

Bringing Back to Life: Laments and the Origin of the So-Called Words of Institution

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Abstract:

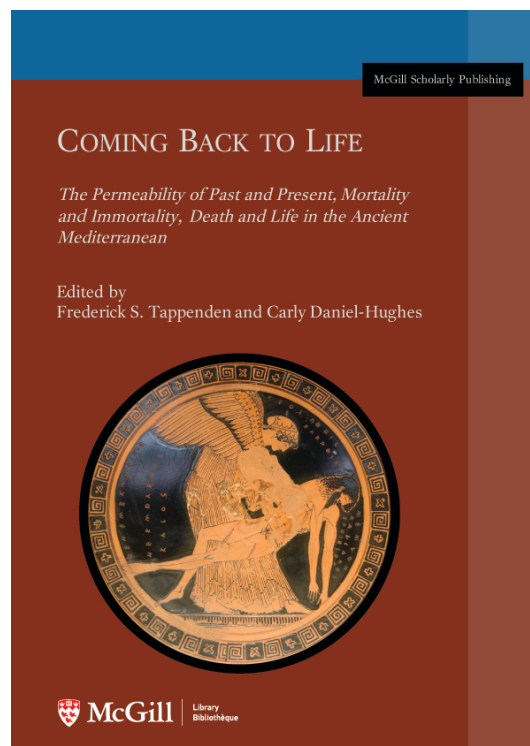
Recent research into the origins of early Christian meals focuses on the social form of the Graeco-Roman banquets and symposium. What remains to be seen, however, is how the so-called “words of institution” transmitted by Paul to the community at Corinth functioned at some of those meals. In this paper I show that the tradition cited in 1 Corinthians 11:23–25 describes most likely a funerary banquet. Here food might be shared between the living and the dead while laments and dirges not only present the context of that meal—a passion story—but also enable an imagined reunion with the deceased so as to raise her or his voice and speak in her or his name. The paper shows how the performance of (funerary) meals might have functioned to those who believed in resurrection.

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I. INTRODUCTION

Meals create communities. From their earliest days, communities of those who believed in Christ were no exception to this rule. Recent research into the origins of the Eucharist has focused on the analogous customs of Greco-Roman banquets, and not on the so-called “words of institution,” namely: “This is my body that is for you. Do this in remembrance of me.”¹ In the words of Dennis Smith (2003, 279):

Early Christians met at a meal because that is what groups in the ancient world did. Christians were simply following a pattern found throughout their world They celebrated a meal based on the banquet model found commonly in their world. . . . Banquet ideology provided a model for creating community, defining behaviour within the community, sharing values, and connecting with the divine. It was also embedded in a social practice and so provided a means for the ideology to be confirmed through a shared experience.

We might of course ask whether banquets and symposia in the Greek and Roman world did in fact follow a uniform social pattern.²

¹ See, for example, Smith 2003; Klinghardt 1996; Taussig 2009; Smith and Taussig 2012. For research on the history of liturgy, see Messner 2009, 214–16; Bradshaw 2004; Leonhard and Eckhard 2010, 1067–76.

² On the differences between the Greek and Roman ideals concerning

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But scholars are nonetheless correct in identifying overtly religious components, such as prayers and libations, at many of these shared meals. Thus spirituality at meals can no longer be considered a uniquely Jewish and Christian phenomenon. New insights into form, participants, etiquette and the liturgy of early Christian meals reveal above all the pluralistic and multiform practice of the celebration of banquets in various Jewish and Christian groups. What remains to be seen, however, is how the famous “words of institution,” found four times in the Gospels and in Paul, were used at such meals. Smith (2003, 189) argues that the words of institution “cannot be read as a script for liturgical action, unless one can imagine someone in the community acting out the part of Jesus in some kind of divine drama, which seems unlikely.”

But is it quite impossible that someone could have acted out the part of Jesus in speaking these words in his name? That I am now asking this question should indicate to you that I think it very possible indeed. In what follows I want to examine the socio-historical contexts in which the words of institution originated and were performed at community meals. I will argue that those words indeed are part of a performance that actualizes a *divine drama* in which the speaker Jesus *comes back to life*. To make my case, I will refer to mortuary practices which, as I will argue, contain forms of speech and ritualized eating that can mediate between the realms of the dead and the living. But first I have to explain why I place the words of institution into a funerary context at all. So my first question is: What can we know about the origin and *Sitz im Leben* of those words Paul passed on to the Corinthians in [1 Cor 11:23–25](#)?

II. ORIGIN AND *SITZ IM LEBEN* OF THE SO-CALLED “WORDS OF INSTITUTION”

The simplest answer to the question of the origin of the words of institution would of course be a direct attribution to the historical Jesus. At his last meal shared with his disciples in Jerusalem he is

socially significant meals, see Stavrianopoulou 2009, 159–83; Standhartinger 2012, 69–73.

said to have spoken these words, which they then remembered following the events of Easter.³ Yet what could Jesus have meant by these words? In his influential explanation, Joachim Jeremias (1990) sets Jesus's words within the context of the Passover liturgy. This is the evening on which the evangelists date Jesus's last supper. According to the Passover liturgy, the bread (מצה), bitter herbs (מרר), and lamb (פסח) are given special significance in recalling the story of the exodus from Egypt.⁴ Likewise Jesus, at his last meal, gave new significance to the food and thus transformed the whole meal into a parable of his approaching death. In the words of Jeremias (1990, 224):

Jesus made the broken bread a simile of the fate of his body, the blood of the grapes a simile of his outpoured blood. "I go to death as the true Passover sacrifice," is the meaning of Jesus' last parable.

However, differences between the Passover meal and the Last Supper can be detected immediately.⁵ In the Passover meal, it is the various special elements of the menu—the unleavened bread, herbs, and lamb—that are assigned particular significance; in the Last Supper, it is the standard elements of bread and wine. More noteworthy is the complete lack of any hint at the Passover in the words of institution. The link is only to be found in the context

³ Some scholars still attribute the words to the historical Jesus, as they appear to remain otherwise inexplicable; cf. recently Löhr 2012, 82ff.

⁴ The liturgy is first discussed in [m. Pesah. 10](#). The Pesach-Haggadah, on the other hand, is considerably younger (cf. Stemberger 1987, 145–58; Leonhard 2003, 201–31). To what extent [m. Pesah. 10](#) can be said to describe a common practice from the first century must remain open. [Philo, Spec. 2.148](#) provides an all-too-general description.

⁵ There is also the discussion of whether a Passover seder existed in the first century (cf. Hauptman 2001; Leonhard 2006). Even if one argues, like Marcus 2013, that there was a non-institutionalized family celebration of the Passover already in the first century CE, because the Gospels of Mark and moreover Luke presuppose it, the literarily independent scenes of [Mark 14:22–25](#) and [1 Cor 11:23–25](#) cover no Passover atmosphere at all.

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assigned to the meal by the author of the Gospel of Mark.⁶ Paul does not refer to the Passover meal in any meal context.

Yet, with his reference to the Passover liturgy, Jeremias made two important observations: firstly, the significance assigned to the food indicates a narrative context, whether that of the exodus, or of the death of Jesus, without which the symbolic speech would be incomprehensible; secondly, the greatest puzzle is how the speaker can designate the food shared at the meal as symbolic of himself. The quest for the original *Sitz im Leben* of the words of institution must, I feel, begin with these two insights.

The first clue may be found in the oldest known literary formulation of the words, quoted by Paul in [1 Cor 11:23–26](#) (NRSV, adapted):

For I received from the Lord what I also handed on to you, that the Lord Jesus on the night when he was handed over took a loaf of bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it and said, “This is my body that is for you. Do this in remembrance of me.” In the same way he took the cup also, after supper, saying, “This cup is the new covenant in my blood. Do this, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of me.” For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord’s death until he comes.

Paul refers to the words as a tradition that he had shared with the Corinthians during his first visit around 50 CE. His ultimate source is the Lord (κύριος).⁷ Thus, Paul himself must have received the tradition either in direct divine revelation or through the Antioch

⁶ The miraculous discovery of the room ([Mark 14:12–17](#)) is part of a doublet with the discovery of the mule in [Mark 11:1–7](#). The identification of the betrayer ([Mark 14:18–21](#)) is also to be found without the words of institution (cf. [John 13:21–30](#)). In both [Mark 14:18](#) and [22](#), the narration begins with the formulation καὶ ἐσθιόντων. Cf. Robbins 1976, 21–40.

⁷ The formulation “I have received from the Lord” (παρέλαβον ἀπὸ τοῦ κυρίου) identifies the κύριος, i.e., the risen one, as the source, not the tradent, of the tradition; otherwise we would expect the preposition παρά with the genitive. See Bornkamm 1959, 147; Koester 1998, 344.

community; one possibility does not, of course, rule out the other.⁸

Paul's tradition of the words of institution refer to the night that Jesus was handed over to the authorities.⁹ This means that it presupposes the narration of Jesus's passion. Paul's words of institution are only part of that story, a *story fragment*. To understand this fragment, one requires the appropriate context. Characters are barely introduced, and the night's events are never really explained. But it is an interesting story fragment, because it contains more action and direct speech than narration. If one found such a story-fragment on papyrus, one would probably assume that it must belong to a decisive moment, a turning point in the storyline. Paul's account of the meal forms a dramatic climax to the community's narration of that fateful night and its consequences (Koester 1993, 199–204; Aitken 1997, 359–70; 2004, 27–54). In [v. 26](#), probably Paul's own words, it becomes clear that the whole event is a communal proclamation of the death of Jesus. In other words, with their meal the community itself is acting out the decisive part of the narrative that is evoked by the story of the night it refers to. But what is the character of that meal described in Paul's tradition?

III. PAUL'S EUCHARISTIC FORMULA AND FUNERARY BANQUETS

It is not only the implied passion account but even the words themselves that designate the meal as a “wake” or “funerary

⁸ Bradshaw and Johnson (2012, 23) assume: “St. Paul himself did begin to associate the sayings of Jesus with the supper that took place on the night before he died, and interpreted them as referring to the sacrifice of his body and blood and to the new covenant that would be made through his death.” But this thesis proves unconvincing. Even if one argues that the *παρέλαβον ἀπὸ τοῦ κυρίου* refers to a private revelation to Paul, there is no link between the text of the sayings (i.e., [1 Cor 11:22–25](#)) and the conflict in the community discussed in [1 Cor 11:17–34](#). Paul assumes that the Corinthians are already familiar with the sayings when he writes [1 Cor 11](#).

⁹ Yet *παράδιδωμι* for Paul does not allude to Judas's betrayal but to the theological continuity of the coming of the Christ (see, for example, [Rom 4:15](#)).

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banquet.” The words τοῦτο ποιεῖτε εἰς τὴν ἐμὴν ἀνάμνησιν ([1 Cor 11:24](#)) are well attested in various memorials to the deceased:

I (Aurelius Festus) donate and bequeath silver denarii to the village of the Rakeloi under the condition that they celebrate my memory ([ἐπὶ τῷ] τοῦτο ποιεῖν αὐτοῦς ἀνά[μνησ]ίν) within the neighbourhood of Dradizane.¹⁰

A meal of bread and wine is associated with mourning rituals in the Hebrew tradition; thus [Jer 16:6 \(LXX\)](#):

They shall not lament for them And bread (ἄρτος) shall not be broken (κλασθῇ) in their mourning, for comfort over the dead; they shall not make him drink a cup (ποτιοῦσιν ποτήριον) of comfort over his father and mother.

There is also literary as well as archaeological evidence for Jewish funeral meals in which food was brought to the graves and shared with the deceased ones.¹¹ The question of whether and how far ancient Jewish funerary rites differ from their non-Jewish environment has been under dispute in recent scholarship. Yet, there is archaeological as well as textual evidence for the practice of eating with the dead at graveyards in Jewish contexts.¹²

The procedure for memorials and shared meals is also to be

¹⁰ Laum 1914, 2:141. The testament of Epicurus according to [Diogenes Laertius 10.18](#) reads: εἰς τὴν ἡμῶν τε καὶ Μητροδώρου <μνήμην>. On this subject, see also [Cicero, Fin. 2.31](#); cf. also [Plutarch, Mor. 1129A](#). Cf. Heitmüller 1911, 71; Dölger 1922, 105–06; Klauck 1982, 82–86.

¹¹ Cf. also [Ezek 24:17](#); [Hos 9:4](#); [Tob 14:17](#). Klauck (1982, 88) therefore suggests that the mourning banquet described in Jeremiah is the only parallel for a meal with bread and wine in which the bread is broken. See also Klauck 1982, 368; Zittwitz 1892, 1–12; Meding 1975, 544–52.

¹² For an overview, see Rebillard 2009, 18–19. See also Block-Smith 1992, 122–32; Wenning and Zenger 1990, 285–303, and the different interpretations of cooking pots and perfume bottles in Jewish cemeteries in Palestine by McCane 2003, 37–53, and Green 2008, 145–73.

found in classical obsequies.¹³ An inscription found at Satafis (Ain el-Kebira) in the province Mauretania Sitifensis in North Africa from 299 CE reads:

To the memory of Aelia Secundula
We all sent many worthy things for her funeral.
Further near the altar dedicated to mother Secundula,
It pleases us to place a stone table
On which we placing food and covered cups,
Remember her many great deeds.
In order to heal the savage wound gnawing at our breast,
We freely recount stories at the late hour,
And give praises to the good and chaste mother, who sleeps in
her old age.
She, who nourished us, lies soberly forever.
She lived to be seventy-five years of age, and died in the 250th
year of the province.
Made by Stulenia Julia.¹⁴

So Stulenia Julia and her relatives set the table with food and drinks and recalled the great deeds of her mother, told stories about her, and praised her. Whether this means free narration or formal dirges, or a combination of both, we cannot know. Yet both antiquity and modernity attest to the practice of lamentation at the grave, followed by a shared meal. Thus Stears (2008, 149) supposes:

The funeral itself was not the only occasion at which laments might be sung: ethnographic comparison suggest that they may have been performed in non-funerary contexts, such as when toiling in the fields or wool working. But perhaps a more certain retelling of these familial histories within lamentation came at the monthly and annual visits to the tomb site.

¹³ For funerary banquets, see Lindsay 1998, 67–80; Dunbabin 2003, 103–40 and 229–36; Tulloch 2006, 164–93 and 289–96; Jensen 2008, 107–43; Graham 2005, 58–64.

¹⁴ *ILCV* 1.1570 = [CIL 8.20277](#). Translation by Jensen 2008, 126 (cf. Quasten 1940).

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Though, one has to ask, what do we know about the earliest practice of lamenting and remembering the death and deeds of Jesus of Nazareth?

IV. JESUS PASSION AND WOMEN'S LAMENTS

There is ample evidence of mourning rituals in the New Testament (Standhartinger 2010). After her death, Tabitha is laid out in her house and the widows keen over her ([Acts 9:37–39](#)). Loud weeping, wailing, and flute music is heard in the house of the recently deceased daughter of Jairus ([Mark 5:38–39](#) par.). Mary and Martha's neighbors come to the house of mourning to console them ([John 11:17](#)) and accompany the sorrowful Mary to the tomb. Others follow in the funeral procession for the son of the widow of Nain ([Luke 7:13](#)). At the burial of Stephen, pious men raise a loud lament ([Acts 8:2](#)).

Despite resurrection, there are even some references to mourning practices in the passion stories (Osiek 2001). Jesus's body is washed and anointed twice, at Bethany ([Mark 14:3–9](#) // [Matt 26:6–13](#) // [John 12:1–8](#)) by a woman and at Jerusalem, as well, this time by males ([Mark 15:42–47](#) parr.).¹⁵ The latter might seem surprising, given the general tendency in antiquity to assign the preparation of the corpse for burial as a woman's task (Schroer 2004; Šterbenc-Erker 2011). Women are at least present at Jesus's burial ([Mark 15:47](#) parr.) and visit the tomb on the third day ([Mark 16:1](#) parr.). In Mark, the women come to anoint the body of Jesus ([Mark 16:1](#)), in Matthew "to see the tomb" ([Matt 28:1](#)), and in Luke they bring spices, which could represent an offering for the dead at the place of burial ([Luke 23:56–24:1](#)). John has Mary Magdalene weeping and wailing at the tomb ([John 20:11](#)).

In the Gospel of Peter, Mary Magdalene comes with her women

¹⁵ For features of mortuary rituals in [Mark 14:3–9](#) parr., see Sawicki 2001. The identity of Joseph of Arimathaea is discussed among the Gospels. He might be a member of the (city-)council or the Sanhedrin ([Mark 15:43](#); [Luke 23:50](#)), Jesus's disciple ([Matt 27:57](#)), or a friend of Pilate (Gos. Pet. 2.3 [≈ [§2](#) in Swete 1893]).

friends to the tomb “to do what women were accustomed to do for the dead beloved by them” (Gos. Pet. 12.50 [[§11](#) in Swete 1893]). They try to enter the tomb “in order to sit beside him and do the expected things” (Gos. Pet. 12.53 [[§11](#) in Swete 1893]). But should that be impossible, they want at least to “throw against the door what we bring in memory of him” (Gos. Pet. 12.54 [[§11](#) in Swete 1893]). The Gospel of Peter does not say what they have with them. The Synoptics suggest ointment, oil, and spices, but in antiquity, flowers, milk, and honey or, in Jewish contexts, bread and wine, would be the offering most likely to come to readers’ minds.¹⁶

There are at least some suggestions in the New Testament that Christians continued the practice of mourning for Jesus in the first century CE, although the location of Jesus’s grave, if it existed at all, was presumably not known even to his friends.¹⁷ In view of the early Christian practice of venerating martyrs at gravesites, it would seem unlikely that the location of the ultimate martyr Jesus would have been entirely forgotten and could only be relocated 300 years later through a vision on the part of Constantine’s mother. But, as modern martyrdom cults demonstrate, the presence of an actual grave is dispensable to the lamenters of those who have none (D’Angelo 2000, 118). So, with or without a grave, Jesus’s death has the effect on his disciples that he predicts to them in the Gospel of John: “Very truly, I tell you, you will weep and mourn (κλαύσετε καὶ θρηνήσετε), but the world will rejoice; you will have pain (λυπηθήσεσθε), but your pain (ἡ λύπη ὑμῶν) will turn into joy” ([John 16:20](#)).

Mourning and laments did not totally die out when various Christian groups and individuals in different places came to know the crucified one as the risen Christ through vision, experience, or reasoning.¹⁸ As early traditions like [1 Cor 15:3–5](#) and [Luke 24:13–27](#)

¹⁶ See Volp 2002 concerning food for the dead (61–62) and for later Christian practice (214–24).

¹⁷ On historical-critical problems of Jesus’s burial in the Gospels, see, *inter alia*, Myllykoski 2001; Cook 2011.

¹⁸ Paul got to know of the risen Jesus by vision ([1 Cor 9:1](#); [15:8](#); perhaps

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show, there is a need to tell of Jesus's crucifixion in order to make his resurrection meaningful. If those who believed in Christ wanted to convince others about the resurrection, they could not stick with short formulas like "Christ died for our sins in accordance with the scriptures, was buried and raised" (cf. [1 Cor 15:3–5](#)). Hence, there must have been expanded narratives about Jesus's death.

How far those earliest oral passion accounts resembled the passion accounts we know from the Gospels of Mark and John is difficult to say. Obviously, the written passion accounts incorporated many motifs from psalms of lament, such as [Pss 22](#), [34](#) or [69](#), into their stories.¹⁹ Mark's and John's passion narratives are at least in part modeled on those psalms of individual lament (Ebner 2001; Janowski 2003; Ahearne-Kroll 2007). Unfortunately, we do not know much about the *Sitz im Leben* of those psalms in antiquity, or if they were used in ancient Jewish mortuary practice (but see Schuele 2010). Some scholars are of the opinion that women's laments inaugurated the passion accounts (Corley 1998, 215–16; 2010, 111–33). Others point to scriptural reflections (Crossan 1998, 527–73). But either way, the words of institution cited by Paul and the oral versions of passion stories are directly interconnected. So, are the words of institution influenced by mortuary rites and laments?

V. THE LAMENTER AS A MEDIATOR OF THE DECEASED'S VOICE

The tradition related by Paul to the Corinthian community describes the sequence of events at a memorial meal, in which memory of the deceased and a shared meal are inexorably linked. Yet here the one who is being remembered appears himself as a character and speaks. We cannot tell to what extent the late mother of Stulenia Julia was considered present at the memorial banquet, yet parallels in antiquity suggest that the presence of the deceased could constitute

also [Gal 1:15–17](#)), by an internal light ([2 Cor 4:6](#)), and by reasoning ([Phil 3:6–10](#)).

¹⁹ Cf. [Mark 15:24](#) // [John 19:24](#); [Mark 15:27–32a](#); [Mark 15:36](#) // [John 19:29](#); [John 19:36–37](#), and others.

part of the experience of the meal.²⁰ So, a funerary banquet would be a meal in the presence of Jesus. But how could he be represented as an actor and speaker of those words?

My hypothesis is that women's laments might be the missing link in answering that question. But here we face a fundamental gap between what might be described as oral and scriptural cultures. Ritual songs of lament are part of the oral culture, which undoubtedly existed but which is almost completely undocumented in literary sources.²¹

In cross-cultural studies, Hedwig Jahnow (1923, 2–57), Gail Holst-Warhaft (1992), and Margaret Alexiou (2002) filled this gap through fieldwork in modern ethnography. Their goal was to outline the developments and continuities in such expressions of mourning, especially lamentations as sung by women. Such transhistorical and transcultural comparisons and constructions of a history of tradition might be seen as problematic today, because they can blur cultural differences and local specifics. In addition, ethnography does not simply open up the experience of those involved in foreign cultures, as the ethnographer has to interpret his or her field studies and interviews (cf. Medick 1989, 48–84). But one can also argue, with Sally C. Humphreys (1978, 13), that

the combination of history and social anthropology . . . means a conscious recognition that the historian not only uses the technique of *Verstehen* to interpret sources and enter into the perception of actors in a foreign culture, but must also recreate

²⁰ [Petronius, *Sat.* 65.10ff.](#); Artemidorus Daldianus, 5.82; [Lucian, *Luct.* 9](#) (see also [Lucian, *Char.* 22ff.](#)). There are graffiti within the catacomb of St. Sebastian that invoke the martyr-apostles Peter and Paul to the *refrigia* (funerary banquets). Cf. Jensen 2008, 124 and Snyder 1985, 251–58.

²¹ Both sexes expressed their mourning, but “women lamented his [or her] loss for the family and described the death as tragic through the conventional formulae of oral poetry” (Šterbenc-Erker 2011, 51). See also Corley 2010; Hope 2011; Graham 2011. In Rome, status and class also entailed differences in mourning habits (Richlin 2001, 229–48; Mustakallio 2005, 179–90).

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imaginatively the material and institutional scenery which the anthropologist in the field can experience directly.²²

Therefore, interviews and ethnographical fieldwork can be useful in an imaginative recreation of ancient experiences if there is some support in the evidence drawn from antiquity. For Alexiou and Holst-Warhaft, interviews conducted with professional mourners in rural Greece allow insights into experiences that remain inaccessible in ancient literature. Modern lamenters for instance point to a similar sentiment to that of Stulenia Julia: that songs of lament help them “to heal the savage wound gnawing at our breast.”

Laments found in literary works such as epics and dramas provide a reflection of this culture, yet are not direct representations of it. Alexiou and Holst-Warhaft were, however, able to identify several elements of structure in common with modern evidence of rituals of lament. The lament for Hector at the end of the *Iliad* ([24.722–777](#)) is, for example, constructed as an antiphony (which can also be observed in modern laments [Alexiou 2002, 131–50; Seremetakis 1990]): Andromache, Hecuba, and Helen, three of his closest female relatives, lead the song, in which the rest of the townswomen join in the chorus. Each begins with an invocation of the deceased. Hector’s mother Hecuba contrasts the divine beauty of her son with the particularly gruesome death he suffered, which she describes: “You, when he had taken your life with the thin edge of the bronze sword, he dragged again and again around his beloved companion’s tomb, Patroklos, whom you killed, but even so did not bring him back to life” ([24.754–756](#)). The moment of death and the act of dying itself are still important themes in many modern laments. However, in Homer it is not, as in many modern lamentations, a protest against the injustice of death, rather purely an indication of the unsired beauty of the late Hector, and thus serves a higher purpose. As Christine Perkell (2008, 104) concludes: “Hekabe’s lament . . . focuses on the fact that Hektor’s body bears no

²² See also Martin 2008, 45–52.

signs of heroic struggle, treatment to his piety and to the god's love."

Modern lamentations also include records of suffering. Thus the song of lament performed by Chrysa Kalliakati in Crete and recorded by Anna Caraveli-Chaves (1980) during an interview, contains repeated appeals to the mother (lines 21, 41, 43). The singer contrasts the suffering her mother endured as a young widow with her abilities as a midwife and healer (lines 5–12). Just as in Homer, the lament is constructed as an antiphony, and the women of the village of Dzermiathes are invited to join in with the lament (lines 15ff.). From line 17 the focus on suffering intensifies; the singer finds her mother nowhere, while the holy places which she had visited and the prayers she had offered could not help her mother (lines 23–34). Finally, nonetheless conscious of her mother's death, she imagines meeting her again (lines 35–39):

On the coming Sunday, I will go to church / to see my mother
start to come, to give myself some hope / . . . I will stand aside
/ to see you pass, mother, carrying a tall candle / holding your
child in your arms, leading him to communion, / leaning to
kiss the icon, bowing down to it.

This reunion is seen both as a vision of the future and a memory of things past, a mimetic coupling of experience and hope. As Caraveli-Chaves (1980, 141) emphasizes:

Laments bridge and mediate between vital realms of existence: life and death, the physical and the metaphysical, present and past, temporal and mythic time. The lamenter becomes the medium through whom the dead speaks to the living, the shaman who leads the living to the underworld and back, thus effecting a communal confrontation with death and through it, a catharsis. In her capacity as a mediator between realms, the lamenter affects the entire community.

In some laments, the deceased can even speak in the first person through the mouths of the lamenter. So in some laments she or he

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addresses those bereaved by her or him with a last word of farewell; the following is noted by Loring Danforth (1982, 80ff.; see also Klaar 1938, 46ff.):

Don't let my wife or my poor grandchildren hear you. Don't tell them that I am dead. Just tell them that I have married and taken a good wife. I have taken the tombstone as my mother-in-law, the black earth as my wife and I have the little pebbles as brothers- and-sisters-in-law.²³

The deceased provides a detailed sketch of his grave as a marriage bed and of his future as the head of a family.

I am not aware of scenes of reunion and address in the first person as the deceased from ancient laments.²⁴ But they are to be found in another form of mortuary practice in antiquity, grave inscriptions and epitaphs. Alongside those which present the deceased as “This is the grave of . . .” and those in which the bereaved address the deceased with their own words, we have inscriptions dating back to the sixth century BCE in which the deceased speaks in the first person:

Greetings, passers-by! I, Antistates, son of Atarbus, lie here in death, having left my native land.²⁵

²³ The lamenters do not, therefore, make up the text as they sing, but rather make use of a repertoire of various laments. For further laments, in which the deceased addresses the living in the first person, see Lardas 1992, 243–44 (nos. 778–81), 250 (nos. 792–93), and others. Compare also Joannidu 1938, 37–44.

²⁴ But see the epigram of the Hellenistic poet Anyte (third century BCE): “Often Kleino, the mother, full of sorrow, cried out at the grave of her daughter, calling for her dear child, gone from her so early, called back Philaiaina’s soul, which before her marriage had passed over the water of swift-flowing Acheron” (*Anth. Grae.* 7.486). For Anyte’s poetry, see Greene 2005, 139–57.

²⁵ *CEG* 80 (= *IG IV 50* = Friedländer 1948, no. 76). In Peek (1960) there are, for example, in the 105 epigrams dated before 320 BCE, twenty-one in which the deceased speaks in the first person, twenty-two in which the

Sometimes the reader is invited to share in mourning while passing by:

Whoever was not present when I died and they carried me out,
let him lament me now: it is the tomb of Telephanes.²⁶

And sometimes one finds dialogues between the dead and the living, or the tombstone and the passer-by.²⁷ Finally, the reader of a grave epitaph may also be encouraged to offer some food or drink to the deceased, as in the case of a Roman sarcophagus from the second century CE:

[W]hoever reads this inscription, [which] I have made for me
and for her, let him pour unmixed wine for Titus Aelius
Euangelus, a patient man. (Koch 1988, 24)²⁸

deceased is addressed, and eight in which the reader is addressed in the second person. See also Vestrheim 2010, 63.

²⁶ *CEG* 159 (= [IG XII,8 396](#) = Friedländer 1948, no. 84). In some inscriptions the deceased provide words of comfort for the bereaved; examples from Merkelbach and Stauber (1998–2004) include: 04/08/02 (= [TAM V,1 636](#) = Peek 1955, 969), Daldis on the west coast of Asia Minor (first century CE); 05/01/31 (= [ISmyrna 233](#) = Peek 1955, 804), Smyrna (second century BCE); and 05/01/32 (= [ISmyrna 249](#) = Peek 1955, 1879), Smyrna (second century CE). Sometimes the words of mourning are attributed to the reader (e.g., *CEG* 470 [= [IG I³ 1273 bis](#)]: “I grieve whenever I look on the tomb of young Autoclides and his death”).

²⁷ See the collection of Peek 1955, 550–72, which, however, does not differentiate between the literary and inscriptional.

²⁸ See also the grave monument of Flavius Agricola mentioned by Dunbabin (2003, 104ff.). For more inscriptions on tombstones with banquet scenes and an inscription that let the deceased speak to the living, see in Merkelbach and Stauber 1998–2004: 03/03/01 (= [IMetropolis 38](#) = Peek 1955, 1119), Metropolis in Ionia (first century BCE); 08/05/03 (= [IMT LAp./Mil. 2255](#)), Miletupolis (or Kyzikos) in Mysia (third century CE); 08/05/09 (= [IMT LAp./Mil. 2288](#)), Miletupolis (?) in Mysia (imperial era); 09/04/05 (= [IPrusaOlymp 62](#)), Prusa ad Olympum (late Hellenistic era); 10/03/03 (= [Marek, Kat. Am. 51](#)), Amastis in Paphlagonia (undated). See also allusions to a funerary banquet in the texts: 06/02/29 (= [MDAI\(A\) 24:172,15](#)), Pergamon (undated); 06/03/01 (= [MDAI\(A\) 24:219,48](#)), Stratonikeia on the Kaikos

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In antiquity reading was performed aloud, so grave epigrams become the spoken word when read. In such cases where the deceased directly addresses the reader, it is the reader who thus lends his voice to the deceased. Whether and how such epigrams relate to laments is debated. Paul Friedländer (1948, 66) argues: “it is not impossible . . . that . . . the epitaph originally mirrored elegies of mourning that were sung to the flute at or after the burials of the great.”²⁹ Joseph W. Day (1989, 27) suggests that “[a]nyone reading these inscriptions takes on the role of one singing the dirge, and so a mimesis of the funerary ritual is performed” (see also Day 2007, 29–47). Katharine Derderian (2001, 191) argues that the inscribed epitaph exists “as a durable verbal and material memorial following and marking the completion of death ritual” and therefore the “retrospective documentation” of its completion. Yet even for her, “though epigram differs from lament in its function as a record of the stable identity of the dead, it also both appropriates aspects of lament by standing in as an emblem of mourning at the gravesite, while also serving as a supplementary genre that looks back at the ephemeral lament” (194).

Whatever the concrete connection between oral laments, dirges, or eulogies at the graveside and the epigrams and inscriptions on tombstones might have been, there must have been an “inherent connection between the spoken and written forms” (Furley 2010, 153). And while abbreviation and compression were necessary due to the lack of space on a tombstone, modern parallels allow us to suppose that a first-person speech from the deceased in

(undated). For inscriptions in which the lionized deceased encourage sacrifice, see Peek 1960, no. 168 (= [IG XII,7 108](#)).

²⁹ See also Raubitschek 1969, 26: “Homerische Überlieferung, mündliche Tradition, zeitgenössische Poesie, Grab- und Weihekult, all diese Elemente haben zur Formung des Epigramms beigetragen, sie waren sozusagen das Rohmaterial aus dem das Denkmal-Epigramm geschaffen wurde.” On the blurring of the boundaries between the living and the dead on grave epitaphs and their representations in poetry, see Erasmo 2008, 155–204.

contemporary laments suggests the possibility of similar forms in antiquity.³⁰

Songs of lament as part of the passion account, the implied context of Paul's tradition of the Last Supper, could indeed, I propose, have taken the form of "someone in the community acting out the part of Jesus" (Smith 2003, 189). However, I found no parallel symbolism of the deceased as bread and wine.³¹ Yet, one notices that the neuter demonstrative pronoun τοῦτο in τοῦτό μου ἐστὶν τὸ σῶμα (1 Cor 11:24) is difficult to attribute directly to the masculine noun ὁ ἄρτος. This can be explained as a reference to the predicate nominal τὸ σῶμα. In this case it would refer to the bread (Löhr 2012, 57). Or, because οὗτος generally applies to what has come before, it might apply to the action of "took, gave thanks, broke."³² If one hears it like this, the experience of sharing the bread and wine becomes comparable to that of those taking part in the wakes examined by Danforth (1982, 105) in his ethnography field studies:

Women in Potamia hold that the food distributed at memorial services somehow finds its way to the other world, where it is

³⁰ Compare with Alexiou 2002, 106: "These inscriptions are an invaluable source of evidence for the present study, since they are probably the closest reflection of popular language, style and thought in antiquity that we possess, although we cannot be sure of the exact manner of their composition."

³¹ Self-identification with bread and wine does, however, occasionally appear in early martyr traditions. Thus Ignatius of Antioch on the way to his death utters: "I am God's wheat, and I am ground by the teeth of wild beasts that I may be found pure bread [of Christ]" (Ignatius, *Rom. 4.1*; trans. Lightfoot). So too Polycarp, while on the stake, desires "that God might find him worthy . . . to have share in the number of the martyrs to the cup of your Christ," and wishes to be received as a "sacrifice which pleases" (Mart. Pol. 14.2). At the same time, one's own martyrdom is to be seen as an imitation of the passion of Jesus (cf. Moss 2010). I therefore think it is at least likely that, in the experiences of those who composed the letters of Ignatius and the Martyrdom of Polycarp, the words of institution may have played a role (cf. Horsting 2011).

³² Among others, see Schröter 2006, 128.

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eaten by the dead. They say that the distribution of food takes place ‘so that the dead may eat’ and ‘whatever you give out becomes available for the dead’! Just as the body of the dead must be destroyed or eaten by the earth in order to pass into the other world, so the food distributed at memorial services must be consumed in order for it to reach the dead. Those who eat the food handed out by the relatives of the deceased substitute for the deceased. By consuming the food, they enable it to pass into the other world, where it nourishes the dead.

Bread and wine shared with the deceased at funerary banquets connected the living with the dead. There is ample evidence, both literary and archaeological, that food was shared in graveyards with the deceased again.³³ How far this was or is experienced as *real* or *symbolic*, and whether the remembered one experiences life again, depends as much on the perception of the individual participants as on whether the presence of Jesus, the *dead-yet-raised-one*, is mediated by speech, the shared food itself, or by remembering the intimacy of shared meals in the past. But either way, the meal in Jesus’s presence brings him back to life.

VI. CONCLUSION

I hope to have demonstrated how someone at community meals might have acted out the part of Jesus and how he or, more likely, she might have designated the bread and wine as symbolic or realistic communication with the deceased and/or the risen Jesus. Through this sharing of bread and wine, the crucified Jesus might have been experienced for the first time as the risen one in some quarters of the early Easter movement. In other circles, a vision of the risen one might be celebrated with a meal. As Ellen Aitken (2004, 166–67; 2012) has shown, in early Christian narrative

³³ For Greek and Roman literary devices see above, n. 19. For early Christianity, see Rebillard 2009, 141–53; 2010. For archaeology, see among many Lepetz and Andringa 2009.

traditions like [Luke 24:13–32](#), [41–43](#) or [John 21:1–14](#), Jesus's resurrection was first experienced in the context of a meal.

The so-called words of institution, conveyed to the Corinthians by Paul, relate to the night on which the events leading to Jesus's passion and death began. The words of institution themselves contain a fragment of that story. With their dense alternation of action and speech, they mark the climax of an important scene. Moreover, the words of institution coincide with a feasting practice. A community celebrating its meals with these words reenacts a decisive moment of that night.

Admittedly, it is not clear from the context of 1 Corinthians 11 that those words of institution were indeed spoken by anyone at community meals.³⁴ However, some observations suggest this, at least as an assumption. For Paul the meal itself is an act of proclaiming the death of Jesus ([1 Cor 11:26](#)). Early Christians would not be the only group to have celebrated feasts as part of a dramatic retelling of history and myth. Philo's Therapeutae celebrated a banquet that ends with a dramatic performance of Israel crossing the Red Sea, whereas the Iobacchoi in Athens performed a play, the cast of characters of which included Dionysus, Kore, Persephone, Aphrodite and other gods at table.³⁵ Moreover, we know of more than five variations of similar but not identical versions of the words of institution to those in [1 Cor 11:23–25](#). In addition, the fact that every single author who cited these words up to the third century felt a need to reformulate them into her or his own manner suggests that they were in current use, at least in some communities.³⁶ When in the longer version of [Luke 22:19–20](#) the anamnesis order is added, and when Matthew includes an invitation to “eat” ([Matt 26:26](#)) and

³⁴ Therefore, some deny that they played a role at all (cf. McGowan 1999). But a catechetical or any other function cannot be proven either.

³⁵ [Philo, Contempl. 83–89](#); [SIG^{3/4} III 1109.124–127](#) (= [IG II² 1368.124–127](#); 178 CE). See also Ebel 2008.

³⁶ [Mark 14:22–24](#); [Matt 26:26–28](#); [Luke 22:17–20](#); [1 Cor 10:16–17](#); [Justin, 1 Apol. 66.3](#); [Gos. Heb. frag. 7](#) (= Jerome, *Vir. ill.* 2, available in both [NPNF²](#) and [PL](#)), and others.

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“drink from the cup” ([Matt 26:27](#)), the appeal to those participating at such meals becomes even more direct.³⁷ Therefore, it seems highly likely that these words played some role at some early Christian feasts.

Based on its elements and on the *anamnesis* order, the meal described in this story-fragment reveals itself to be a funerary banquet. Here, family, friends, and associates remember the life and deeds of the departed in order to comfort one another and to heal “the savage wound gnawing at their breast.” One form of remembrance testified many times in antiquity, including in the Hebrew Bible and New Testament, is dirges and laments. Early oral accounts of Jesus’s sufferings and death might have grown out of such laments. At the very least, multiple features of the ancient funeral ritual as well as motifs from the psalms of lament are woven into the oldest passion narratives we know of.

Both modern ethnography and the epitaphs on ancient gravestones suggest that dirges and laments were experienced as a means of communicating with the dead. Food and drink shared at funeral meals mediate symbolically between the realms of the living and the dead. Through their mouths and bodies, the lamenters raise the dead by allowing them to speak symbolic words through their voices and to perform symbolic acts through their bodies. In so doing, they would indeed have become “actors in a divine drama” (Smith 2003, 189; for a similar assumption, compare Aitken 2012, 114–15; Corley 2010, 106–09). As Jesus’s medium, they brought him back to life. The enigmatic words “This is my body,” spoken in the name of the dead and risen Jesus, might thus have originated at funerary meals in the context of dramatic retellings of Jesus’s passion.

³⁷ Matthew also links the meal to the community rules for forgiving sins (compare [Matt 26:28](#) with [18:15–21](#)).

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