

# Marcin Kowalski

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The book *Decisive Meals* is a collection of essays which were originally presented at the Biblical Studies Symposium “Decisive Meals – Was sich beim Essen Entscheidet”, held in Basel, Switzerland, in 2011. The symposium concluded the larger research project on meal traditions in biblical literature, which brought together an international group of scholars. The editors as well as contributors of the volume come from different academic and biblical study centers in UK, Germany, Switzerland, Austria, and USA. They present various methodologies including theological, socio-scientific, socio-cultural, Jewish and Christian hermeneutics, and gender sensitive approach to the Bible. Almost all of the authors previously wrote on the topic of meals in biblical traditions.

The essays contained in the present volume seek to come to a deeper understanding of meals in biblical texts. The book is divided into ten chapters preceded by Introduction, and followed by Bibliography, Index of Ancient and Modern Authors. In Introduction, the editors point at the project underlying the publication and concisely present every contribution. In broad strokes, they also sketch a panorama of the issues emerging from the essays like importance of Hellenistic meal model, conversation between Old Testament and New Testament texts, and transformative power of meals perceived as *loci* of identity formation, of the stilling of hunger, and of the overcoming of injustice.

In Chapter 1, ‘The Eyes of All Look to You’: The Generosity of the Divine King”, Nathan MacDonald examines the Old Testament roots of the concept of God as king. First, he scrutinizes Ps 147 – 149 where Jahwe’s providential care is connected with the motif of his kingship. Then the “Jahwe is king” Psalms and Ps 145 – 150 are analyzed, in which one can see numerous references to the theology of creation and to the concept of universal God’s

rule. The differences between the “Jahwe is king” psalms and Ps 145 – 150 are subsequently explained in terms of the different historical and cultural setting of the both corpora. The latter one is influenced by the great empires of the ancient Near East whose kings and gods would host banquets at which fates of mortals would be decided and which had a cosmic, universal dimension. Ultimately, the microcosmic symbolism of the Mesopotamian royal table served the biblical authors to depict Jahwe as the Great King, the creator of all, who sets his table for everybody on the Mount Zion.

Chapter 2, “Everyday Meals for Extraordinary People: Eating and Assimilation in the Book of Ruth”, by Peter Altmann, shows how the motif of meal shapes the entire narration of the Book of Ruth. The author starts from pointing at the problematic Moabite origins of Ruth and traces some parallels existing between her and Rebekah from Gen 24. Then, the first lunch in the field in Ruth 2:14 is analyzed, which implies the future marriage and Ruth’s inclusion into the community. Next, a light dinner at home described in Ruth 2:18-23, which, according to the author, is a mark of common identity confirmation between Ruth and her mother-in-law. Finally, after-dinner night in Ruth 3:7 gives a decisive stimulus for Ruth’s and Naomi’s full integration into Boaz’s family and into the Bethlehem community. In conclusion, the author states that the context of meal is decisive for Ruth’s transformation from a dangerous, seductress character into a praiseworthy ancestress of Israelite royalty.

Chapter 3, “Eating and Living: The Banquets in the Esther Narratives”, by Susanne Plietzsch, addresses the literary function of banquets and of eating in the Book of Esther. The author starts with a brief look at the different versions of Esther in MT, LXX, and A-Text. Consequently, she moves to investigate on the story of Esther in Jewish Tradition, in particular on the connection between the Megillat Esther and Purim. The Book of Esther enjoyed venerable status among the Jewish writings, while the character and the name of the main protagonist, which means “hidden”, were interpreted as standing for God, only seemingly absent in the story. Finally, the motives of eating and banquets are studied, which, according to the author, serve as the element structuring the book. Eating provides background for the theme of nation survival, becomes the moment in which the tragic fate of Vashti and Haman is decided (thus it becomes an “anti-banquet”), and stands as a statement of opposition against power politics hostile to life and to God (cf. the fasting of Esther considered to be a decisive point in the narrative).

Chapter 4, “You Are How You Eat: How Eating and Drinking Behavior Identifies the Wise According to Jesus Ben Sirach”, by Ursula Rapp explores Sirach’s teaching on behavior at the table. It is not a *savoir-vivre* manual,

but it provides us with an image of the wise person or even a kind of ideal society. The author starts with the introductory remark on the Hebrew text of Ben Sirach to be studied, and delineates its structure with the three main literary motives: moderation and abundance, social relations, and wisdom. Consequently, Rapp analyzes the motif of dealing with abundance which is judged by Ben Sirach as contradictory to God's creation and its order. Calling for moderation in face of abundance, the sage in the same time criticizes pagan symposium customs. As for the social relations, at the banquet one is obliged to be attentive to the needs of others as he is to his own. The respect for those participating at a common meal orientates itself according to wisdom, not only to social honors. Finally, the banquets with their debates and interaction are shown to be the most important *loci* of the wisdom transmission.

Chapter 5, “‘And All Ate and Were Filled’ (Mark 6:42 par.): The Feeding Narratives in the Context of Hellenistic-Roman Banquet Culture”, by Angela Standhartinger puts Jesus' feeding of four and five thousands (Mark 6:32-44; 8:1-10) in the specific context of ancient public mass-feeding and civil banquets. The author first examines the phenomenon of public feedings in Hellenistic-Roman antiquity, performed at various occasions by political authorities (Cleanax of Cyme), emperors (e.g. Caesar, Domitian), and other benefactors. Different groups were fed differently in diverse festive occasions. The banquets mirrored a hierarchical order of society and segregated people along the status and gender lines. They were meant to gain the love of the people, but also to strengthen social bonds and to reinforce ones rank. Subsequently, the author analyzes the feeding narratives in Mark and compares them to the public banquets in antiquity. Jesus' multiplication of bread in a deserted place resembles ancient outdoor banquets; the green grass, on which the crowd is seated, is typical of Dionysius or plebeian feasts; the disciples resemble the table servants; reclining appears in the context of aristocratic meals, as well as bread and fish, while at the end the *sportulae*, bread baskets, are used to collect leftovers. The difference between Mark and the ancient mass-feedings is that the former does not show any social differentiation between participants. Additionally, Jesus' feedings regard milieu that was usually excluded from free food distribution, and present the hungry people in danger of starving. By taking up the social practices of his times, Mark also expresses the expectation for a common meal where everybody will be truly filled.

Chapter 6, “The Various Tastes of Johannine Bread and Blood: A Multi-Perspective Reading of John 8”, by Esther Kobel, answers the question how the original audience might have perceived the consumption of Jesus' flesh

and blood (John 6:51-58). The author explores a number of “tastes”, that is, meanings, of that difficult phrase. First of all, the text bears numerous markers alluding to Eucharistic traditions (the bread standing for flesh, and the blood to be drunk). It also shows affinity with the main ideas of various mystery cults (drinking wine and eating raw flesh to absorb the god in Dionysian rituals). One of the most surprising “tastes” detected by the author in John 6 is the bonding taste alluding to cannibalistic behavior. Christ-believers were often accused of ritual murder followed by the consumption of human flesh which reminds similar rituals performed in antiquity by members of secret associations to solidify a bond among them. In conclusion, according to the author, the wide range of possible allusions one can find in John 6, might have had an integrating effect on John’s original audience, facilitating the connection between Christ-believers.

Chapter 7, “What Happened in Caesarea? *Symphagein* as Bonding Experience (Acts 10 – 11:18)”, by Luzia Sutter Rehmann re-interprets the story that happened in the house of the Roman centurion. The story of Cornelius recorded in Acts 10 – 11 is almost unanimously perceived as a paradigmatic conversion of gentiles. In the same vein, the vision of Peter, in which he is invited to kill and eat unclean animals, is read as an abrogation of dietary laws instituting gentile Christianity free of the law. The author challenges the common interpretations of the story by pointing at the context of the Roman occupation and food shortage in the first century Palestine. In that circumstances, wealthy benefactors and military commanders were crucial for securing survival for small local communities. Accordingly, in his vision Peter is not invited to abolish Torah’s dietary laws, but warned that the hunger he is already experiencing will become even more acute. Only at the hospitable house in Caesarea he begins to understand that Cornelius was sent to save the small Christian community in Joppa from famine. At the end, the author points at the passages in the Acts where eating is strictly connected with the survival of the Christian community and thus should be interpreted as bonding experience between those who are hungry and satisfied, between lowly Jewish people and an Italian cohort.

Chapter 8, “To Eat or Not to Eat – Is This the Question? Table Disputes in Corinth”, by Kathy Ehrensperger, deals with the issue of the Corinthians’ participation in public meals at a sanctuary (1 Cor 8:1-13; 10:14-22). First, the author reflects on the origins of the problem rooted in the blurred boundaries between what was considered to be faithful adherence to tradition, and what was already perceived as idolatry in the first century. Besides, from the Corinthians perspective, the refusal to participate in temple rituals would be seen as antisocial behavior threatening the well-being of the community.

According to the author, the addressees of Paul's teaching in 1 Cor 8 – 11 are not two groups fighting in Corinth (Jewish and Hellenistic Christians), but rather non-Jews, former pagans, previously associated with Judaism as God-fearers. They saw no problem in showing loyalty to numerous deities (by participating in public meals at temple) and to the God of Israel. The exclusivist claims of Paul would be alien to them, as well as the consequences of joining Jesus which would result in deprivation of the important sources of additional food. Consequently, the author exposes Paul's double rationale in 1 Cor 8:7-13 and in 10:14-22, which first of all aims at the holiness of the community as the body of Christ. The behavior of the "knowledgeable" hurts brothers and sisters (contaminates their holiness) and as such cannot be reconciled with the participation in the Lord's table. Lord's Supper suppresses pagan meals and establishes new, exclusive place of bonding for fellow Christians, the place where they also receive their necessary provisions.

Chapter 9, "The Power of an Invitation: Early Christian Meals in Their Cultural Context", by Saham Al-Suadi focuses on the invitation which precedes festive meal. The author starts with the basic components of invitation letters and then generically presents meal invitations in the New Testament. Information given by them is only a starting point for a decision-making process, resulting in certain actions, complications, and socio-religious transformations. They are well illustrated with the example of ancient letter of invitation from Ptolemaios to his father. Paul mentions invitation to meal only once, in 1 Cor 10:27, stressing however its difficulties and socio-religious influences. Due to the processes of selection, adoption, and imitation, Christian meals are in many ways similar to Hellenistic meals, but they also present some significant differences. The Hellenistic meals served to integrate one into the Greco-Roman society (cf. the Hellenized cult of Serapis). For Paul, they were instrumental to build the identity of small subgroups based on household and family meetings.

Finally, in Chapter 10, "Meals as Acts of Resistance and Experimentation: The Case of the Revelation to John", Hal Taussing reads the fragments of Revelation to John where meals are mentioned. The point of reference for his reading is the common Greco-Roman paradigm of meal established by Klinghardt and Smith, which also incorporates Jewish meals. Consequently, the author indicates a set of texts with explicit references to meals in the Revelation to John. He embeds them in the context of the Lord's Day celebration and perceives as entangled in the issues of imperial power resistance and adaptation. The combination of fixed structure and improvisation in Greco-Roman meal would allow to bring together eating and lively debates. The problem of meat sacrificed to idols, which Paul discusses in 1 Corinthians,

emerges also, according to the author, in the seven letters of Revelation. As Paul's stance on the issue can be actually presented in terms of four different positions, so also Johannine communities could employ different solutions to the problem negotiating their social identities in relation to Roman power. Eating or not-eating should be regarded as a dramatic performance. The text that the author submits at the end to illustrate it is Rev 18:1-3. Here and in the following prediction of Babylon's destruction, the community expresses the resistance to Roman influence. Sarcasm and laughter, discernible here, compensate for the relative powerlessness of the early Christians.

*Decisive Meals* is definitely a valuable and well written book. It deals with an interesting and important biblical topic. The authors of the essays are mostly women representing German and English speaking academic circles. It is a pity there is nobody from the Mediterranean countries like Italy, Spain, or France, with such a rich and ancient socio-cultural traditions on meals. The contributors show broad methodological spectrum and expertise in their particular fields of research. They expose their topics in a very clear manner, with helpful summaries, employing vivid and accessible language. The authors succeed in showing that the motives of eating and banquets can provide us with the interpretive key to the lecture of some biblical books (cf. Altmann's essay on the Book of Ruth and Plietzsch's reading of the Esther narrative). They definitely broaden or even change our understanding of the well-known biblical passages by putting them in the context of Greco-Roman culture (cf. Standhartinger's mass-feeding in Mark). Their conclusions are in many instances very inspirational and provoke to further reading (cf. Reihmann's essay).

All the merits notwithstanding, one can also point at some minor lacks of the volume. First, it would be useful to have a thematic bibliography on the biblical meals instead of the bibliography containing the works quoted by the contributors. Second, we have no Scriptural index in the book, which is a rarity nowadays in respectable scholarly publications. Third, one can sometimes legitimately wonder about the pertinence of the conclusions drawn by the authors. Are really the multifaceted character of the Fourth Gospel and the may "tastes" indicated by Kolbe so appealing to Jewish and pagan audience? Would not they be disturbed by finding that Jesus does not differ from Dionysius or that he institutes a rite similar to cannibalistic practices of some secret associations? Are not the "tastes" distinguished by the author in conflict? Maybe the connection between the words of Jesus and Dionysian mysteries or cannibalistic rites was so shallow and far-fetched that the original audience did not deem it worth exploring?

Kolbe does not verify her theses against the text reception history and does not broaden her intertextual reading by other texts of the NT. The same

methodological faults underlie the contributions by Rehmann and Taussing. The first author proposes a very interesting reading of the episode in Caesarea which unfortunately is based on a very disputable textual grounds. How can one find in Peter's hunger in Acts 10 the allusion to the famine devastating Palestine in the first century AD? Is really the topic of hunger and community survival so preponderant (cf. three enigmatic mentions in Acts 11:29; 12:20 and 10:1-2), as to overshadow the Lucan topic of the Gospel leaving the boundaries of Israel and reaching the pagans? In the narrative perspective of Acts, Peter precedes Paul in his mission of preaching the Gospel without the law. It is legitimate and rather not premature to see it foreshadowed and supported by the head of the Church. In the interpretation proposed by Rehmann one can feel the lack of the broader narrative perspective of Acts. The same can be said of Taussing's reading of Rev 18. Although the author originally puts the meal narratives in Revelation in the context of the Lord's Day, his interpretation of chapter 18 fits more Hellenistic symposium than the Lord's Supper. How can one reconcile the grandeur and seriousness of Christian liturgy (cf. Rev 3 – 4) with sarcasm and laughter accompanying the performance of Rev 18? Is this really how the original audience would perceive and perform those words?

With all the critical remarks one can have, *Decisive Meals* makes a very good reading and it is definitely worth recommending both to the scholars and to the students interested in the issue.