

GENDERED MEALS ON ETHNO-RELIGIOUS BOUNDARIES¹

The Role of Women in the Commensality at the Early Christian Community Meals

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FEMINIST THEOLOGY AND JEWISH–CHRISTIAN ISSUES

Feminist theology is theological flow, which takes the oppression of women as a theological challenge, and commits itself to a vision of mutuality and equality of men and women. There is not one feminist theology, as a unified system or school, but a number of feminist theologies of different religions, various theological traditions and different social analyses. Although women's critical voices can be detected in every historical period and religion, the history of feminist theology as a continuous theological flow begins with Protestant Christian abolitionist feminists in the nineteenth-century United States, while the rise of the movement dates to the 1970s. Jewish and Christian feminist theologies of Western women grew together in these times and became an important part of the theological spectrum in the 1990s, while in other religions, such as Hinduism and Islam, feminist theological approaches are still on the very margin of theological discourse.¹

Since Christian feminist theology seeks self-justification in the Bible, and in particular in Jesus, early feminist theologians wanted to present Jesus as a kind of feminist of his age. In order to do that, they needed a 'dark background' against which the respectful and woman-friendly behaviour of Jesus could shine. That led Christian feminist theologians to a stereotypical, simplistic representation of women's role and status in first-century Judaism. Feminist theologians claimed that first-century Jewish women lived under extreme oppression, deprived of the opportunity to actively participate in the religious life of Israel, secluded in their homes, despised as impure and spiritually inferior creatures. This image was created on the basis of divergent data on Jewish women's lives between the twelfth century BCE and the sixth century CE, and, where the information was not sufficient, Christian feminists often unconsciously filled the gaps with their own experiences in the Western Christian context. Thus, feminists tended to interpret Judaism as a misogynous culture, from which Jesus liberated his women followers. By doing that, they followed an old path of Christian theological Anti-Judaism.

In recent decades Jewish and Christian feminist scholarship has worked hard to deconstruct this pattern.² Recent studies in racism have made clear to feminists that

a single-issue focus on sexism and women's experience does not automatically encompass or address other forms of dominance. On the contrary, in the absence of an explicit commitment to ending the multiple, interstructured forms of oppression that shape women's lives, feminist theory and institutions continue to support dominant racial, religious, class, and sexual perspectives.³

Thus the clear stand against theological anti-Judaism is not a matter of "politeness", or solidarity with Jewish feminists, but a direct interest of feminist theology.

Judith Plaskow, one of the leading Jewish feminist scholars, proposed an agenda for Christian New Testament (or Second Testament⁴) scholars 'toward a more critical feminist hermeneutic'. Her five points are:

- i. Becoming aware of the existence of anti-Judaism in our Christian theological heritages.
- ii. Its systematic problematisation as an integral part of our feminist analysis.
- iii. The appreciation of Judaism as an autonomous, changing and diverse tradition, a feminist exploration of the history of Jewish women of different social strata, family statuses, different Jewish groups and traditions.
- iv. Reading the New Testament not as an antithesis or refutation of 'Judaism', but as an important source of Jewish women's history.
- v. Institutional dimension: close co-operation with Jewish scholars, workshops, and institutions.⁵

What I would like to do here is engage in a Christian feminist theology of this kind. My object is to examine the interaction between ethno-religious and gender issues in the field of meals and

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commensality, a field crucial in the making and reinterpretation of identity in the first century. My thesis is that it was women who established table-fellowship with non-Jews in the first generation of the Jesus-movement.

My thesis certainly involves a strong value-judgement: it is, in my reading, meritorious that these women overcame the exclusivism of their contemporaries, and opened the communities of early Jesus-followers to non-Jews. Some may disagree with my judgement, since the inclusion of Gentiles in the earliest Christian communities was an important step in the separation of Christianity from its Jewish identity, its becoming a separate religion – a process which ended up in a Christianity hostile and exclusivistic towards Judaism. Yet I would argue that the step taken by these early Christian women is to be remembered as a positive one; not, as several nineteenth- and twentieth-century theologians argue, because of its possible importance for the missionary perspectives of later Christianity, but rather because these early experiences of Christianity and the narratives reflecting them were foundational for the attitude of Christians towards peoples of other cultures and religions. Ágnes Heller in her essay on ‘The Resurrection of the Jewish Jesus’ rightly pointed out that the renewed interest in the Jewish identity of Jesus has to do with the wish to overcome the Christian tradition of persecuting other religions.⁶ Each and every book of the Bible is a product of a complex interaction between cultures. This interaction ‘was often very complex and subtle, involving not only rejection and resistance, but negotiation and adaptation as well’.⁷ Many of the biblical stories were formulated against these negotiations and adaptations, and have an exclusivist shape. Christian theologians often used these stories of both testaments to understate the superiority-claims of Christianity against all the other religions – including Judaism itself. It is important to reread these stories, and encounter their other side, their reporting on fruitful interactions and liberating practices of cultural exchange.

The way I interpret this aspect of the first-century Jesus-movement differs radically from the traditional Christian readings of the same story. Therefore, before turning to my main thesis, I will look at the later theological developments through which the contribution of women to this achievement was erased from Christian memory.

HOW WOMEN WERE WRITTEN OUT FROM THE STORY

Present-day Christian memory knows little or nothing about the role of women in the opening of Christian community meals towards non-Jews. This amnesia began at the beginnings of ecclesiastical historiography, and I will show the factors which led to the ‘forgetting’ of women’s contribution to this process. It is striking that biblical scholarship of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, which explored so many forgotten parts and aspects of this history, failed to do that with women’s contributions. The causes of this failure lie in the dogmatic presumptions and also in the latent anti-Judaism of that scholarship.

The construction of the history of a movement normally begins only a little later than the beginnings of the movement itself. The construction of the history of the early Jesus-movement is to some extent an exception from this rule. The first generations of the movement understood their time as a short interval between the death and the *Parousia*, the victorious return of Jesus, and ascribed little or no importance to the changes and developments in their movement. Thus, ecclesiastical historiography began in the last decades of the first century, when Christianity faced the fact that this ‘interval’ was much longer than expected. The *Acts of the Apostles*, the first surviving treatment of the earliest ecclesiastical history dates from the 80s or 90s and reprojects the structure and experiences of this period to the 30s and 40s of the first century. But these fifty years brought major changes in the life of the Jesus-movement, three of which directly concern the role of women in the establishment of table-fellowship. First, women enjoyed great opportunities in the Jesus-movement of the 30s and 40s, while in the 80s and 90s we see a flashback, systematic attempts to minimise their activities in the public life of the church. Secondly, community meals were gradually transformed and reinterpreted in a sacrificial sense. Thirdly, the role of Jews and Gentiles in the Jesus-movement changed radically between 30 and 90 CE.

The earliest Jesus-movement was a marginal group that attracted mostly deprived and excluded members of the society. The organisation of the community was not based on hierarchy and fixed titles, but on personal charisma. Prophecy and spontaneous prayer were the main forms of religious expression, which gave space to people without formal education, and also to women. Traditional roles of women were challenged in numerous ways, women could live as independent prophets and preachers, could lead communities; patriarchal family hierarchies were called into question. In the

second and third generation, as the movement became more institutionalised, women gradually lost their leadership roles in the communities, were admonished to keep silent in the community and also to respect the family hierarchies (1 Co 14:33–36 1Tim 2:11–15, etc.).⁸

An as yet unrecognised factor forging this development is that the community meal gradually gained a more sacrificial and public character. The *agape* meal of the community was separated from the celebrational meal. The death of Jesus came to be interpreted as a sacrificial death, he himself as Paschal lamb (John 19:36), fragrant offering, (Eph 5:2), or scapegoat (Hebr 9–10). The eating of the body of Christ and the drinking of his blood in a bodily sense – unimaginable in the Jewish context – came to be the centre of the later Christian Eucharist. But, as I will show, the organisation and conduct of sacrificial meals was a male task in the cultural context. From the second century the table-service was a priestly task, and women were excluded from this newly developed priesthood.

In the first generation Christianity was a Jewish movement. The first Gentile converts had a vulnerable and often lower status in the community. In the third generation Gentile converts constituted the majority in many communities, and certainly in the circles behind the *Acts*. The mission among Gentiles was already the normal praxis of the church, and the *Acts of the Apostles* created a history in which Jesus himself sent the disciples to the nations (Acts 1:8). Later on, God revealed the plan of a Gentile mission to Peter (Acts 10:1–11,18), and called Saul to his ministry among the Gentiles (Acts 9:15). Historically, there was great disagreement between the factions and groups of early Christianity concerning the Gentile mission, yet the author of the *Acts* held a council in Jerusalem in the first generation – the ‘synod of Jerusalem’ as it is called in the later literature – at which all the leading personalities (Paul, Barnabas, Peter, and James the Just) reached agreement on this question (Acts 15). Early Christian historiography could not attribute such a historic achievement to nameless women, it needed the male leaders of the movement to unequivocally stand behind this decision.

Why and how has this development remained unrecognised by modern scholarship? The importance of the move towards a Gentile mission was understood very early,⁹ yet it was attributed to others. Conservative and Barthian circles agreed in the view that God is totally different from anything human: God is the *ganz anderes* itself. Thus Jesus, with his knowledge of God, was understood as being in radical discontinuity with humanity, and, consequently, as being discontinuous with the Jewish tradition. It was assumed that he introduced an ethic that was ‘free from the restrictions of Jewish law’. In this theological framework the inclusion of Gentiles in the church was seen as the will and plan of Jesus, who, as they claimed, never respected the dietary laws of the Judaism of his age.

Liberal Christian biblical scholarship followed another trajectory. It was claimed by many that Paul ‘set Christianity free from Jewish Law’.¹⁰ This view constructs a binary opposition: Paul, the liberal, against his conservative countrymen, especially James the Just, who remained a pious pharisaic Jew even as a follower of Jesus. Paul is the liberal one, and the bearer of the real Christian message, while James is the conservative whose narrow visions are overcome by history.

Both the dogmatic and the liberal narrative needed emblematic personalities, ‘named men’, who initiated a revolutionary step, and this need blinded them to the importance of women’s contributions to the process. Both narratives work with a latent anti-Jewish bias, presenting the ‘real Christian position’ (that of Jesus/Paul) as an antithesis of the ‘Jewish exclusivism’ (of Jews in the time of Jesus/Judaizers of early Christianity). In order to overcome this bias and ‘appreciate Judaism as an autonomous, changing and diverse tradition’ (Plaskow) and as the intellectual space of which the inclusion of the Gentiles in the table-fellowship of Christians was a part, I will do the following: first I will draw a general picture of meals in the Ancient Mediterranean and present the problem and discussion on commensality in this context. Secondly, I will discuss gender-differences in the construction of religious identity, and of the paths of conversion in these cultures. Thirdly, I will present the importance and function of community meals among the followers of Jesus. These three branches of information put together can support my thesis on women’s role in the establishment of commensality. Finally, I will find positive evidence of the same in a New Testament text, namely Mk 7:24–30.

MEALS IN THE ANCIENT MEDITERRANEAN

Our image of ancient meals is determined by the descriptions of *symposia* of the Roman and Greek elites. My present concern differs from that: I am interested in the meals of the lower and middle classes of the rural and urban population, who supplied the first members of the Jesus-movement.

In Antiquity the basic foods were grain-products: different kinds of polenta, porridge, and cooked grain (emmer, rye wheat, einkorn, spelt and common wheat), as well as bread. In Rome, bread was a later invention, first regarded as a luxury, but later as the staple food of the poor in the time of the Empire.¹¹ They ate soups and sauces made of beans and peas, vegetables cooked or in the form of salads, fruit and mushrooms, nuts and olives.¹² Oils, honey, and spices played a major role in the meals; milk-products and eggs were also important foods in most Mediterranean cultures. They drank wine with water or beer, honey-beer.¹³

We find a wide variety of meat and meat products on the markets of the Roman Empire.¹⁴ It seems, however, that meat was less central in the ancient Mediterranean than in medieval Europe. It is likely that people of lower social status mostly ate inexpensive fish, or meals without any meat.¹⁵ It seems that for many the bread was much more important in a meal than meat. We know that the soldiers of Caesar were close to revolt because they got meat instead of bread.¹⁶ Also, Dio Chrysostom tells us with some wonderment about two hunters who learned to prefer meat to bread.¹⁷

Most people took breakfast, then a light lunch, and the main meal, the *cena*, was in the evening. The participants at the meal – except, maybe, in the poorest households – lay around the table or the place designated for eating.¹⁸ Dishes were shared, and people ate with their hands.

Meals were celebrational: they began with a short prayer and sacrifice (offered to the ‘good spirit’ of the house), and ended in the same way. The *libation* – a drink offering to the gods – concerned the whole cup or jar of wine: a mouthful of it was poured out on the ground, while the rest was consumed as sacrificial wine.¹⁹

If there was meat in the meal, it usually came from the altars of gods. In the usual sacrifices only the worst part of the animal was burnt. Part of the meat was given to the priest, and the rest was the property of the person who offered the sacrifice. The meat that one could buy at the butcher’s was sold there by priests or by people coming from sacrifice.²⁰

If there was sacrificial meat in the meal, the male head of the family conducted it. (In most Hellenistic cults women were not allowed to offer sacrifices.) If it was a meal without meat, the women, mostly the mother of the house, served the food and conducted the whole of the celebration.²¹ It is a phenomenon known in various cultural settings that there are male and female kinds of food and meals. Linguistic signs (the sin of the flesh/meat) also indicate a kind of pseudosexual relationship with food.²² In the Mediterranean the preparation of bread and other grain dishes was a female task, and foods and the meals based on them were associated with women. Men prepared meat dishes and conducted the male meals containing them. This classification of meals has little to do with the participants in the meal: both men and women took part in most meals. The gender of the meal derives from the person in charge of the food and of serving the meal.

The participants in everyday meals were members of the household, and in smaller households even slaves. It is important to understand that ancient families – or, since the modern notion of family was unknown among the ancients, households – were organised in accordance with a strict hierarchy. Belonging to a household meant being under the authority and protection of the head of the household. The common meal was the most important horizontal contact between members of a household.

Public meals, like *symposia*, played a significant role in expressing social hierarchies. The order around the table, the order in which the servants offered the food, wine, and the water for hand-washing, all marked the social status of the guests.²³ These meals, unlike the everyday meals of the family, were gender-separated. Women ate sitting while men reclined, or they reclined at separate tables. Respectable women often left the meals before the drinking began. Drunkenness was not a sin in the case of a man, but in case of women it was seen as an extreme transgression.²⁴ Even when they were present, they had to be silent and invisible, as a sign of their modesty and respectability. Heteras, however, took part in *symposia*, and were involved in the public conversation and also in the drinking.²⁵ This kind of separation seems to have declined during the period of our investigation: wives joined their husbands at *symposia* – unlike, probably, unmarried women and widows.²⁶

The clubs and civic associations of the Hellenistic world held regular common meals. Since these associations had partially religious purposes, these meals followed the common worship of the god or goddess of the association, and had a public character. In some associations women were also members and participated in the common meals.

Jewish meals were basically the same: Jews ate similar dishes, in similar order. The dietary rules prohibiting the consumption of pork and other impure sorts of meat were not unusual in the wider cultural context. Several other Semitic nations shared these particular prohibitions, while other nations or followers of other cults had to avoid eating other kinds of meat.²⁷ Jewish meat-meals were not automatically connected with sacrificial practice, since most first-century Jews lived in the Diaspora,

far from the Temple. There were naturally no libations or food-sacrifices, but the prayers and blessings gave a similarly sacred frame to the common consumption of food. Jews also avoided the consumption of blood – as did most neighbouring nations – and did not cook the kid in the milk of its mother, but there is no indication that the complex regulations of a kosher kitchen were present in the Jewish households of the first century. In some pious Jewish circles it was preferred to wash one's hands before eating, but it was not a general rule.²⁸ Also, the gendering of dishes and meals is traceable in the Jewish context: the baking of bread (except temple-bread) and the preparation of grain-dishes appears to have been a female task, while the meat-dishes belonged to the male sphere.²⁹ Common meals served as strong markers of shared identity in the Jewish context as well.

The aspects of this picture of which I will make particular use in what follows are the rarity of meat in ancient meals, the gendering of the meals, and the social function of common meals as signs of belonging together.

COMMENSALITY OF JEWS AND NON-JEWS IN THE FIRST CENTURY

Commensality was an important sign of mutual acceptance and respect. Alexander the Great organised, as part of his internationalist project, meals shared by representatives of the nations of his empire.³⁰ Antique authors often blame their contemporaries for not sharing their meals properly with all their guests, but serving the best food to the most valued guests and providing food of lower quality for the rest.³¹ The complaint of the psalmist characterises well the importance of shared meals in the marking of social relations: 'mine own familiar friend, in whom I trusted, which did eat of my bread, hath lifted up his heel against me' (Ps 41:10 KJV).³²

It is widely debated whether, and to what extent, Jews shared their meals with non-Jews in the first century. I will argue here that in the period in question some Jewish groups opted for more intimate commensality, while others were more exclusivistic, but female meals allowed for more social interaction between Jews and non-Jews than male meals.

From the second century there is plenty of evidence, in both Jewish and non-Jewish sources, that Jews did not engage in common meals with Gentiles. It is, however, unclear whether this practice predates the Bar-Kochba revolt or even the destruction of the Temple. Some scholars³³ claim (and many others implicitly assume) that there was a definite ban against commensality with non-Jews already at the time of the first Christian generations. Others think that there was no central authority at that time that had formed such a regulation, and, while some more scrupulous groups avoided table-fellowship as far as possible, other groups accepted and extended invitations to meals where Gentiles, mostly sympathisers of Judaism, were present. It is also claimed that the commensality with God-fearers – people following part of the Law, but not becoming full proselytes – formed a bridge between Jews and non-Jews.³⁴ Therefore I will examine the available sources in more depth.

While there was no definite prohibition on commensality of Jews with non-Jews there were several factors which made it difficult. First of all, as we have seen, the meals of Gentiles were embedded in their religious praxis. Those drinking libation wine became participants in the sacrifice. Jews naturally could not participate. Secondly, the prohibitions on the consumption of pork and blood also hindered table-fellowship. But, let us emphasise once more, there is no prohibition on eating with Gentiles in Mosaic law.

Many ancient historians and other authors report on the separate life of the Jews. There are two problems with the data gained from them. First, the authors normally do not specify in what sense the Jews separated themselves, and whether it extended to commensality. Secondly, the authors often generalise, knowing about the habits of a particular Jewish community, or only about the life of some informants, but assuming that their rules are typical of Judaism as a whole.

Apollonius Molon, writing in the early first century BCE, tells us that Jews (whom he knows from his native land of Caria) were unwilling to associate (*koinōnein*) with the rest of mankind. This expression can refer specifically to table-fellowship in certain contexts, but not in every case. Similarly, Diodorus Siculus in 60–30 BCE reports that Jews 'do not associate at table (*trapexeis koinōnein*) with other nations'. We do not know the source of his information, but he is known as a very polemical author and his work is a less reliable source. Pompeius Troglus, around the beginning of the Common Era in Egypt, writes that Jews do not live (*conviverent*) with strangers.³⁵

Strabo in his Geography (22 CE) shares with us the surprising information that Jews refrain from meat in general.³⁶ One suspects that this is evidence of limited table-fellowship: Jews did not eat meat at the tables of Gentiles, and non-Jews misinterpreted this behaviour as vegetarianism.

It is only in the second century CE that Gentile sources become more concrete in this connection. Tacitus in his *Histories* (110 CE) presents a good summary of Jewish customs and laws, and says that Jews sit apart at meals, indicating a very limited table-fellowship.³⁷ The explanations he gives for these customs are typical of Alexandrian Judaism, thus giving a clue to the circle of his informants. Philostratus in the third century CE is very clear: 'Jews cannot share with the rest of mankind the pleasures of table, nor join their libations, prayers or sacrifices.'³⁸

Jewish normative sources concerning the problem of table-fellowship are rather contradictory. The *Book of Jubilees*, probably from the late second century BCE, explicitly forbids eating with Gentiles,³⁹ but this document represents the views of marginal sectarian groups, such as the Qumran community, and we know that members of this community did not share their meals with ordinary Jews either. In the Mishnah (Aboda Zarah 5) we read regulations about a limited table-fellowship attributed to early rabbis. But the dating of any Talmudic tradition is very problematic; it is highly questionable whether this text expresses the views of the first century, or of much later times.⁴⁰

We can quote narrative sources on the problem of commensality in abundance, but their interpretation is ambiguous. In the *Book of Daniel*⁴¹ (first half of the second century BCE) Daniel and his Judean friends, unlike the other Israelites, refuse to consume the food and wine of the emperor, and eat vegetables instead. Some scholars interpret this as a sign of a Jewish ban on commensality. In my view this story, contrasting the behaviour of the four exemplary young Jews with that of the other Jewish men, reflects the self-understanding of a stricter, extremely pious Judean group, who, unlike their fellow countrymen, practised only a very limited table-fellowship with Gentiles, namely one restricted to vegetables (Dan 1:3–16). Similarly, in the *Book of Tobit*, composed in the second century BCE, Tobit refuses to eat of the food of the Gentiles, even though the other Israelites did (Tob 1:11 ff). Both the uncertain canonical status of these books and the narrative itself indicates that abstaining from the table of Gentiles was not yet a general rule in the second century BCE, but a minority position propagated by some pious circles.

In the canonical *Book of Esther* – that is, the version of the text to be found in the Hebrew Bible – Esther eats from the royal table. But in the Septuagint,⁴² the second-century BCE Greek version of the Jewish Bible, produced in Alexandrian Jewish circles and widely used in Greek-speaking Judaism, we find a reedited version of the same text, with several insertions. One of these (4:17^s) states that Esther abstained from eating from the table of Haman or drinking of the libation wine, and 'did not praise the banquets of the king'. Yet, it is still admitted that Esther ate from the table of the king. The presence of the two forms of the Esther-narrative seems to indicate an internal Jewish conflict around the problem of table-fellowship.

In the letter of Aristeas,⁴³ which is a non-canonical Jewish text written in the late second century BCE in Alexandria, we find two kinds of information concerning our investigation. First, a group of Jewish priests gets an invitation to the table of the Egyptian (Ptolemaian) king, King Nicanor, who appoints a high steward as 'special officer looking after the Jews', and 'commands him to make the necessary preparation for each one', so that 'there may be no discomfort to disturb the enjoyment of their visit'. The steward 'carries out everything in accordance with the customs which were in use amongst his Jewish guests' (verse 182). He 'dispenses with the services of sacred heralds and the sacrificing priests' and called upon 'one of the priests to offer a prayer instead' (verse 183). The second type of information is a speech of the priest Eleazar reported by the letter, which interprets the purity laws, especially those concerning food, for the wise and God-fearing Gentiles. According to his speech, the prohibitions of certain kinds of food have the function of pointing to ethical values that the Jews, as people dedicated specially to God, have to follow (verses 141–143). The forbidden meats may be, for example, from wild, carnivorous, or tyrannising animals, and

naming them unclean, He [God] gave a sign by means of them that those, for whom the legislation was ordained, must practice righteousness in their hearts and not tyrannise over any one in reliance upon their own strength by robbing them of anything. . . .

This means that the Letter of Aristeas propagates limited commensality, arguing obviously not against those Jews who do not eat with Gentiles at all, but against those who do it without taking much heed of the special regulations given to the Jews.

Another Jewish Pseudepigraph is *Joseph and Aseneth*, a Hellenistic Jewish novel and at the same time a midrash on the marriage of Joseph with an Egyptian woman after her conversion to Judaism. In this narrative Joseph, the exemplary pious Jew, when visiting the parents of Aseneth, accepts the

hospitality of Penthepres, an Egyptian, but eats from a separate table. Here we find a more general refusal of table-fellowship, yet it is Pharaoh who gives the banquet for their wedding, and invites all the chiefs of Egypt.⁴⁴

In summary, I have to agree with the scholars who claim that in the first century there was no generally accepted Jewish ban on commensality with Gentiles. Different groups had different ways of avoiding participation in idol-worship connected with Gentile meals: they abstained from wine and meat, used separate vessels, or ate from separate tables. What is not observed by these scholars is the gender difference in this question. The restrictions concern men much more than women. Women are not assumed to participate in the drinking portion of Hellenistic banquets anyway, so the problem of libation-wine does not concern them to the same extent as men. 'Female meals' are without meat and so can be shared with Gentiles without problems. Also, the Jewish prohibitions, as explained by the Letter of Aristeas, concern men, but not so much women. This does not mean that Jewish women were free to eat with non-Jews. Women, especially elite women, lived secluded, did not accept or pay visits to men, and did not dine out without their husbands. 'Female meals' belonged to the inner life of the household. Thus, the greater freedom to engage in commensality is a consequence of their otherwise more regulated life. Yet, the lack of strict regulations concerning female meals opened a space for female action.

GENDER AND CONVERSION IN THE FIRST CENTURY

Ethno-religious identity and conversion was gendered or gender-specific in the first century. Thus, women had a greater freedom in inter-ethnic and inter-religious communication than men, not only in commensality, but also in other fields. We have to understand the nature of this gender-difference because this might have been the factor that made women's initiatives possible at the tables of the early Jesus-movement.

The first fact we have to cope with in this context is that both Judaism and Christianity attracted more women than men as members in these times.⁴⁵ Josephus Flavius tells us that when the Gentiles in Damascus decided to massacre the Jews of the city, they had to conceal their plan from their wives, because these were all converted to Judaism.⁴⁶

Yet, the conversion of a man meant a more profound change in his status, both socially and from a religious point of view. In Antiquity religion was a family matter. Individuals did not have religious convictions and beliefs; rather the household had its gods, inherited from the ancestors. The gods of the household had their little sanctuary in Greek and Roman houses, and everybody in the house was supposed to participate in their cult. The daily religious celebrations, often connected with meals, maintained continuity with the ancestors, the 'diachronic axis' of the family. The *lares* were present at each important event of the family, such as marriage, birth, funerals, or birthdays. A wife, servant, or slave who became a member of the household was supposed to join the cult of the household as a natural sign of his or her new identity.⁴⁷ Under this system a woman abandoned her old ancestral religion for the one in her husband's house. At the time of the Roman Empire women and slaves often had a 'second religion', a cult to which they belonged of their own volition, but these were not supposed to conflict with their family religion.⁴⁸ The claim of Josephus that the women of Damascus were 'all converted to Judaism' may indicate such a second religious identity, which did not change the status of the wives – the men of Damascus did not see them as potential victims of the pogrom – yet made the women allies of the endangered Jewish community.

Most Hellenistic cults did not require exclusive devotion. One could join them while maintaining his or her original religious identity. The monotheism of Judaism and later of Christianity created a new problem in this system.⁴⁹ A Roman or Greek man converting to Judaism or Christianity left the gods of his ancestors, lost the support of his wider family with which these gods linked him, and lost a sign of his inherited citizenship in the city where his family belonged to the worshipping community. Here again we can observe a gender difference: women's social status depended as a rule on their husbands (or other male relatives) and so their conversion did not affect their place in society.

Female conversion had lower costs for the convert, but also smaller gains from a religious point of view. Women could be members of the religious community, but, since ethnic identity and citizenship were constructed on a patrilineal basis, they could not perform one of the greatest religious duties, namely pass their religion on to their descendants.⁵⁰ Christian women often faced conflicts in the second and third centuries not because of their own faith, but because they took their children with them into the Christian community.⁵¹ Women were also excluded from many religious rites; their

'observance of the law' was restricted to a smaller group of duties.⁵² Thus, women adherents of the Jewish community could offer their financial support or patronage, and their participation in religious events, but could not be full members of the community.⁵³

In the case of Judaism, male conversion had a strong, direct, and irreversible bodily sign, namely circumcision. Female conversion did not entail such a decisive moment. It is disputed whether the ritual bath functioned as a rite of initiation in the first century.⁵⁴ Thus there was a clear difference between God-fearers and proselytes in the case of men, but not of women. Shaye Cohen even proposes that we speak not of female 'converts', but only of 'adherents', since women could not be converts in the full sense.⁵⁵

To sum up, male conversion had major social consequences. It was strictly regulated, the different stages were separated from each other, and marked by clear signs. Female conversion, in contrast, had less radical consequences outside the household. Women's sympathy and adherence to Judaism was not marked by strong, distinctive signs, and formed a continuum from friendly interest to stronger commitment. It is easily imaginable that a Jewish man from a more scrupulous Pharisaic group would not have attended a banquet given by a Gentile man who was attracted by Judaism and ready to follow certain Jewish regulations, but would have found it normal that his wife ate with the same Gentile's wife.

MEALS IN THE EARLIEST JESUS-MOVEMENT

The earliest Jesus-movement had meals at the centre of its community life. According to the *Acts of the Apostles* the first community of the later Church was formed at Pentecost in Jerusalem. 'And day by day, attending the Temple together and breaking the bread in their homes, they partook of food with glad and generous hearts, praising God and having favour with all the people' (Acts 2:46–47 RSV). Although, as stated above, Acts was written in the last decades of the first century, it uses earlier written and oral sources, and we can use this sentence to highlight some features of early Christian meals.

First, the earliest Christian communities understood themselves as particularly pious, good Jews, who attended the Temple every day. They had another daily religious celebration, a common meal. These two – Temple service and meals at houses – characterise the religious life of the Jerusalem community in the first chapters of Acts (Acts 3:1; 5:20). The tradition of community meals is no doubt very early. Already Paul, who wrote his letters to the Corinthians in the early 50s, writes about the meal tradition as something 'he received from the Lord and delivered' to the Corinthians (1Co 11:23).

Secondly, they celebrated the community meals 'at houses', *kat'oikon*, that is, in a domestic setting. The early Christian communities were house churches, communities formed in households, following and reinterpreting the patterns of contemporary households.⁵⁶ The members addressed each other as brothers and sisters, which expressed equality and mutuality – the sibling-relationship was the model of democracy in Hellenistic thought.⁵⁷ In these earliest communities no member played the role of head of the household; they saw themselves as part of the household of God. The community meal was socially inclusive, providing subsistence to the poorest members. These first meals were closer to everyday family meals than to a public banquet. The 'breaking of the bread' also refers to an ordinary, 'female' meal without meat.⁵⁸

Thirdly, in the text quoted from Acts there is no hint of the commemorative aspect of the later Eucharist. The development of the meal traditions is debated. Gerd Theissen and Annette Merz analyse seven different meal traditions (the Last Supper stories of the gospels, the Johannine bread-homilies, the texts of 1Co and of the Didache), and show a great richness of interpretations.⁵⁹ Two messages or aspects seem to be linked in the later Eucharistic texts: the commemoration of Jesus' death, and the foreshadowing of the eschatological banquet at the end of days, when the family of God would be fully restored.

German exegetes of the first half of the twentieth century made the hypothesis that the eschatological thanksgiving-meal came from the Galilean Jesus-tradition, and goes back to the lifetime of Jesus, when he ate together with both elite and marginalised groups, and united them in an eschatological fellowship.⁶⁰ The vision of the eschatological meal has a rich scriptural basis (for example, Isa 25:6; Ps 22:27; 23:5 Joel 2:24-26), yet its primary intertext is the manna in the desert, a daily meal of (heavenly) bread.

Thus, we can see that the earliest Christian meals were the centre of community life. Participating in these meals was constitutive for the belonging to the community. When the first non-Jews – mostly

God-fearers – became attracted by the Jesus-movement, it was a major problem to integrate them into the community meals. The Jesus-movement rose in the rural Galilee and Judea, had close connections with Zealots and Essenes, and greater similarities to the Pharisaic movement. These were the least open, most rigorous groups of first-century Judaism. Both Essenes and Pharisees found it problematic to share their tables even with other, less rigorous Jews.⁶¹ Jesus walks through Galilee several times, but in the Gospels he never enters Tiberias, the most important city on the lake. Indeed, Tiberias was built on a cemetery, and therefore seen as an impure city in the first century – it was only Rabbi Meir in the second century who made it ritually pure. It seems that Jesus observed this rule. He ate and socialized with people of problematic ritual status, but there is no indication of his dining with Gentiles. From this background it was no means natural to include non-Jews in the community meals of the early Jesus-movement. Several writings of the New Testament reflect the conflicting views on the question (Gal 2,1-10; Mt 7,6; 15,21-28 par; Acts 10).⁶²

The organisation of the first Christian community meals – everyday meals without meat – was the task of women, probably mostly widows (Acts 6:1 cf. Lk 10:38–42).⁶³ The word *diakonein* or ‘serving’ became the technical term for table-service in an early stage of the tradition. We often encounter this word in connection with women in Gospel narratives (Mk 1,31 par; Lk 10:40; Jn 12:2). Wealthy women hosted the house churches in their homes, and prepared the tables, probably with the help of their female relatives, maidservants, and other female members of the community. They could invite people to these meals, and separation or full commensality at the meals was in their hands. It is possible that the first non-Jews whom these Jewish women included in the community meals were women – their own non-Jewish slaves, servants, or God-fearing women visiting Israel. At a later stage these women could include Gentile or God-fearing men in the community.

Since these meals were understood as domestic meals, women were not expected to remain silent and inconspicuous. Moreover, the community understood itself as an eschatological community, in which God pours out his spirit onto men and women, even onto servants and maidservants (Joel 3:1–2, quoted in Acts 2:17–18); thus, they could participate in prayer, in prophesy, in talk (for example, Acts 21:9; 1Co 11:5). Thus, their work in forming the community was not restricted to silent interventions: they could defend their position by arguments or by prophetic words, even by reinterpretation of the tradition taken from Jesus.

A WOMAN ARGUING BOLDLY FOR THE SHARING OF TABLES AND OF THE BLESSING OF JESUS

The most important text reflecting this process is to be found in two Gospels, Mark and Matthew. The Matthean version is in literary dependence on Mark, therefore we quote the Markan text here:

24 And from there he arose and went away to the region of Tyre and Sidon. And he entered a house, and would not have any one know it; yet he could not be hid. 25 But immediately a woman, whose little daughter was possessed by an unclean spirit, heard of him, and came and fell down at his feet. 26 Now the woman was a Greek, a Syrophenician by birth. And she begged him to cast the demon out of her daughter. 27 And he said to her, ‘Let the children first be fed, for it is not right to take the children’s bread and throw it to the dogs.’ 28 But she answered him, ‘Lord, yet even the dogs under the table eat the children’s crumbs!’ 29 And he said to her, ‘For this saying you may go your way; the demon has left your daughter.’ 30 And she went home, and found the child lying in bed, and the demon gone. (Revised Standard Version with my modifications⁶⁴)

This story is striking in many respects. First of all, Jesus wants to refuse a mother’s request for help. Secondly, he does so because of ethnic considerations. (The intratextual signs emphasise the woman’s ethno-religious otherness, but also numerous intertextual parallels make clear what is meant by ‘sons’ and ‘dogs’. For example, Rabbi Eliezer said: ‘one who eats with an idolater is like one who eats with a dog’.⁶⁵) Thirdly, the Gospel supports the woman against Jesus’ first position.

This story has indeed provoked various exegetical theories. In the mainstream exegetical works from Late Antiquity to the modern age the woman exemplified the humility of the true believer: she is ready to accept the humiliating label of a dog, but does not give up her hope and supplication. Luther, for example, claimed that Jesus wanted to heal the child, but first he wanted the woman to prove her persistent faith.⁶⁶ This interpretation absolves Jesus on the one hand of the moral weight of not helping a sick child, and on the other hand it reduces the seriousness of his original position. Exegetes of the last century also often tried to soften or ‘explain away’ the words and intentions of Jesus: Jesus was tired and wanted to hide, the ‘let the children be fed first’ may mean an openness toward non-Jews;⁶⁷

the image of children and dogs is a 'unification of Jew and Gentile in the household of God'.⁶⁸ Yet there is a growing consensus among exegetes that the exegesis of this story has to account for both the harsh exclusivism of Jesus and the words of the woman overruling him.

In my reading this is a special type of story, the instruction of the master, which we often find in Jewish religious literature from First Testament times up to the Hassidic legends. In these stories the teacher, religious leader, or other man of great authority is taught by a poor, lowly, uneducated person, who comes to him for help (2Sam 12,1–5; 14,4–11; several stories in Taanith in connection with the prayers for rain, and so on). Often the poor visitor asks for the judgement of the wise man on a smaller question, and thus points to the failure of the wise on a greater, more general issue, or the uneducated person uses the argument and words of the great Rabbi to defend him- or herself against unjust charges. In other cases the lowly visitor unconsciously points to a great truth that the rabbi immediately recognises, and thus he changes his position. In the Old Testament God sends the prophet Nathan to David with such a story of two poor men, and Joab uses the wise woman from Tekoa to provoke the judgement of the king against himself. In later legends the poor '*am ha'aretz*' may turn out to be the prophet Elijah. Martin Buber tells us a similar story about Avraham Heschel, the rabbi of Apta: a respected woman came to visit him and ask for counsel. But as he saw her, he shouted: 'Oh, you harlot, you just committed a sin and now you come here, to my clean room?' The woman answered:

The creator of this world is merciful to sinners, does not reveal the secrets of creatures, and they do not feel shame when they repent and turn to Him. But the Rabbi of Apta sits on his seat and can not resist revealing what is concealed by the Creator of the World.

From that day, the Rabbi of Apta used to say: 'Nobody ever overcame me but this woman.'⁶⁹ The story of the Syrophenician woman in its present form is a narrative of this kind. The story of the *maître maîtrisé*, the great teacher, who had a shortcoming, but to whom God sent a little, needy woman to teach him, and he was able to understand the truth revealed by her.⁷⁰

Several scholars have attempted to reconstruct the prehistory of the Markan account.⁷¹ It is not a miracle-story, but rather a *Streitgespräch*, a controversy in connection with an exorcism. The core of the story could be a *chreia* with the saying of v. 27 and the response of v. 28.⁷² It is likely that the parable on 'sons before the dogs', and the counterparable on 'children and dogs sharing the one bread' was already directed to the issue of Gentile mission and table-fellowship.⁷³ The first saying on dogs and children comes from the same tradition as the logion of the Sermon of the Mount in Mt 7:6: 'Do not give to the dogs what is holy, and do not throw your pearls before swine.'⁷⁴ If this saying, attributed to Jesus, was used against the Gentile mission (which involved commensality with Gentiles), the answer of women, who established and defended table-fellowship with Gentiles, in particular with Gentile women. This narrative in its present form carries an additional message: even the tradition taken from Jesus can be reinterpreted in a critical and creative way.

The pericope itself is about the relationship of Jews and Gentiles in the Jesus-movement, using the image of shared bread as a metaphor for their community. The setting of the story in the Gospel of Mark puts special emphasis on the aspect of commensality. The immediately preceding text (7:1–23) is a speech of Jesus on purity regulations. The following narrative unit is again the healing of a Gentile man, with a reference to a prophecy of Isaiah (Mk 7:34–37 to Isa 35:5)⁷⁵, where the prophet says about the reign of the Messiah: 'And a highway shall be there, and a way, and it shall be called The way of holiness; the unclean shall not pass over it' (Isa 35:8 KJV). Thus, the three parts of the seventh chapter are united by the theme 'Gentiles and purity'. This group of stories is bracketed by the two feeding miracles in 6:30–44 and 8:1–10.⁷⁶ Both stories tell about eschatological banquets, where Jesus miraculously feeds all his followers, fulfilling the prophecies on the Messianic age. Both texts have close connections with the story of the Last Supper in 14:12–26, and thus they prefigure the eucharistic community meals of later Christianity. The first miracle happens on the Jewish side of the sea or lake, the other in Gentile territory. In both cases there are enormous amounts of leftovers, food to be eaten in an even greater banquet. After the second miracle Jesus summarises for his disciples:

'When I broke the five loaves for the five thousand, how many baskets full of broken pieces did you take up?' They said to him: 'Twelve'. 'And the seven for the four thousand, how many baskets full of broken pieces did you take up?' They said to him: 'Seven'. And he said to them: 'Do you not yet understand?' (Mk 8:19–21 RSV)

In the biblical symbolism the number twelve refers to the tribes of Israel to be gathered again from all corners of the earth, while seven is the number of the entire creation and humanity. Both miracles have

verbal links to the story of the Syro-Phoenician woman.⁷⁷ That made exegetes read the two stories as eschatological signs referring to the coming of Israel and of the nations to the Messianic banquet of Jesus.⁷⁸ Hence, in the Markan context the story of the Syro-Phoenician woman is the story of a woman who managed to convince Jesus, to make him change his mind, and invite also the Gentiles to his table.

This woman is the only positive female character whose voice is heard in the Gospel of Mark. Women, although they often act in an exemplary way, are silent throughout the text. This silence becomes central in the last verses:⁷⁹ there, after the resurrection of Jesus, the message of Easter is told to the women who visit the tomb, but they do not tell it to anybody, because they are frightened. The gospel ends with a tension: how will these silent women be courageous enough to fulfil their call and speak in the Christian community? This tension recalls once again the story of the Syro-Phoenician woman. The boldness of the women who established table-fellowship with the Gentiles becomes a good example for all women in the Christian community: they have to lift up their voice, they have to act and to speak against injustice and exclusion. Their silence does not make this a secondary issue; it is the very essence of the Gospel.

¹ See Lucia Scherzberg, *Grundkurs Feministische Theologie* (Mainz: Grünewald, 1995); *Searching the Scriptures. A Feminist Introduction*, ed. Elisabeth Schüssler-Fiorenza (London: SMC, 1994); *Dictionary of Feminist Theologies*, ed. Letty M. Russell and J. Shannon Clarkson (Westminster: John Knox Press, 1996).

² See, for example, Marie-Theres Wacker and Luise Schottruff, *Von der Wurzel getragen. Christlich-Feministische Exegese in Auseinandersetzung mit Antijudaismus*, Biblical Interpretation Series, Vol. 17 (1996); Katharina von Kelenbach, *Anti-Judaism in Christian-Rooted Feminist Writings* (Atlanta: Scholars, 1994). Other aspects of feminist theological anti-Judaism (for example, 'the Jews killed the Goddess') cannot be discussed here.

³ Judit Plaskow, 'Anti-Judaism in Feminist Christian Interpretation', in *Searching the Scriptures*, p. 118.

⁴ Christian theology gave the title 'Old Testament' to the part of the canon shared with Judaism, while the specific Christian part was later named the 'New Testament'. The anti-Judaist impact of this naming does not need to be proven. Present scholarship developed or adopted some alternative terms, such as 'Hebrew Bible', 'First Testament', 'Mikraal and Tannakh' for the first half of the Christian canon, while the second part is sometimes designated as 'Second Testament'. All of these terms have certain deficits, therefore I am not opting exclusively for any of them, but use the new terminology together with the traditional one, and hope to reinterpret the latter through the former.

⁵ Plaskow, 'Anti-Judaism in Feminist Christian Interpretation', pp. 124–27.

⁶ Ágnes Heller, *A zsidó Jézus feltámadása* (Budapest: Múlt és Jövő, 2000), pp. 81–87.

⁷ Kwok Pui-Lan, 'Racism and Ethnocentrism in Feminist Biblical Interpretation', in *Searching the Scriptures. A Feminist Introduction*, ed. Elisabeth Schüssler-Fiorenza (London, 1994), p. 109.

⁸ This development is well analysed and described by recent feminist scholarship, for example in the following studies: Elisabeth Schüssler-Fiorenza, *Discipleship of Equals: A Critical Feminist Ekklesiology of Liberation* (New York: Crossroad, 1993); Anne Jensen, *Gottes selbstbewußte Töchter. Frauenemanzipation im frühen Christentum?* (Frauenforum) (Freiburg: Herder, 1992); Luise Schottruff, *Lydias ungeduldige Schwestern. Feministische Sozialgeschichte des frühen Christentums* (Gütersloh: Kaiser/Gütersloher, 1994).

⁹ See, for example, Adolf von Harnack, *Dogmengeschichte* (Freiburg im Breisgau, 1898).

¹⁰ See, for example, Harry Chadwick, *A korai egyház* (original title: *The Early Church*) (Budapest: Osiris, 1999), pp. 16–18.

¹¹ Magdolna Jánosné Petruska, 'Étkezés – római módra', in *Az antik Róma napjai*, ed. Ágnes S. Boronkai (Budapest: Tankönyvkiadó, 1986), pp. 233–34.

¹² Tibor Szepessy, *A régi Róma napjai* (Budapest: Gondolat, 1968), pp. 154–55.

¹³ Jánosné Petruska, 'Étkezés – római módra', p. 243.

¹⁴ Szepessy, *A régi Róma napjai*, pp. 155–57.

¹⁵ Jánosné Petruska, 'Étkezés – római módra', p. 234.

¹⁶ György Ürögdi, *Róma kenyere, Róma aranya* (Budapest: Gondolat, 1969), pp. 92–93.

¹⁷ *A leány meg az Isten. Görög szerelmes novellák*, ed. József Révay (Budapest: Helikon, 1968), p. 88.

¹⁸ *Late Antiquity: A Guide to the Postclassical World*, ed. Glen Warren Bowersock et al. (Cambridge, MA.: Harvard University Press, 1999), p. 409.

¹⁹ Everett Ferguson, *A kereszténység bölcsője* (original title: *Backgrounds of Early Christianity*) (Budapest: Osiris, 1999), p. 155.

²⁰ *Late Antiquity*, ed. Bowersock et al., p. 452.

²¹ Marcel Detienne, 'Violence of Well-Born Ladies', in *The Cuisine of Sacrifice Among the Greeks*, ed. Marcel Detienne and Jean-Pierre (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1989), pp. 129–47, esp. p. 133.

²² Roland Barthes, 'Toward a Psychology of Contemporary Food Consumption', in *Food and Culture. A Reader*, ed. Carole Counihan and Penny Van Esterik (New York: Routledge, 1997), p. 24.

²³ János Bolyki, *Jézus asztalközösségei. Újszövetségi-patrisztikai kutatások* [Jesus's table communities. New Testament–patristic studies] I (Budapest: Ráday nyomda, 1993), p. 183.

²⁴ According to Valerius Maximus (6,39) a woman who got drunk on wine deserved even to be killed. Jane F. Gardner and Thomas Wildermann, *The Roman Household. A Sourcebook* (London – New York: Routledge, 1991), p. 57. For the evaluation of men and women drinking in Jewish society see Sirach 26,8 and 31,27–28.

²⁵ Stuart L. Love, 'Women and Men at the Hellenistic Symposia Meals in Luke', in *Modelling Early Christianity. Social-Scientific Studies of the New Testament and its Context*, ed. Philip P. Esler. (London–New York: Routledge, 1995), pp. 199–201.

²⁶ *Families in the New Testament World. Households and House Churches*, ed. Carolyn Osiek and David L. Balch (The Family, Religion and Culture Series) (Louisville, KY: John Knox, 1997), pp. 45–46.

²⁷ *Late Antiquity*, ed. Bowersock, p. 453.

²⁸ Joachim Gnilka, *Das Markusevangelium. Evangelisch-Katolische Kommentare* (Freiburg, 1996).

²⁹ See, for example, Genesis 18,6-9; Genesis 27, esp. 27,4; Leviticus 26,26; 1 Sam. 8,13; 2 Sam. 13,6-10, etc. Gen. 25 represents a special case: the feminised Jacob prepares female food, while the emphatically masculine Esau hunts. Another exception is the witch of Endor, who, unlike proper women, such as Abigail, prepares a meal with a sacrificial character herself (1 Sam. 27,21 cf. 25,8). Among the works of woman Ketubot 59b, mentions grinding, but says nothing about meat preparation.

³⁰ Ferguson, *A kereszténység bölcsője*, p. 31.

³¹ Bolyki, *Jézus asztalközösségei*, p. 175.

³² See also the Gospel of Thomas 61.

³³ See for example Philip P. Esler, *Community and Gospel in Luke-Acts. The Social and Political Motivations of Lucan Theology*, Society for New Testament Studies Monograph Series 57 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987).

³⁴ James D. G. Dunn, 'The Incident at Antioch (Gal. 2,11–18)', *Journal for the Study of the New Testament* 18 (1983), pp. 58–67, reprinted with an additional note in Dunn, *Jesus, Paul, and the Law. Studies in Mark and Galatians* (London: SPCK, 1990), p. 147.

³⁵ Esler, *Community and Gospel in Luke-Acts*, pp. 78–79.

³⁶ Strabo, *The Geography* (London: H. C. Hamilton and W. Falconer, 1889), Vol. 3, pp. 177–78, XVI. ii. 37–38.

³⁷ *The Histories of Tacitus* (London: Macmillan, 1898), Book V, chapter 4.

- ³⁸ 'Life of Apollonius of Tyana', quoted in Esler, *Community and Gospel in Luke-Acts*, p. 80.
- ³⁹ Esler, *Community and Gospel in Luke-Acts*, pp. 82–83.
- ⁴⁰ Esler, *Community and Gospel in Luke-Acts*, pp. 83–84.
- ⁴¹ *Biblia Hebraica Stuttgartiensia* (Stuttgart: Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft, 1990, based on the 1967–77 edition).
- ⁴² *Septuaginta. Id est Vetus Testamentum graecae iuxta LXX interpretes edidit Alfred Rahlfs* (Stuttgart: Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft, 1979, based on the 1935 edition).
- ⁴³ I use the edition of R. H. Charles (Oxford: Clarendon, 1913), republished on <http://wesley.nnu.edu/noncanon/ot/pseudo/aristeas.htm>.
- ⁴⁴ JosAs 21,6; 8,5.
- ⁴⁵ For Judaism, see Bradley Blue, 'The Acts and the House Church', in *The Book of Acts and its Graeco-Roman Setting*, 2nd volume of *The Book of Acts in its First Century Setting*, ed. David J. Gill and Conrad Gempf (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans–Carlisle: Paternoster, 1994), p. 178. For Christianity, see Margaret MacDonald Y., *Early Christian Women in Pagan Opinion. The Power of Hysterical Women* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), pp. 51–125.
- ⁴⁶ De Bellum, 2.506 ff.
- ⁴⁷ *Families in the New Testament World*, ed. Osiek and Balch, pp. 82–87.
- ⁴⁸ David L. Balch, *Let Wives Be Submissive. The Domestic Code in 1 Peter* (SBL MS 26) (Chico: Scholars, 1981), p. 68.
- ⁴⁹ The Jews enslaved by Pompeius were probably the first group who refused to participate in the cult of their masters. Philo claims that their intractability on this issue was the reason why they were later emancipated and became citizens. The logic of his argument is illustrative of the point I made above: the refusal to join the family cult was understood as a lack of general loyalty to the master. This was seen as irreconcilable with slave status. Embassy to Gaius 155. Balch, *Let Wives Be Submissive*, p. 69.
- ⁵⁰ Shaye J. D. Cohen, *The Beginnings of Jewishness. Boundaries, Varieties, Uncertainties* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1999), pp. 241–306.
- ⁵¹ MacDonald, *Early Christian Women*, p. 60.
- ⁵² It is indeed stated on epitaphs that women 'observed the law'. Barbara H. Geller Nathanson, 'Toward a Multicultural Ecumenical History of Women's Early Christian History', in *Searching the Scriptures*, ed. Schussler-Fiorenza, p. 279. The statement is difficult to interpret because most of the laws of the Torah were exclusively for men. Jewish law had three commandments that only women were obliged (and able) to follow: the lighting of the Sabbath candles, the *challah* precept (taking and burning a piece of dough before baking the bread), and the laws concerning menstruation.
- ⁵³ I take the view that the development of the notion of a spiritual religious motherhood, which took place in parallel in Judaism and Christianity in the second and third centuries, was an answer to this problem. Women who converted without their children hoped to be mothers of the synagogue or of the Christian community instead. For the mothers of the synagogue, see Bernadette J. Broten, *Women Leaders in the Ancient Synagogue. Inscriptional Evidence and Background Issues* (Brown Judaic Studies 36) (Atlanta: Scholars, 1982) and Ross S. Kraemer, 'A New Inscription from Malta and the Question of Woman Elders in the Diaspora Jewish Communities', *Harvard Theological Review* 78, No. 3–4 (1985), pp. 431–38.
- ⁵⁴ Lester L. Grabbe, *Judaic Religion in the Second Temple Period. Belief and Practice from the Exile to Yavneh* (London – New York: Routledge, 2000), pp. 295–97. In the already mentioned *Joseph and Aseneth*, a book obviously written to propagate conversion, the inclusion of Aseneth into the Jewish community is a longer process. She repents for her idolatry and haughtiness, destroys her idols, fasts and prays, receives heavenly messages, takes heavenly food and drink, immerses in pure water from the spring, but her full inclusion into the people of Israel happens through her marriage. In this legal act she leaves the authority of her father, the Egyptian priest, and becomes part of a family "who worships the living God".
- ⁵⁵ Shaye Cohen, 'Respect for Judaism by Gentiles according to Josephus', *Harvard Theological Review* 80 (1987), pp. 409–30.
- ⁵⁶ Hans-Joseph Klauck, *Hausgemeinde und Hauskirche im frühen Christentum* (Stuttgarter Bibelstudien 103) (Stuttgart: Katholisches Bibelwerk GmbH, 1981).
- ⁵⁷ For example Arius Didymus, a friend and teacher of Augustus wrote an Epitome on the ideas of Aristotle. Here he summarises: 'for the relation (*koinonia*) of parents to children has a monarchic character; of men to women, aristocratic; of children to one another, democratic', 148,16-18; Balch, *Let Wives Be Submissive*, pp. 40–42.
- ⁵⁸ It is debated which earlier form or forms of meals were the models of these early Christian meetings. The three main hypotheses are: the Eucharist is modelled on the Pesakh meal, modelled on the todah-meal, or on the ordinary daily family meal.
- ⁵⁹ Gerd Theissen and Annette Merz, *Der historische Jesus. Ein Lehrbuch* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1996), pp. 363–86.
- ⁶⁰ Theissen and Merz, *Der historische Jesus*, pp. 363–64.
- ⁶¹ Bolyki, *Jézus asztalközösségei*, pp. 186–88.
- ⁶² Esler, *Community and Gospel in Luke-Acts*, pp. 86–93.
- ⁶³ This point was treated at length by Elisabeth Schüssler-Fiorenza in 'Theological Criteria and Historical Reconstruction: Martha and Mary. Luke 10,38-42', *Coloquy* 53 (1987).
- ⁶⁴ There is an important textual-critical problem in verse 28. Several old manuscripts insert a 'yes' into the answer of the woman: 'Yes, Lord, yet even the dogs under the table eat the children's crumbs'. The most recent edition of the *Greek New Testament* (NTG, 27th ed., Barbara Aland et al. Stuttgart: Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft, 1981) opts for the shorter reading, but most translations, and all the published Hungarian Bibles give the longer one.
- ⁶⁵ Quoted in Ched Myers, *Binding the Strong Man. A Political Reading of Mark's Story of Jesus* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1988), p. 204. The text has strong intertextual connections to the story of the widow of Sarepta (1 Kings 17,17–24), another woman from the region of Sidon, whose child was resurrected when she complained to Elijah against the injustice done against her: 'What have I to do with thee, O thou man of God? Art thou come unto me to call my sin to remembrance, and to slay my son?' (1 Kings 17,18 KJV).
- ⁶⁶ Zoltán Dóka, *Márk evangéliuma* (Budapest: OLBK, 1996), p. 156.
- ⁶⁷ Hisako Kinukawa, *Women and Jesus in Mark. A Japanese Feminist Perspective* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1994), p. 60.
- ⁶⁸ Ernst Lohmeyer, *Das Evangelium nach Markus überstzt und erklärt. Kritisch-exegetischer Kommentar über das Neue Testament I/2* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1959 [1937]), 15th edition, pp. 145–48.

⁶⁹ Martin Buber, *Haszid történetek I–II* (original title *Die Erzählungen der Chassidim*) (Budapest: Atlantisz, 1995) Vol. II, p. 94. My own, somewhat shortened retelling.

⁷⁰ Jean-Yves Thériault, ‘Le maître maîtrisé! Matthieu 15,21–28’, in *Jésus et les femmes. Lectures sémiotiques* (Montréal: Bellermin – Paris: Du Cerf, 1987), pp. 19–34. and Jean-Paul Michaud and Pierrette T. Davideau, ‘Jésus au-delà des frontières de Tyr. Marc 7,24–31’, in *Jésus et les femmes*, pp. 35–58.

⁷¹ Monika Fander, *Die Stellung der Frau im Markusevangelium. Unter besonderen berücksichtigen kultur- und religionsgeschichtlicher Hintergründe* (Altenberge: Oros Verlag, 1992), pp. 63–76; Hal Taussig, ‘Dealing under the Table. Ritual Negotiation of Women’s Power in the Syro-Phoenician Woman Pericope’, in *Reimagining Christian Origins: A Colloquium Honoring Burton L. Mack*, ed. Elizabeth A. Castelli and Hal Taussig (Philadelphia: Trinity Press International, 1996), pp. 264–79.

⁷² Hal Tausig argues that the original speakers of the *chreia* were not Jesus and a Syro-Phoenician but a man and a woman, and the text addresses the problem of women’s participation in community meals. A second stage, then, was the formation of the exorcism story around the dialogue, and only in the Markan redaction did the text gain its new meaning in relation to Jewish–Gentile problems. Although I do not follow her reconstruction of the history of the tradition, my exegesis owes a lot to her analysis of the text. Taussig, ‘Dealing under the Table’, p. 265.

⁷³ Fander, *Die Stellung der Frau im Markusevangelium*, p. 67. The Didache quotes this saying of Jesus in connection with Eucharistic table-fellowship, but there the unworthy are not Gentiles, but non-baptised. Did 9,5.

⁷⁴ It is impossible to tell whether and in what sense the historical Jesus uttered this. Yet it is accepted by most researchers that he did not turn toward Gentiles with his message, and did not send his disciples to the Gentile mission either.

⁷⁵ Isaac Rabinowitz, “‘Be Opened’ – Effata (Mk 7,34): Did Jesus Speak Hebrew?’, *Zeitschrift für Neutestamentliche Wissenschaft* 53 (1962), pp. 229–38.

⁷⁶ I cannot discuss here the role of the Walking on the Water (6,45–56) in this context. The commentary of Bas van Iersel, ‘Mark. A Reader–Response Commentary’, *Journal for the Study of the New Testament*, Suppl. Series 164 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1998) offers an extensive and very convincing analysis of the sea-crossings in context of the problem of mission and crossing boundaries. See pp. 125 and 230–235.

⁷⁷ See Myers, *Binding the Strong Man*, p. 204: First the children have to be satisfied (χορτασθῆναι), also at the end of the first feeding in 6,42 and of the second in 8,8.

⁷⁸ Geert Van Oyen, *The Interpretation of the Feeding Miracles in the Gospel of Mark*, *Collectanea Biblica Et Religiosa Antiqua* 4 (Brussel, 1999), esp. pp. 206–12.

⁷⁹ The original text of the Gospel of Mark ends at 16,8; 16,9–21 is a later addition, as most of the earliest manuscripts indicate it.