

Symposion and Philanthropia in Plutarch

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THE READING OF TEXTS AT THE GRAECO-ROMAN SYMPOSIUM AND IN THE CHRISTIAN GATHERING

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Abstract

Classical scholars who researched the topic of the activities taking place at Graeco-Roman banquets, extensively described the artistic presentations that accompanied eating and drinking. They have paid much attention to the singing, dancing and dramatic performances given at banquets. Less attention has been given to the subject of public reading in the context of the after-dinner symposium. The custom of reading literary works at symposia is well attested in the symposiastic literature of the first and the second centuries CE. Plutarch's *Moralia* are one of the more important sources that attest the reading of literature at the Graeco-Roman symposium. In the late 90s it has been argued by several scholars that the early Christian communities during their weekly gatherings followed the same pattern of Graeco-Roman dining. This paper seeks to argue that the reading of texts in the early Christian gathering is the historical counterpart of the reading of texts at the Graeco-Roman symposium.

Introduction

Classical scholars have carefully investigated the activities that accompanied Graeco-Roman banquets and the entertainment and artistic contributions that surrounded the eating and drinking.¹ They have paid much attention to the singing, dancing and dramatic performances given at banquets². However, they have taken less interest in the subject of the public reading of literary texts in the context of the after-dinner symposium.³ The custom of reading literary works at symposia is well attested in the symposiastic literature of the first and second centuries CE. Plutarch's *Moralia* is one of the more important sources for our knowledge about the reading of literature at the symposium. In the late 90's of the last century, several scholars have convincingly shown that the weekly gatherings held by early Christian communities conformed to the custom of many voluntary associations in the Graeco-Roman world which would gather periodically for a supper and a symposium⁴. However, it has not been argued sufficiently and in detail that various elements of the Christian gatherings such as reading of Scripture, preaching and singing have their origins in customs practised at Graeco-Roman banquets. This paper tries to argue that the reading of texts in the early Christian gathering is the historical counterpart of the reading of texts at the Graeco-Roman symposium.

¹ K. DUNBABIN, 1998, pp. 81-101; E. STEIN-HÖLKESKAMP, 2005, pp. 220-52.

² K. DUNBABIN, 1996, pp. 66-80.

³ Discussions of reading at the symposium are found in R. STARR, 1990-1991, pp. 337-43; Ch. JONES, 1991, pp. 191-92.

⁴ M. KLINGHARDT, 1996, pp. 269-378; H. J. DE JONGE, 2001, pp. 209-37; D. SMITH, 2003.

The Reading of texts at the Graeco-Roman Symposium

Public reading in antiquity could be performed in various social settings. Dio Chrysostom describes how, walking through the hippodrome, he encountered people playing the flute, dancing, performing tricks, reading out a poem, singing, and recounting a history or tale⁵. The most common context, however, was the after-dinner symposium.⁶ Numerous Greek and Roman authors give descriptions of banquets at which the reading of texts played a prominent role. The reading of texts at a symposium usually served two purposes. First, it provided entertainment for the guests. Juvenal writes in his *Satirae*: “My party today will offer other forms of entertainment. We’ll have a recitation from the author of *Iliad* and from the poems of Virgil which challenge Homer’s supremacy. With poetry like this, it hardly matters how it is read”⁷. Second, the reading of texts at banquets could give the impulse for a good conversation and, according to Plutarch, also help “to raise morals to a higher standard of fairness and kindness”⁸.

At the symposium various types of texts could be read: philosophy, scientific treatises, history, poetry, and comedy. According to Aulus Gellius, at a banquet of the philosopher Taurus the *Symposium* of Plato was read.⁹ At the dinner of the philosopher Favorinus “there was usually read either an old song of the lyric poets, or something from history, now in Greek and now in Latin”¹⁰. Gellius once heard the reading of a passage from the treatise of Gavius Bassus *On the Origin of Verbs and Substantives*¹¹. Plutarch notices that, as entertainment at a banquet, the dialogues of Plato could be recited and even performed¹². According to Lucian, the blessed ones who live on the Isle of the Blest enjoy a symposium accompanied by poetry and songs. Here, mostly the poems of Homer are read or recited¹³. In Lucian’s *Symposion*, the grammarian Histiaios recited a combination of verses of Pindar, Hesiod and Anacreon¹⁴. Plutarch states that the comedian Menander is particularly fit to be read at symposia¹⁵.

The reading at symposia could be performed by persons of various statuses. First, the person who read the literary text could be the author of the text himself, who by reading his composition hoped to elicit the comments and reactions of the participants in the banquet¹⁶. Petronius relates that Trimalchio

⁵ D. Chr., XX 10.

⁶ Plu., *Quaest. conv.* 7.711b-712c; Plin., *Epist.* 1.15.2.

⁷ Juv., *Sat.* 11.180.

⁸ Plu., *Quaest. conv.* 7.712d.

⁹ Gell., *NA* 17.20.

¹⁰ Gell., *NA* 2.22.

¹¹ Gell., *NA* 3.19.

¹² Plu., *Quaest. conv.* 7.711c.

¹³ Luc., *VH* 2.15.

¹⁴ Luc., *Symp.* 17.

¹⁵ Plu., *Quaest. conv.* 7.712b.

¹⁶ E. J. KENNEY, “Books and Readers in the Roman World”, in E. J. KENNEY & W. V. CLAUSEN (eds.), *The Cambridge History of Classical Literature Volume II: Latin Literature*, Cambridge, 1982,

at his banquet read his last will and also some poetry of his own making.¹⁷ Second, the reading could be performed by the host of the banquet. Third, the task of reading could be assigned to a special reader (ἀναγνώστης, lector). Such readers would often be educated slaves, whose duty in Roman houses was to entertain their master and his guests at table by a recitation in Greek and/or Latin¹⁸.

Atticus, for instance, had very good readers, whom he thought indispensable at dinner parties¹⁹. Gellius relates that a slave usually stood by the table at dinner with the philosopher Favorinus²⁰. Plutarch states that slaves could be charged with the recitation and performance of Plato's dialogues²¹. The evidence cited so far may suffice to warrant the conclusion that reading of literary compositions at symposia was a widely spread custom.

The Reading of texts in the Gatherings of Christians

Generations of scholars have traced the reading of Scripture in early Christian communities back to the reading of the Law of Moses in the Jewish synagogue. In this traditional and still current view, it is taken for granted that the reading of Scripture in Christian assemblies goes back to the reading of the Law in the synagogue if only for the fact that it was the Jewish Scriptures that were read in the Christian gatherings²². The earliest Christians, who were Jews, would have taken over not only the custom of meeting weekly to read and interpret the Law and the Prophets but also the practice of singing psalms and saying prayers and thanksgivings. Jews would have held their scrolls in great veneration, a respect that was enhanced by the ritualized reading in a religious setting. In time, the reverence for the word of God and the use of sacred books in religious gatherings would have become characteristic of Christians as well²³. This argument for tracing back the reading of Scripture among Christians to the synagogue profits from the fact that there are no clear-cut or convincing parallels for the cultic reading of texts in other religions than Judaism, apart from religions that have been influenced by Christianity itself. Thus, on the assumption that there was historical continuity between Jewish and Christian cultic practices, scholars inferred and still infer that the reading of Scripture in the Christian gathering has its roots in Judaism or has been influenced by Judaism in one way or another²⁴.

However, the view that the reading of texts in Christian communities derives from the practice of reading and studying the Law in Jewish

p. 11; R. STARR, 1987, p. 213.

¹⁷ Petron., *Satyr.* 71.4; 55.

¹⁸ See J.W. DUFF and A. J. S. SPAWFORTH, "anagnostes," in *OCD*³, p. 80.

¹⁹ Nep., *Att.* 13.3; 14.1.

²⁰ Gell., *NA* 3.19.

²¹ Plu., *Quaest. conv.* 7.711c.

²² F. YOUNG, 2004, p. 91.

²³ *Ibid.*, 92.

²⁴ G. ROUWHORST, 2002, p. 305.

communities does not seem to be confirmed by the data contained in early Christian literature.

To clarify the origin of the reading of Scripture in the gatherings of Christians it is necessary to look at the context of reading in the Christian Church during the first and second centuries.

In the last ten years there has been a substantial shift in the way scholars viewed the periodical gatherings of the early Christians. This shift began with the publication of *Gemeinschaftsmahl und Mahlgemeinschaft* by Matthias Klinghardt (1996)²⁵ and became stronger through studies by H. J. de Jonge (2001) and D. Smith (2003)²⁶. The essence of these authors' new approach can be formulated as follows: the local early Christian community, as a sociological phenomenon, functioned as a voluntary religious association just like many other associations in the Graeco-Roman world of the first century CE. There is firm evidence from the first two centuries CE to support this view. For instance, in 55 CE Paul compares the local Christian community with pagan religious associations in Corinth²⁷. In 112 CE Pliny does the same in his correspondence with the Roman Emperor Trajan²⁸. Lucian in the second century CE calls the leader of a Christian community a *thiasarches*, that is, leader of a cult association²⁹. About 200 CE Tertullian compares meals of the Christian communities with meals of various other religious associations such as the *collegia Saliorum* and the Dionysus and Sarapis cults³⁰.

Recent scholarship mostly accepts and subscribes to the view that, sociologically, early Christian communities functioned as Hellenistic cult associations. Such associations, whether pagan, Jewish, or Christian, held periodical gatherings that had a bipartite structure: a meal (*deipnon*) and a drinking party (*symposion*) afterwards. Most descriptions of Christian gatherings in the first three centuries present these gatherings as banquets that took place weekly on Sunday evening (Paul, Pliny, Justin Martyr, Clement of Alexandria, Municius Felix, Tertullian). Basically, the early Christian gathering was a supper with a drinking party, not a meeting for the study of the Bible, as was the synagogue meeting on Sabbath. The early Christians met in private houses on Sunday evening and held their symposia more or less the same way as other groups did in those days. During the symposium part of the evening, Christians not only engaged in such oral communication as prayer, singing, speeches, homilies, lessons and revelations, they also practised public reading of texts.

It may seem exaggerated to seek the roots of the reading of texts in the gatherings of Christians one-sidedly and exclusively in the Hellenistic symposium, and not both in synagogue and symposium. There are, however,

²⁵ M. KLINGHARDT, 1996, pp. 269-378.

²⁶ H. J. de JONGE, 2001, pp. 209-37; D. SMITH, 2003.

²⁷ 1 Cor. 10:16-21.

²⁸ Luc., *Peregr.* 11.

²⁹ Plin., *Epist.* 10.96.

³⁰ Tert., *Apol.* 39.

strong reasons to trace the Christians' reading exclusively to the symposium. The meeting in the synagogue took place on Saturday in the morning did not comprise a meal or a symposium. The literary evidence from Philo and Josephus suggests that the synagogue was used primarily for reading and interpreting the Law of Moses³¹. Christians did not read the Torah or the Law of Moses as was the custom in the synagogal meeting. Moreover, during the first century, Christians read texts without any interpretation that followed the reading. There simply no continuity: neither between the ceremonies involved, nor between the texts read.

The first Christian texts to be read in Christian gatherings were apostolic letters, for instance, those of Paul. These were read from the middle of the first century onwards. This can be inferred from the Pauline correspondence and the Book of Acts³². At first, the reading of the apostles' letters was not yet a liturgical practice; rather these letters were read just as letters received. In certain cases, the messenger who brought them could read such letters to the audience.³³ Many early Christian letters were intended to be heard by all members of the community to which they were addressed; this means that they had to be read aloud in that community's weekly gathering at the symposium.

It should be admitted that reading at the Hellenistic symposium could have different functions and goals, and that various genres were read. But one function could certainly be the instruction or edification of the audience, which comes close to that of the reading of apostolic letters among Christians. Plutarch said that one should read moral stuff, especially Plato's dialogues.³⁴ Moreover, one should not conceive of the apostolic letters read in the Christian communities as documents of high canonical, holy or divine status. At first, they were no more than messages from contemporary teachers, and documents almost of the level of every-day life; nothing particularly special. Furthermore, it is already significant of and in itself that reading occurred at the Christian symposium: why would one suppose that this has other roots than reading at symposia in general. That the genres that were read could vary, both within paganism and between paganism and Christianity, does not alter the fact that reading at symposia was the continuation of the reading at symposia in general.

Around 100 CE the author of 1 Timothy admonishes his addressee to devote himself to the public reading of the Scriptures.³⁵ Since there is no evidence that there existed special meetings intended only for the reading of Scripture and preaching, it is probable that 1 Timothy means that portions of the Old Testament in Greek should be read at the symposium on Sunday evening. Until the third century³⁶ there is no indication that Christians in their

³¹ Philo, *Som.* 2.127; Jos., *Ant.* 16.2.4.

³² 1 Thess. 5:27, Acts 15:31; Col. 4:16.

³³ Luc., *Symp.* 21.

³⁴ Plu., *Quaest. conv.* 7.711.c.

³⁵ 1 Tim. 4:13.

³⁶ Or., *Hom. Josh.* 4.1; *Hom. Gen.* 12.1. According to Melito of Sardes, *On Pascha*, he read

gatherings read the Law of Moses; it is most probable, therefore, that they read other books of the Old Testament, for example, the Prophets or the Psalms.

In the second century, in addition to letters and Prophets, the writings read at Christian symposia included sermons, apocalypses and accounts of Christian martyrdoms³⁷.

Explicit information about the reading of Gospels in the gatherings of Christians is provided by Justin Martyr (*ca.* 155):

On the day called Sunday, all who live in cities or in the country gather together in one place, and the memoirs of the apostles or the writings of the prophets are read, as long as time permits. Then, when the reader has finished, the president in a discourse instructs and exhorts to the imitation of these good things³⁸.

Thus, in Justin's Church in Rome, the reading of Gospels and/or Prophets was followed by a speech, including ethical exhortations, and prayers. Only then would the supper begin.

Some decades later, the reading of Gospels in gatherings of Christians is attested by the *Acts of Peter*, written between 180 and 190 CE. Here Peter is said to have entered the house where the Christians had gathered. When he came into the dining-room (*triclinium*), "he saw that the gospel was being read. And rolling it up he said, 'Men, who believe in Christ and hope in him, you shall know how the holy scriptures of our Lord must be explained Now I will explain to you that which has been read to you.'"³⁹ The reading and exposition of Scripture are concluded with a supper (ch. 22). The course of things described here must be that of the Roman Church in the late second century.

In about 200 CE, Tertullian gives a brief description of the Christian gathering in North Africa. With respect to the reading of Scripture in this gathering he observes:

We assemble to read our sacred writings, if any peculiarity of the times makes either forewarning or reminiscence needful. However it be in that respect, with the sacred words we nourish our faith, we animate our hope, we make our confidence more steadfast; and no less by inculcations of God's precepts we confirm good habits⁴⁰.

Interestingly, in Tertullian's view the reading has a pastoral purpose. The hearing of Scripture strengthens the listeners' faith, hope and morality.

Whereas at Graeco-Roman symposia the reading of texts normally took place after the supper, the evidence in Justin and Tertullian suggests that, in

Ex. 12 on Easter day, but this is of course a special case; it is not the reading in a regular Sunday gathering.

³⁷ 2 *Clem.* 19.1.; Rev. 1:3-8, 11; Herm., *Vis.* 2.8.4; *Canon Muratori*, lines 71-78; *M. Polyc.* 20.

³⁸ Just., 1 *Apol.* 67.3.

³⁹ *Acta Petri* 20.

⁴⁰ Tert., *Apol.* 39.3.

the second century, Christians reversed the order and put the reading before the communal meal. The easiest explanation of this reversal is that it allowed those who were not yet full members of the community, the catechumens, to participate in the gathering until the supper began, from which moment on they were excluded⁴¹. If the reading of Scripture took place *after* the supper it was difficult to arrange for the catechumens to arrive precisely in time to hear the reading. It was, thus, much more practical to put the reading, together with the exposition, before the supper.

The office of “reader” or “lector” has arisen in the Church at the end of the second century: Tertullian in North Africa is the first to attest the existence of the function of reader⁴². The office originated certainly some time before Tertullian makes mention of it.

Before the office of reader originated, the reading of Scripture in Christian gatherings must have been performed by ordinary members of the community. This earlier practice is reflected in Revelation 1:3, where a blessing is pronounced over “the one who reads” the Book of Revelation out loud in Church. Obviously, this reader does not yet have an official capacity, for he is designated with the participle ἀναγνώσκων, not with the noun ἀναγνώστης. On the other hand, in 1 Timothy 4:13, the responsibility for the reading of Scripture is assigned to the leader of the community. Apparently, around the turn of the first to the second century, practices as to who performed the reading still varied.

Towards the middle of the second century we encounter someone who reads his own composition in a Christian congregation, namely the author of the homily known as *2 Clement*. This author concludes his homily by stating: “Brothers and sisters, . . . , I am reading to you an exhortation to pay attention to that which is written, that you may save both yourselves and the one who reads among you”⁴³. Obviously, “reading” is the delivering of the homily; it is read aloud by the author himself.

Justin’s account of the Sunday gathering mentions “the person who reads [namely, a passage from a Gospel or a Prophet]”⁴⁴. But Justin does not use a noun designating the reader and it cannot be inferred from this passage that he already knew the office of lector. Tertullian, however, as already stated, is acquainted with the reader as an official of the Church.⁴⁵ From the third century onwards the reader regularly appears as an official functionary who, at various places, assists bishops and other clergy in conducting the service of Christian congregations. The ceremony of the appointment of a reader is mentioned in a mid-third-century manual on Church practice from Rome, the *Apostolic Tradition*; it states: “A reader is installed as the bishop hands him a book. He

⁴¹ *Did.* 9.5.

⁴² Tert., *Praescr.* 41.8.

⁴³ *2 Clem.* 19.1.

⁴⁴ Just., *1 Apol.* 67.4.

⁴⁵ Tert., *Praescr.* 41.8.

has no laying on of hands”⁴⁶. Around the same time, the appointment of *lectores* is attested by other authors in Rome and Carthage⁴⁷. In the *Syriac Didascalia* (ca. 215 CE?) it is not a reader, but the bishop himself who performs the reading from the Scriptures.⁴⁸

One may find it difficult to accept that readers in Christian communities are analogous with the slave lectors at Graeco-Roman symposia. However, as it has been stated in the beginning of this article the reading at symposia could have been performed by various persons provided they have ability to perform the reading. As long as Christian communities conducted their gatherings in the evening following the standard pattern of meal plus symposium the reading of various texts could be performed by host himself, his educated slave or any member of the community who could do it. Christian communities may have lacked educated slaves who read texts at Hellenistic symposia, but with time they began to appoint some members of their congregations to perform reading of authoritative texts in their gatherings. In any case the office of reader in Christian Church can be best traced back to reader at symposia in the Graeco-Roman world in general.

Conclusion

Christians in the first and second centuries met in private houses on Sunday evening. They held their symposia in the same way as other, non-Christian, groups did in those days. Accordingly, they practised public reading of texts at their symposia and had special readers to do the reading, at least from some point of time in the second century onwards. The reading of authoritative writings took place in the social gathering that followed the supper. This was the context in which apostolic and other important letters, Prophets, Gospels and other genres were read aloud to the community. There is a close analogy between the reading of texts at non-Christian banquets and the reading of texts in the weekly gatherings of Christians. This analogy cannot be incidental. We are witnessing here one and the same phenomenon in both non-Christian and Christian contexts. The analogy challenges the current view, recently upheld by some scholars, according to which the reading of the Scriptures in the gatherings of Christians should be traced back to the Jewish practice of reading and studying the Law of Moses on Sabbath in the synagogue. There is no continuity between the reading in the synagogue and that in the Church. The public reading of Scripture in Christian communities goes back, not to the reading of the Law in the synagogue, but to the reading of literature at the Hellenistic banquet in general.

⁴⁶ *Trad. ap.* 11.

⁴⁷ Eus., *Hist.* 6.43.11 (Rome, 251 CE); Cypr., *Epist.* 29.1 (Carthage, ca. 250 CE).

⁴⁸ *Did. ap.* 2.58. The bishop is supposed to perform the reading in a sitting position.

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