *The “Drama” of the Messiah in Matthew 8 and 9: A Study from a Communicative Perspective* (European University Studies Theology 866) (Bern: Lang, 2008), 182-183; Eric Ottenheim, “The shared meal - a therapeutical device: The function and meaning of Hos 6:6 in Matt 9:10-13,” *Novum Testamentum* 53 (2011): 1-21.

In the Lord's Prayer, the meal, namely bread, is mentioned as well. Matthew 6:11 reads: *Give us this day our daily bread*. The Lord's Prayer uses the first person plural. From the perspective of the Bible, it is impossible to pray: give *me* today *my* daily bread. Individualism and having bread, having a meal, are incompatible in the Bible.³

In the Acts of the Apostles, meals play an important role. The chapters 10-11 are crucial. In these chapters, the step from the faithful from the circumcision (the Jews) towards the faithful from the gentiles is made. This step is accompanied by a vision with meal aspects. Peter, who is staying in Joppa, sees a sheet with various unclean animals coming down from heaven. A voice says: "Slaughter and eat." But Peter is not willing to do so. He repeats this three times. Then, as verse 15 tells, the voice explains to Peter: *What God has cleansed, you must not call unholy*. At that very moment, a mission of a Roman centurion from Caesarea appears on the scene. This Cornelius becomes the first gentile who enters the movement of the 'Way', as Christianity was called originally.

FAILING MEALS: NO COMMUNITY

Unfortunately, celebrating a meal goes wrong sometimes. In a couple of Biblical texts, having a meal does not lead to community, to life for everyone, but rather to destruction, to death.

In the book of Esther, chapter 1, a festive meal is going on. The gentile King, however, makes a mess of it, which leads to the Queen Vashti being deposed. Her successor, the Jewish Esther, may expect an even worse fate. By means of her meals, however, she succeeds in saving her people, the people of God.⁴

The meal in Daniel 5 is notorious as well. The Babylonian King is enjoying a meal and, according to the verses 1-4, he uses the plates stolen from the temple in Jerusalem as tableware.⁵ The wine that he drinks from the holy cups, is not an expression of life, but of death, of the exile of God's people. Such a meal cannot find favour in the eyes of God. A hand appears in verse 5 and writes the ominous words on the wall: *mene mene tekel upharsin*. The gentile King is weighed and found wanting. The meal seals his death.

In the gospels too, meals that go wrong are told. During the birthday meal of King Herod, John the Baptist is beheaded. This gospel story in Mt 14:6-12 functions as, what I like to call, an anti-parable. Whereas parables normally begin with the formula "Once upon a time there was a King who organises a festive meal..." and this festive meal should be an expression of God's Kingdom, as Jesus is preaching, this

³ See also: Sjef van Tilborg, *The Sermon of the Mount as an Ideological Intervention: A reconstruction of Meaning* (Assen: Van Gorcum, 1986), 118-119.

⁴ Regarding the banquets, see also: Harald Martin Wahl, *Das Buch Esther: Übersetzung und Kommentar* (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2009), 129-131.

⁵ For the climactic description of the vessels see also: Bill T. Arnold, "Wordplay and Narrative Techniques in Daniel 5 and 6," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 112 (1993): 480-481.

narration about Herod is about an anti-meal, during which God's Kingdom is not realised. On the contrary, it is about the martyrdom of John the Baptist.

The most famous meal in the Bible that goes wrong, is the last supper of Jesus and his friends. The 'Last Supper' is a meal that goes wrong. Shortly after the meal, Jesus will be betrayed (see among other: Mt 26:14.21-25.48; Lk 6:16; Joh 13:2) and denied (see among other: Mt 26:33-35.75) and abandoned (see among other: Mt 26:31.56) by all of his friends who are now reclined at table along with him. According to the synoptic gospels, the "Last Supper" is the Passover meal, the meal concerning the liberation; but the participants do not act as liberated people: betrayal and denial, and in their wake suffering and death, are ready to take place.⁶

Luke, therefore, frames his story about Jesus' crucifixion and resurrection with two meals. Before Jesus' death on the cross, the meal that goes wrong, takes place (22:14-23), but after Jesus' resurrection, a successful meal, the meal with the men of Emmaus (24:28-33).

In the liturgy of the Easter Triduum, this idea is present as well. The evening Eucharist on Easter Sunday has its own reading from the gospels, namely the story of the men of Emmaus. In this way, the Easter Triduum is framed by the commemoration of Jesus' meals: the unsuccessful meal on the eve of Good Friday (Maundy Thursday) and the successful meal on the evening of Easter Sunday.

THE SECOND CHARACTERISTIC OF THE BIBLICAL MEAL: HOSPITALITY

Next, meals are connected to hospitality. The Bible considers hospitality of paramount importance. As a matter of course, this originates from the nomadic culture from which the people of God arises. If one does not offer hospitality to someone else in the desert, he could die of thirst and hunger. Hospitality is a matter of life and death.⁷

The greatest sin in the Bible, therefore, is inhospitality. In Biblical stories, inhospitality is very often connected with sexual violence. Both hospitality and inhospitality are present in chapters 18-19 of the book of Genesis. Abraham offers three unknown men hospitality. He gives them an abundant meal. In this hospitality, God reveals to Abraham that he will have a son. Lot too offers hospitality to the men who pass from Abraham to Sodom. He takes them under his protection against the dangers of the night. The inhabitants of Sodom, however, think differently. They do not offer hospitality, but rather inhospitality. Emphasizing their inhospitality, they

⁶ It is remarkable that, in the synoptic tradition, the disciples fall asleep in the Pesach night (Mt 26:40; Mk 14:37; Lk 22:45).

⁷ Beyond the nomadic origin of the Lord's people, the general human experiences of the involuntary and voluntary dimensions of eating and drinking play a role in feeding the stranger; see: Ghislain Lafont, *Eucharist: The Meal and the Word* (New York: Paulist Press, 2008); original title: *Eucharistie: Le repas et la parole* (Paris: Cerf, 2001), especially 30-31.

extort the men for sexual abuse. The inhospitality is destroyed by God and the hospitable Lot is saved.

Because of the importance of hospitality, in Christian theology the guest is called Christ. In the monastic rule of St. Benedict (chapter 53), this theology is explicitly mentioned when discussing hospitality: whoever receives a guest, receives Christ (*confer.* John 1:37-39; 13:20).

THE THIRD CHARACTERISTIC OF THE BIBLICAL MEAL: LIBERATION

A successful meal creates liberation on the part of God. Deliverance from Egypt, rescue out of Sodom, salvation from childlessness, brought about by God by means of meals.

The Bible even goes a step further: God reveals himself in the meal itself. In Ex 24:11, the story about the gift of the Ten Commandments is concluded by the statement: *they saw God and ate and drank*. Seeing God is very exceptional in the Bible. The Ten Commandments, given in order to have life, are so close to God, that God himself becomes visible. Immediately thereupon, without further explanation, they eat and drink. Seeing God and having a meal go hand in hand.⁸

In the Bible, the events in the history of salvation are marked by meals. Not only is the gift of the Ten Commandments, but also the other events in the history of God and his people marked in that way.

In the book of Deuteronomy, Moses commissions the people to have a meal when they arrived in the Promised Land. When the people enter the Promised Land by passing through the river Jordan under Joshua (thus: Jesus), Moses' successor, they celebrate the Passover meal. Joshua 5 describes the first meal in the land of Israel: encamped at Gilgal the people of Israel celebrate the Passover. Directly after the Passover in the plains of Jericho, the manna ceased, for the land, flowing with milk and honey, provides food to the people.⁹

When Solomon dedicates the Temple in Jerusalem, the ceremony is concluded with a meal. 1 Kings 8:65 reads that Solomon held a feast meal and all of Israel did the same along with him. As abundant the sacrifices were in the Temple during the dedication ceremony, so abundant was the feast meal, which took seven days.

After the Babylonian exile, the people return to Jerusalem. The priest Ezra leads the people. Having arrived in Jerusalem, he ascends a platform and reads the Torah,

⁸ Many commentaries incorrectly add a clause as 'when they returned to the camp' to the remark about eating and drinking; *pace*, therefore, for example: Umberto Cassuto, *A Commentary on the Book of Exodus* (Jerusalem: Magnes, 1967; reprint: 1997), 315.

⁹ For the Passover narratives in the Hebrew Bible see also: Marco Nobile, "Les Quatre Pâques dans le Cadre de la Rédaction Finale de Gen - 2 Rois," in *Pentateuchal and Deuteronomic Studies* (BETHL 94), ed. Christian Brekelmans and Johan Lust (Leuven: Leuven University Press / Peeters, 1990), 191-196.

the Lord's Law. The Torah is very important. After all, from a Biblical perspective, neglect of the Torah had caused the destruction of Jerusalem and the exile of God's people. All the congregation of Israel bursts out crying after hearing the words of the Torah. Ezra, however, asks them not to cry, but to have a meal. In Neh 8:12, the reading of the Torah is concluded by having a festive meal, which have to be shared with people who does not have the money for having a feast meal. Sharing the festive meal after the reading of the Torah is an expression of implementing the words of the Torah about the Passover, which has to be shared with families which are too small to afford a Passover lamb.

When the Bible describes future salvation, meals are used as well. The most famous vision is chapter 25 in the book of Isaiah about the meal on the mountain of the Lord of hosts. Both verses 6 and 8 tell us about an activity of eating. The Lord prepares a feast of rich things, of wine on the lees, of rich things full of marrow meant for all the nations, without exception. The prophet also sees how God swallows up all destructive powers. Death too is swallowed. Swallowing death and having a feast meal full of food and wine are parallel in the prophet's vision.¹⁰

The last book of the Bible re-uses this image of having a meal. In Rev 19:9, the eternal life of the resurrection is represented as a wedding meal. Those who are invited to the marriage supper of the Lamb are called blessed. This text is one of the many quotations of the Bible in the liturgical texts of the Eucharist.

THE FOURTH CHARACTERISTIC OF THE BIBLICAL MEAL: BREAD AND WINE

At each meal, bread and wine were eaten in Biblical time. And that is the case still today. Bread is a basic product (as rice is in most of Asia). No meal without bread.

Water is scarce in the ancient Near East. People collected rain water in cisterns. Water, especially when it is kept for a long period of time, is full of germs bearing diseases. For cleaning, disinfecting, the water, they used alcohol. In the Near East, this is wine. Normally, people never drank wine undiluted, but always diluted it with water, or better: they drank water diluted with wine.

Because in the northeast of Europe, it is impossible to keep vineyards due to the cold climate, people brew beer. At least since the Middle Ages, monasteries have had breweries. Some of them still exist today. A couple of Cistercian abbeys in Belgium and the Netherlands are world famous for their beer. Anyhow, the origin of using alcohol is making contaminated water drinkable.

When Islam conquered the Near East, the winegrowing ceased. Mohammed's prohibition of wine is an undermining of the continuation of the Biblical meal in the

¹⁰ For a detailed analyse of this pericope see: Archibald L.H.M. van Wieringen, "Isa 24:21-25:12: A Communicative Analysis," in *Formation and Intertextuality of Isaiah 24-27* (Ancient Israel and Its Literature 17), ed. J. Todd Hibbard / H.C. Paul Kim (Atlanta, GA: SBL 2013), 77-97.

Jewish Sabbath meal with the Sabbath wine and the Jewish Passover meal as well as of the Christian celebration of the Eucharist with the Eucharistic wine.

Bread and water (or drinkable water, namely wine) are as much necessary for life itself as they are considered as being gifts of God.

In the form of a story, Gen 14 tells about bread and wine. When Abram has delivered Lot and returns to his tents, he encounters the high priest Melchizedek in Salem (which is of course Jerusalem, without mentioning the name of Jerusalem), who offers bread and wine (the verses 18-19).¹¹

In the book of Exodus, this theology is part of the ordinances in the Torah. In Ex 23:25a it is clear that serving the Lord means that God will bless bread and water, which implies that God will take away sickness from his people. Obeying God and the absence of disease are directly connected to God blessing bread and water.¹²

The poetic Psalms are witness of this theology as well. I mention only two examples: Ps 104:27-30 about God giving food to all creation in due season and 136:25 about God giving food to all flesh (i.e. to all mortals).¹³

THE EUCHARISTIC MEAL: COMMUNITY

The Eucharistic meal combines all these Biblical aspects. From this perspective, I would like to mention some characteristics of the Eucharist.¹⁴

The community which arises in the Eucharist, is called *Body of Christ*. Paul expresses this theology even twice in his first letter to the Corinthians: *The cup of blessings which we bless, is it not a communion in the blood of Christ? The bread which we break, is it not a communion in the body of Christ? Because there is one bread, we who are many, are one bread, for we all partake of the one bread.* (10:16-17). The celebration of the Eucharist leads to *κοινωνία communion*. The Latin word for the Greek word *κοινωνία* is *communio*. The word *κοινωνία* (or *communio*) means:

¹¹ See also: Benno Jacob, *Das erste Buch der Tora: Genesis* (Berlin: Schocken, 1934; reprint, New York: Ktav, s.a.), 379.

¹² Confer: Otto Kaiser, *Aretē und Pathos bei Philo von Alexandrien*, in *Deuterocanonical and Cognate Literature Yearbook 2011: Emotions from Ben Sira to Paul* (Deuterocanonical and Cognate Literature), ed. Renate Egger-Wenzel / Jeremy Corley (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2012), 415-416 on Philo's comment on this verse.

¹³ See also: Gianfranco Ravasi, *Il Libro dei Salmi: Commento e Attualizzazione*, Vol. 3 (Bologna: Dehoniane, 1984), 124-126.742.

¹⁴ See also: Archibald L.H.M. van Wieringen and Herwi W.M. Rikhof, *De Zeven Sacramenten: Een Bijbeltheologische en Systematisch-theologische studie* (Theologische Perspectieven Supplement Series 6) (Bergambacht: 2VM, 2013), 221-243.

unity, community, communication, communion. The expression *holy communion* is derived from it.¹⁵

Whoever does not discern the unity, but lives in divisions, so Paul explains in 1 Cor 11, is a sinner. Whoever just pretends to take care of his fellow man, celebrates the Lord's meal in a false way. Paul writes this, because he has discovered that, after the celebration of the Lord's meal, rich people go home full and poor people go home still hungry. Such a practice, however, contrasts with the Biblical view on having a meal, for Biblical meals are always communion meals, which means without a division between rich and poor people.¹⁶

In the Eucharistic prayer, therefore, all participants in the Body of Christ are mentioned. First of all, communion means communion with Jesus the Christ. Further, communion with all the people celebrating. Also communion with all the people celebrating the Eucharist somewhere else. That is the reason why the name¹⁷ of the local bishop is mentioned, as a sign of communion with all the people celebrating nearby, as well as the name of the bishop of Rome (the pope), as a sign of communion with all the people celebrating wherever in the world.

Finally, the communion with all the people who were celebrating before the people celebrating the Eucharist now, that means: the saints and the other deceased persons. Even communion with all of God's creation: with the archangels, the Seraphin¹⁸, the angels, and the powers.

THE EUCHARISTIC MEAL: HOSPITALITY

Communion implies that the Eucharist is meant for all the people present in the celebration.¹⁹

In the story in the gospel about the last supper, this is expressed by the twelve disciples, who stand for the twelve tribes of Israel, that means: everyone. Luke emphasises this even more by telling that Judas Iscariot partakes in the Pesach-meal as well (Lk 22:21).

¹⁵ See also: Jacobus J. Meuzelaar, *Der Leib des Messias* (Kampen: Kok, 1963; reprint: 1979), 27-29.

¹⁶ Even if the meeting in Jas 2:2 is not Eucharistic, but 'only' liturgical, the parallel with the Pauline theology is evident; see: Peter-Ben Smit, "A Symposiastic Background to James?," *New Testament Studies* 58 (2011): 105-122.

¹⁷ The bishop is mentioned in the Eucharistic prayer by mentioning his baptismal name, not his family name. This is also a way in which the liturgy expresses that the Eucharist presupposes baptism.

¹⁸ In the Roman canon, the Seraphs are present as in the Aramaic form Seraphim (instead of the Hebrew form Seraphim), which indicates that their present in the Eucharistic prayer has very old roots.

¹⁹ Confer: Petros Vassiliadis, Eucharist as a Unifying and Inclusive Element in New Testament Ecclesiology, in *Einheit der Kirche im Neuen Testament*, ed. Anatoly A. Alexeev, Chrēstos Karakolis and Ulrich Luz (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2008), 121-145; Andrew B. McGowan, "The Meals of Jesus and the Meals of the Church: Eucharistic Origins and Admission to Communion," in *Studia Liturgica Diversa: Studies in Church Music and Liturgy* (FS Paul F. Bradshaw), ed. Maxwell E. Johnson / L. Edward Phillips (Portland, OR: Pastoral Press, 2004), 101-115.

In the stories about breaking the bread for the large crowd, the gospels explicitly mention that everyone eats (see among others: Mt 15:37; Mk 6:42).

Avoiding taking part in the liturgical celebration of the last supper, as very common in certain protestant movements, is far from Biblical.

THE EUCHARISTIC MEAL: BREAD AND WINE

Bread and wine are the food in the Eucharist, as at any Biblical meal. For the sake of the Biblical connection, these elements cannot be replaced by, for example, rice cookies or apple juice.

In the gospel of John, Jesus is identified with bread. In John 6:35 Jesus indicates himself as the bread of life. During the table conversation at the last supper, Jesus is identified with wine, even twice. In John 15:1 Jesus speaks about himself as the true vine. Next, in verse 5, the metaphor of wine is used as well to describe the communion with Jesus: Jesus is the vine, his followers are the branches.

It is remarkable that a Eucharist is not about corn and grapes. Not corn, but bread, and not grapes, but wine, form the Eucharist. That means: the gathered people offer gifts of God, but treated by men. The fruit of the earth, the fruit of the vine, the work of human hands.²⁰

THE EUCHARISTIC MEAL: THE WORD OF GOD

The celebrating communion arises around the word of God. A meal follows the Ten Commandments; a meal follows the reading of the Torah after the Babylonian exile. God's Word and the Lord's meal belong together.²¹

A short remark in verse 1 in the story about Jesus calling his first disciples in Lk 5:1–11 shows the intrinsic relation between Word and meal: the people is reclining (ἐπίκειμαι) with Jesus, while hearing the word of God. Thomas of Aquinas speaks about the Scriptures as the *mensa sacrae Scripturae*, the Table of sacred Scripture (*Super Psalmo 22*, no 2).

In line with the Second Vatican Council, the terminology of 'the Table of the Word' and 'the Table of Bread and Wine' should preferably be used.²² Some people speak about 'the service of the Word' and 'the service of the Table'. In this way, however, the Table is narrowed to only the celebration of bread and wine. The Second Vatican Council, conversely, sees both parts as Table. Both parts together form the

²⁰ Confer: Anton Hänggi and Irmgard Pahl, *Præx Eucharistica: Textus e variis liturgiis antiquioribus selecti* (Spicilegium Friburgense 12) (Fribourg: Éditions universitaires, 1968), 6-7.

²¹ See also: Enzo Bianchi, *Praying the Word: An Introduction to Lectio Divina* (Cistercian Studies Series 182) (Kalamazoo: Cistercian Publications, 1998); original title: *Pregare la Parola: Introduzione alle 'Lectio Divina'* (Turino: Piero Gribaudi Editore, 1992), especially 23-38.

²² See also: Presbyterorum Ordinis 18.

Eucharist. You cannot use one as opposed to the other. On the contrary, both Tables are essentially one and the same Table.

In the Roman rite, the unity of this one Table is expressed in the greeting at the beginning of the reading of the gospel and at the beginning of the Eucharistic prayer: *Dominus vobiscum* 'the Lord be with you.'

The Second Vatican Council, therefore, speaks about a triple presence of Christ: in the Word, in Bread and Wine (therefore also in the altar), and in the celebrating community. Liturgically, this triple presence is expressed in the incensing of the Gospel Book, of the gifts of bread and wine (the altar), and of the celebrating community (which are: the presiding ministers and the gathered people).

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, I have made clear that the characteristics of the Passover meal are basic for the Biblical theology about meals. In the Biblical meal, aspects concerning unity, hospitality, and righteousness regarding the poor and the rich converge. Moreover, the Biblical meal reveals God himself, and Jesus Christ and his mission regarding God's Kingdom. Next, I have made clear that all the Biblical aspects of meal are present in the liturgical celebration of the Eucharist. The Eucharist appears to be very consistent with the Biblical theology of meals.²³

²³ I am greatly indebted to Maurits J. Sinninghe Damsté (Musselkanaal, the Netherlands) for his correction of the English translation of this article.