

THE POSSIBLE INFLUENCES OF GRECO-ROMAN ASSOCIATIONS ON THE CORINTHIAN *EKKLĒSIA*: AN EXAMINATION OF 1 COR 11:17–34

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Abstract: *There have been various approaches to unearthing Paul's intention in 1 Cor 11:17–34. This study attempts to verify the possible influences Paul's instructions might have had on the members of the Corinthian ekklēsia. The ritual structure of the Corinthian deipnon offers an inimitable opportunity for Paul to try to end the schismata in the ekklēsia. It is plausible that the Corinthian deipnon might be the type of meal akin to the voluntary associations in particular and in the Greco-Roman milieu in general. This is evidenced by certain features of the Greco-Roman meal practices, which were similar to the Corinthian deipnon. The ritual Paul is helping to create shaped the community through action. The application of ritual studies to the passage under review has the following advantages: It is void of mirror reading and situates the passage in its ritual setting.*

Keywords: Corinthian *ekklēsia*; Schismata; Symposium; Deipnon; Voluntary associations; Ritual structure.

Introduction¹

Rhetorical and socio–historical studies have contributed to the understanding of Paul's instructions in 1 Cor 11:17–34.² Nonetheless, there

¹ The article is based on the chapter two of the author's Ph D Thesis ("The Potency of Rituals in Effecting Stability in Communities: An Examination of Paul's Interventions in 1 Cor 11:17–34," University of St Michael's College, Toronto, 2016).

² Margaret M. Mitchell, *Paul and the Rhetoric of Reconciliation: An Exegetical Investigation of the Language and Paul and Composition of 1 Corinthians* (Louisville, Ky.: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1993); Carl Roebuck, *Corsinth XIV: The Asklepeion and Lerna* (Princeton: The American School of Classical Studies at Athens, 1951), 1–2. J. Murphy-O'Connor, *St Paul's Corinth: Texts and Archaeology* 3d ed., rev. and exp. (Collegeville, Minnesota: The Liturgical Press, 2002), 35, 129, 186–89; Ben Witherington, *Conflict and Community in Corinth: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary on 1 and 2 Corinthians* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: W.B. Eerdmans, 1995); P. Lampe, "Theological Wisdom and the 'Word about the Cross.' The Rhetorical Scheme in 1 Corinthians 1–4," *Interpretation* 44 (1990): 117–31 esp. 127–31; Benjamin Fiore, "Covert Allusion" in 1 Corinthians 1–4 *CBQ* 47 (1985): 85–102; esp. 86–88, 93–94, 100–101; Dale B. Martin, *The Corinthian Body* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995); Elliott, John H. "Social-Scientific Criticism of the New Testament and Its Social World: More on Method and Models," *Semeia* 35 (1986): 1–33; G. Theissen, *The Social Setting of Pauline Christianity: Essays on Corinth*, trans. and ed. J. H. Schutz (Philadelphia Fortress, 1982); Alan C. Mitchell, "Rich and Poor in the Courts of Corinth: Litigiousness and Status in 1 Corinthians 6:1–11," *NTS* 39 (1993): 562–86 at 562; Justin J. Meggitt, *Paul, Poverty and Survival*. Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1998.

is room to explore further because we do not have a satisfactory answer yet for the fractiousness in the Corinthian *ekklēsia*. Recent scholarship has challenged such approaches based on “mirror–reading” to interpret the causes of divisions within the Corinthian *ἐκκλησία*.³ W. Baird states the effect of such reconstructions as follows: “This method of ‘mirror reading’ has imposed on the interpretation of the epistles an oppressive rigidity. A fresh reading of 1 Corinthians is needed – a reading open to a more flexible analysis of the conflict within the Corinthian congregation.”⁴ Given the shortcomings exhibited in the attempts by these studies to resolve the issues at stake to make it compelling for a new approach. This paper examines Paul’s instructions in the passage under review through a ritual lens.

This paper argues that the Corinthian *δειπνον* might be an ordinary meal of the kind we see in voluntary associations. It cites some features prominent in Greco-Roman banquets⁵ and compares and contrasts them with the Corinthian *ekklēsia*. It examines the Corinthian meal practices through the lenses of the banqueting customs of the voluntary associations. It further seeks answers to the questions: What are the

³ Mitchell, *Paul and the Rhetoric*, 54–55; C. S. Keener, *1–2 Corinthians* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 8. Willem C. van Unnik, “The Meaning of 1 Corinthians 12:31,” *NovT* 35 (1993), 142–159, who is of a similar view considers it as a wrong historical method in New Testament scholarship in recent times “to reconstruct the unknown ideas of the Christians there by reverting Paul’s words to the opposite and by thinking that everything the apostle wrote was prompted by the necessity of contradicting very explicitly ideas that were held by these enthusiasts in the Corinthian ecclesia and which were leading the sheep astray.” Wilhelm Wuellner, “Where is Rhetorical Criticism Taking Us?” *CBQ* 49 (1987): 448–63; esp. 458–63. C. K. Barrett, “Christianity at Corinth,” in *Essays on Paul* (London: SPCK, 1982), 1–27. Michael Bünker, *Briefformular und Rhetorische Disposition im 1 Korintherbrief* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1984). Keener, *1–2 Corinthians*, 3 rightly states that: “Because letters were not speeches and even later rhetorical handbooks treat them differently, rhetorical outlines of Paul’s letters, (as if they were handbook model speeches) are suspect.” D. E. Garland, *1 Corinthians* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2003), 533 also mentions that the problem in Corinth was caused neither by their “theological confusion about sacramental facets of the Lord’s Supper nor by a conflict over Eucharistic theology.”

⁴ W. Baird, “‘One against the Other’: Intra-Church Conflict in 1 Corinthians” in *The Conversation Continues: Studies in Paul and John in Honor of J. Louis Martyn*, ed. R. T. Fortna and B. R. Gaventa (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1990), 119.

⁵ A banquet is a social institution and associated with it are meals and drinks. It is a dual-purpose occasion which features the *deipnon*, “supper” i.e. the meal proper and the *symposion* i.e. the drinking party. See Katherine M. D. Dunbabin, *The Roman Banquet: Images of Conviviality* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 4; who opts for the word as a “generic term for the festive consumption of food and drink in Roman society.” Jason König, *Saints and Symposiasts: the Literature of Food and the Symposium in Greco-Roman and Early Christian Culture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 6: *symposion* literally means “drinking together.” The institution may be traced to the “archaic period, from the eighth to sixth centuries B.C. E.”

parameters that constitute the Corinthian *ekklēsia* to be analogous to an association? To what extent did the meal practices of the Greco-Roman world influence the meal practices in the Corinthian *ekklēsia*?

The Importance of Voluntary Associations in the Greco Roman Milieu

One feature that is common to the first century and the present-day Christianity is the tendency towards the establishment of associations. With the decline of the Greek *πόλις*, voluntary associations bloomed during the Hellenistic and Roman periods. People in the society found solace in associations operating with “structures on a more personal scale.”⁶ The “Pauline movement” as part of its social organization worked out structures including “belonging.”⁷ In addition to these structures, the members of the associations participated in several rituals one of which was the partaking in a “common meal”⁸

Some Purposes of Voluntary Associations

There was a proliferation of associations for multiple purposes in the early Roman Empire. These included trade guilds, dramatic guilds, clubs and societies of all kinds.⁹ Kloppenborg observes that it is problematic to categorize *collegia* by their so-called main activities or their functions, which may be inter-related. He maintains that it is expedient to classify the associations based on their membership rather than functions. He identifies three major bases of membership namely those connected with a household (*collegia domestica*), those formed in relation to a common trade (professional) and *collegium* built around the cult of a deity (religious), which he describes as most inclusive of voluntary

⁶ Hans-Josef Klauck, *The Religious Context of Early Christianity* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2003), 43. See also Robert L. Wilken, *The Christians* (New Haven - London: Yale University Press, 2003), 35.

⁷ See Meeks' comprehensive discussion of the language of belonging and boundaries, W. A. Meeks, *The First Urban Christians. The Social World of the Apostle Paul* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1983), 84–110. Cf. Wilken, *The Christians*, 35–36.

⁸ Edwin Hatch, *The Organization of the Early Christian Churches*. Eight Lectures delivered before the University of Oxford, in the year, 1880 on the Foundation of the Late John Bampton (New York: B. Franklin, 1972), 31 n. 13. Cf. J. S. Kloppenborg, “Edwin Hatch, Churches and Collegia,” in *Origins and Method: Towards A New Understanding of Judaism and Christianity*. Essays in Honour of John C. Hurd, ed. Bradley H. McLean JSNT Sup 86 (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1993), 212–238 at 237.

⁹ Hatch, *The Organization*, 26.

associations. The taxonomy is thus based on profile of the members rather than the purpose of the association.¹⁰

The significance of the Greco–Roman banquet

Festive meals were a common feature of the voluntary associations of all kinds in the Greco–Roman milieu. B. W. R. Pearson is of the view that “the most frequent activity of associations, whatever their particular stripe, was social gathering.”¹¹ A festive meal was commonly celebrated on “the feast of the god or of the foundation, annually, once a month or even more frequently, depending on the aims and statues of the association.”¹²

There are pieces of evidence within the political *ἐκκλησίαι* of Greco–Roman world which might illuminate what took place in the Corinthian *ἐκκλησία*. In the ancient Mediterranean world banquets took place in varied spaces. Some scholars are of the view that banquets could take place at homes. For example, Jerome Murphy–O’Connor, a representative of the second phase considers the *triclinium* to be the meeting place for the house congregation.¹³ Murphy–O’Connor, basing his evidence on architectural structure of a classic Roman villa, points out the disparity that social class portrayed in the Greco–Roman social context. On invitation to banquets, the host’s “closest friends ... who would have been of the same social class and from whom he might expect the same courtesy on a future occasion” would recline in the triclinium while the rest would be compelled to sit “in the atrium, where conditions were

¹⁰ John S. Kloppenborg, “Collegia and *Thiasoi*: Issues in Function, Taxonomy and Membership,” in *Voluntary Associations in the Graeco-Roman World*, ed. John S. Kloppenborg and Stephen G. Wilson (London; New York: Routledge, 1996), 20–27. Hatch, *Churches*, 237 is of the view that Pauline *ἐκκλησίαι* like *collegia* “can be fitted into the spectrum of formal designations, organization and membership profiles of Greek and Roman voluntary associations.” Meeks, *The First Urban Christians*, 77–80, observes both similarities and differences between the Christian group and typical voluntary associations. See also Philip A. Harland, *Associations, Synagogues, and Congregations: Claiming a Place in Ancient Mediterranean Society* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2003), 2, 9, 28–29. Mack, “Rereading the Christ Myth,” 52 writes: “The Corinthians were apparently meeting together as an association of non-native persons in the recently repopulated city of Corinth.”

¹¹ B. W. R. Pearson, “Associations,” in *Dictionary of New Testament Background*, ed. Craig A. Evans and Stanley E. Porter (Downers Grove, IL.: InterVarsity Press, 2000), 136.

¹² Pearson, “Associations,” 44.

¹³ Murphy–O’Connor, “St Paul’s Corinth”, 178–185; See also P. Lampe, “Das korinthische Herrenmahl im Schnittpunkt hellenistisch-römischer Mahlpraxis und paulinischer Theologia Crucis (1 Kor 11, 17–34),” *ZNW* 82 (1991):183–213 and *idem*, “The Corinthian Eucharistic Dinner Party: Exegesis of a Cultural Context (1 Cor. 11:17-34),” *Affirmation* 4 (1991):1-15.

greatly inferior.”¹⁴ James N. Davidson buttresses the fact of the disparity in social class by arguing from Petronius’s narrative of Trimalchio’s feast that “in the Roman context the banquet becomes a theatre of wealth and property, of social distinction, or social climbing.”¹⁵

The third century witnessed the waning of the political significance of the polis and the involvement of citizens in political affairs leading to the “depoliticization of the meal.”¹⁶ Gradually the banquet became open to women and to slaves, and it absorbed the social functions of the polis, primarily in the voluntary associations that represented public life. The significance of this development can hardly be overestimated: the central event in the many associations coming into being in early Hellenism, as well as in early Principate, was the communal banquet meal.¹⁷

External Evidence

For an effective analysis, it is important to resort to external evidence that has a parallel to the Corinthian practice. Establishing this kind of evidence is relevant to assert that the Corinthian meal is an ordinary Greco–Roman meal. For legal reasons, Jewish groups within the Roman Empire were known as *collegia*. The synagogues were among other “long-established groups” that were exempted when Julius Caesar issued a decree banning all *collegia* from operation.¹⁸ Pliny the Younger in writing to the emperor Trajan employed two terms namely *superstitio* “superstition” and *hetaeria*, “political club” to describe Christians.¹⁹ Pliny mentions a custom (*mos*) practiced by Christians which involved separating themselves and reassembling to partake of

¹⁴ Murphy-O’ Connor, “St Paul’s Corinth”, 183; See also Lampe, “Das korinthische Herrenmahl,” 183–213 and *idem*, “The Corinthian Eucharistic Dinner Party,” 1–15.

¹⁵ J.N. Davidson, *Courtesans & Fishcakes: The Consuming Passions of Classical Athens* (London: Harper Collins, 1997), 311.

¹⁶ Matthias Klinghardt, “A Typology of the Communal Meal,” in *Meals in the Early Christian World: Social Formation, Experimentation, and Conflict at the Table*, ed. Dennis E. Smith and Hal E. Taussig (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), 9–10.

¹⁷ Klinghardt, “A Typology”, 10.

¹⁸ Meeks, *The First Urban Christians*, 35.

¹⁹ *Hetaeria*: derived from the Greek word *ἑταιρία* (*ἑταιρία*) that has been transliterated into Latin. It is commonly known as political club or association. Robert L. Wilken, *The Christians as the Romans Saw Them*, 34 indicates that: “Although the term *hetaeria* highlights the political aspects of these associations, most clubs were not political, as Trajan recognized.”

food (*quibus*). He regarded the Christian Supper to be in the same category as that of the *hetaeriai*. Christians, however, abandoned this practice when Pliny forbade such meals in Bithynia–Pontus in early second century after Trajan had issued an edict banning the *hetaeriai*.²⁰ Kloppenborg, deducing from Pliny’s statement expresses the view that it is an indication that both “the Christians involved saw themselves as constituting an association and that this judgement was shared by Pliny.”²¹ Christians were seen by outsiders as being part of mystery religions. One possible way of clarifying this notion “was to call themselves an *ekklēsia*,” a means of intensifying social integration.²²

Aristotle, in his *Ethica Nichomachea* states that: *hai de koinōniai pasai moriois eoikasi tēs politikēs*.²³ Aristotle further mentions that: *enai de tōn koinōniōn di’ hēdonēn dokousi ginesthai, thiasōtōn kai eranistōn: autai gar thysias heneka kai synousias*.²⁴ From Aristotle’s statement, two kinds of associations (*koinōniai*) can be identified namely religious guild (*thiasos*) and dining club (*eranos*). While it is likely that the terms were used interchangeably, the clubs as religious clubs offered sacrifices and promoted companionship at the social level. Almost all associations seemed to have a religious flavor. Edwin Hatch agrees with the notion that Christian churches were analogous with voluntary associations. With the Greek associations, the common meal was inferred by its regular provision for sacrifice at their meetings, while with Roman associations it was stipulated in the extant bylaws.²⁵

W. A. Meeks mentions the partaking in “common meals” as one of the significant similarities between the Pauline groups and the private associations.²⁶ Kloppenborg, basing his observation on Edwin Hatch’s

²⁰ Pliny the Younger *Ep.* 10. 96. 7.

²¹ Kloppenborg “Edwin Hatch, Churches ,” 228. Peter Richardson, *Building Jewish in the Roman East* (Waco: Baylor University Press, 2004), 187; Wilken, *The Christians*, 44– 47.

²² Klauck, *The Religious Context*, 54. Transliteration mine. Cf. Edwin Hatch, *The Organization*, 30 mentions that from the perspective of an outsider, the Christians were in the “same category” with the association.

²³ Aristotle, *Eth. Nic.* 8. 9. 4 (1160a) “But all associations are as parts of the State.” My translation.

²⁴ And some associations seem to be established on the account of pleasure, for example, religious guilds (*thiasotai*) and dining-clubs (*eranistai*) that are unions for sacrifice and companionship. *Ibid.*, 8. 9. 5. (1160 a). My translation.

²⁵ Hatch, *The Organization*, 16–54 esp. 31 n.13.

²⁶ Meeks, *The First Urban Christians*, 78.

comments about how cultic associations thrived irrespective of political pressures notes that, as Christian mission expanded, it did not have to create the “notion of a religious society distinct from the family and the polis or state.”²⁷ Kloppenborg argues that “there was a broad spectrum of forms of collegia, broad enough that most of the particularities seen in Pauline churches could fit comfortably within that spectrum.”²⁸ Likewise, P. Richardson maintains that synagogues started as collegia in diaspora setting and early synagogues (pre 70 synagogues) were in all details analogous to collegia.²⁹

Analysis

Association banquets provide analogies that contribute in shedding light on the behavior of the members of the Corinthian *ekklēsia*, the physical setting and the ritual structure of the Corinthian meal. Furthermore, certain parameters enhanced the banquet tradition of the associations in the Greco–Roman world. Certain features of the meal practices of Greco–Roman associations bear comparison with the evidence of 1 Corinthians 11: social stratification, social ethics, timing, drunkenness, character and social mobility.

Social Stratification

The social structure of the Greco–Roman world was displayed at the gathering for meals. In the associations, seating arrangement was one of the “indicators of status.”³⁰ In professional associations, the arrangement of tables underscored hierarchy and rank; and penalties were imposed on those who attempted to take the seat of others.³¹ In the Roman

²⁷ Kloppenborg, “Edwin Hatch, Churches,” 213.

²⁸ Kloppenborg, “Edwin Hatch, Churches,” 231–38.

²⁹ P. Richardson, “Early Synagogues as Collegia in the Diaspora and Palestine,” in *Voluntary Associations in the Graeco-Roman World*, ed. John S. Kloppenborg and S. G. Wilson (Hoboken: Routledge, 2012), 90–109.

³⁰ J. S. Kloppenborg, “Greco-Roman Thiasoi, the Ekklēsia at Corinth, and Conflict Management,” in *Redescribing Paul and the Corinthians*, ed. Ron Cameron and M. P. Miller, SBL Early Christianity and its Literature (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2011), 211. Robert W. Funk and the Jesus Seminar, ed., *The Acts of Jesus: The Search for the Authentic Deeds of Jesus* (San Francisco: HarperSan Francisco, 1998), 353: “Meals functioned as social boundary markers, not only defining by seating arrangement who outranked whom. But relegating to the bottom of the social heap those not invited in the first place.” Hal E. Taussig, “Elaborating a New Paradigm: The Work of the Society of Biblical Literature’s Seminar on Meals in the Greco–Roman World” in *Mahl und religiöse Identität im frühen Christentum*, ed. Matthias Klinghardt and Hal E. Taussig TANZ 56 (Tübingen: Francke, 2012), 25–40 at 34: Reclining at meals “underlined status and stratification.”

³¹ Onno M. van Nijf, *The Civic World of the Professional Associations in the Roman East*, Dutch

period, such positions became well defined.³² Lucian mentions Alcidas the Cynic who went to a banquet as an uninvited diner. Aristaeus after commending him asked him to sit on a chair because there were virtually no other important place for reclining. Alcidas retorted that it was *gynaikeion kai malthakon* (womanish and weak) to sit on a chair or stool during a banquet hence he opted to eat while walking about in the dining room. In order to exhibit his unique social standing, he would ultimately choose to recline on the floor should he get tired.³³

The mode of reclining was indicative of a social rank. The reason was that a unique order of reclining prevailed; with the “most honored” position accorded to the person on the right of the *symposiarchos* and the “least honored” position given to the person at the other end of the circle and “faced the back of the *symposiarchos*. Almost always those with the places closest to the right hand of the *symposiarchos* had the most prestige and honor in the larger society.”³⁴ In the Corinthian *ekklēsia*, the members were not at a single level. There were differences in status. As a stratified community, this discrepancy reflected in the sharing of meal. Paul claims that some were satisfied while others were hungry (1 Cor 11:21). It is plausible that the rhetorical question posed by Paul – *mē gar oikias ouk ekete...*; (1 Cor 11:22)³⁵ could mean the ownership of houses by the elite.³⁶ G. Theissen attributes the discrepancy to class distinction i.e. between the wealthy and poor. He draws a distinction between those who have houses and those who do not.

An indicator of status is the quantity of food served at the tables.³⁷ The hierarchies of the associative order were openly given places of honor at banquets and were served larger portions of meal.³⁸ Thus, the

Monographs on Ancient History and Archaeology 17 (Amsterdam: J. C. Gieben, 1997), 110.

³² D. E. Smith, “Social Obligation in the Context of Communal Meals: A Study of the Christian Meal in 1 Corinthians in Comparison with Graeco-Roman Meals,” PhD Thesis (Harvard University Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1980), 8.

³³ Lucian, *Symp.* 13.

³⁴ Taussig, “Elaborating a New Paradigm”, 34. See also Rachel M. McRae, “Eating with Honor: The Corinthian Lord’s Supper in Light of Voluntary Association, Meal Practices,” *JBL* 130 (2011):165–81.

³⁵ “For do you not have houses?” (1 Cor 11:22). My translation.

³⁶ G. D. Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, NICNT; rev. ed. (Grand Rapids, Mich.: W.B. Eerdmans, 2014), 602, points out that the question implies “ownership”: *oikias echete*; not “homes.”

³⁷ Kloppenborg, “Greco-Roman Thiasoi,” 211.

³⁸ K. Verborven “Associative Order: Status and Ethos of Roman Businessmen in the Late Republic and Early Empire,” *Athenaeum* 95 (2007): 861–893 at 887. Meeks, *The First Urban Christians*,

“leading members and benefactors” in professional associations, were given the first cut of “sacrificial meat.” Nonetheless, they were supposed to help defray the cost of the meetings and banquets.³⁹ The conflict in Corinth arises as a result of “two different patterns of conduct” both of which the wealthier Christians can trace to the social setting. It could be attributed to internal stratification of the community. By virtue of the fact that some members could contribute more than others, it equally gave them the opportunity to attain a position of superiority.⁴⁰

Within the associations, the larger allocation to certain members was not considered as an offence. The regulations of the associations stipulated that the officers were to receive greater portions of all distributions, basically in the food and drink for the performance of administrative assignments. G. Theissen, referencing E. Kornemann, states that the portions varied from between “one and one-half to two and three times the normal, giving rise to the terms *sesquiplicarii*, *duplicarii*, *triplicarii* for the various categories of officials.”⁴¹

A case in point is the *collegium* in Lanuvium, Campania, Italy 136 CE [June 9] (*CIL* XIV 2112 = ILS 7212 = Bendlin 2011; 136 CE, June 9). In one of the bylaws of the *collegium*, for example, it was voted that any member who is elected a president (*quinquennalis*) shall receive a double portion in all distributions.⁴² Also, it was further voted that officers such as secretary (*scriba*) and the messenger (*viator*) shall receive a portion and a half in every distribution, and that any former president who rendered distinguished and honest service shall receive a portion and a half of everything as an indicator of honor. This was to serve as an incentive for the presidents to execute their duties effectively.⁴³ Furthermore, the custom of Liopesi, Attica, regarding the purchasing of priesthood was that it included a double portion of food with the exception of wine after the payment has been made to the head of the club

159, following G. Theissen’s construction writes: “the hosts provide both greater quantity and better quality of food and drink to their social equals than to participants of lower status.”

³⁹ Onno M. van Nijf, *The Civic World of the Professional Associations in the Roman East* (Amsterdam: Gieben, 1997), 110.

⁴⁰ Theissen, *The Social Setting*, 162.

⁴¹ Theissen, *The Social Setting*, 154. See E. Kornemann, s.v. “Collegium,” *PRE* 7, 3.

⁴² Richard S. Ascough, Philip A. Harland and J. S. Kloppenborg, *Associations in the Greco-Roman World: A Sourcebook* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2012), 310 (1.50 [11]). Cf. Theissen, *The Social Setting*, 154. Kloppenborg, “Graeco-Roman Thiasoi,” 212. A *quinquennalis* was one of the most important officers in an association.

⁴³ *CIL* XIV 2112 = *ILS* 7212 = *AGRW* 310 [11] – [13].

(*SEG* 31 [1981], no. 122 = *AGRW* 9, early II CE). Theissen adds that “[s]uch discrepancies were in fact, considered fair and proper.”⁴⁴

Seniority was another mark necessary to accord a person a place of honor at a table. Such a position offers one the opportunity to start discussing a subject. Plutarch records: “Solon was the right man to make the beginning of the subject not only because he was senior to all the rest and was in the place of honor at the table, but because, having legislated for the Athenians he held the greatest and completest position of a ruler.”⁴⁵ Similarly, Plato mentions Phaedrus as occupying the topmost place at table and being the father of their debate. On the right of the host were guests who were seated routinely in a way depending on their status.⁴⁶ In contrast with this is the lowest position.

Social Ethics

Within the Greco–Roman associations, emphasis was placed on decorum during meals. Eating a meal is not merely an anatomical exercise but it offers diners the opportunity to foster social relationships. It is only when the *eranos* meal is taken in a friendly manner that the beneficent principle becomes effective. The diners are expected to make friends rather than have enemies. Socialness is of utmost significance during symposium. Plutarch laments that some rich men build rooms large enough to contain thirty or even more tables. According to him, “*hothen ouk ophōs hoi plousioi neanieuontai kataskeuazontes oikous triakontaklinous kai meizous: amiktōn gar autē kai aphilōn deipnōn he paraskeuē kai panēgyriarchou mallon ē symposiarchou deomenōn.*”⁴⁷

Corporate values and norms were enforced. This enhanced fellowship,⁴⁸ which was the mainstay of banquets. Plutarch in establishing the

⁴⁴ Theissen, *The Social Setting*, 154.

⁴⁵ Theissen, *The Social Setting*, 151; Plutarch, “Dinner party of the seven sages.”

⁴⁶ Plato, *Symposium* 177 D–E: In the discourse, Phaedrus, the father of debate is given the privilege to start (Phaidro[s]... *prōtos katakeitai kai estin hama patēr tou logou*). It is followed by the one on the right (*epi dexia*) and to those at the lowest position at table (*hemin tois hustatois katakeimenois*).

⁴⁷ Plut. *Quaest.conv.* 5. 5. 2: “And therefore some rich men are immature, who fully furnish houses big enough with thirty couches or more at once; for such a preparation is for unsociable and friendless dinners, and such as are suitable for a panegyriarch rather than symposiarch to preside over.” My translation.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 717 A.

essence of fellowship makes the following statement: “*all’ hopou to idion estin apollutai to koinon.*”⁴⁹ Comparing this statement to the case of the Corinthian *ekklēsia* evokes the questions that Paul posed in 1 Cor 10:16: *to potērion tēs eulogias ho eulougoumen, ouchi koinōnia estin tou haimatos tou Christou; ton arton hon klōmen, ouchi koinōnia tou sōmatos tou Christou estin;*⁵⁰

Related to fellowship is friendship. Friendship is a beneficent principle.⁵¹ Friendship and hospitality revolve around the table. Plutarch regards friendship as the best of possessions.⁵² “Take away food, and you take away the table – that is to say, gods of the altar of friendship and hospitality.”⁵³ The rationale for friends to be invited was for them to share their moments of delight in common. Archilochus is known to have said: “You come and drink full of Chian wine, and yet give no return for them, nor wait to be invited, as a friend would do.”⁵⁴ True friendship involves trust and the level of trust should be just as one trusts himself.⁵⁵ The act of sharing food is also an indication of level of friendship that exists between people.

Closely related to social ethics is social equality.⁵⁶ Equality was an essential ingredient of the social code of the Greco–Roman setting. The notion of social equality was in vogue in the time of Homer where “equal feasts” was a trait of the meals of the Heroes.⁵⁷ Plutarch promoted the spirit of equality. He enjoined all persons irrespective of status to participate in the *eranos* on friendship terms. This instruction was given to ensure that meals were equitably distributed to all and sundry irrespective of their social status and it conforms to the expectations of the Greco–Roman milieu where dinner is a democratic affair (*dēmokratikon esti to deipnon*).⁵⁸ This speaks to Paul’s dissatisfaction

⁴⁹ Ibid., 644 C: “but fellowship perishes when idiosyncrasy persists.” My translation.

⁵⁰ “The cup of blessing that we bless; is it not the *koinōnia* of the blood of Christ? The bread that we break; is it not the *koinōnia* of the body of Christ? My translation.

⁵¹ See Plut. “Isis and Osiris” 370 e in *Moralia* V, where Empedocles calls this principle “friendship” or “friendliness” or and usually “concord.”

⁵² Plut. “On Calumniating,” *Moralia* V, 156.

⁵³ Plut. “Dinner Party of the Seven Sages,” 158.

⁵⁴ Ath., *Deip.*, 1.14.

⁵⁵ Sen., *Ad Luc.*, 3.2.

⁵⁶ There is a tension between the notion of social equality and social stratification.

⁵⁷ Hom., *Ill.* 1.468, 602; 2.432.

⁵⁸ See Quaest. Conv. 616 F of Plutarch’s *Moralia*. Timon expresses social equality in the following words: *ti ouk enteuthen arxamenoī prōton ethizomen atuphōs kai apheleōs kataklinesthai met’ allēlōn,* ‘euthys apo tōn thyrōn orōntas hoti, demokratikōv esti to deipnon kai ouk echei topon

about the Corinthians. Paul's dissatisfaction is seen in his remarks that some of the members become satisfied and drunk while others are hungry. Paul's concern is that the members of the *ekklēsia* would exhibit *isotētos* (11:21; cf. 13:33–34).⁵⁹ Furthermore, in 1 Cor 1:4, Paul expresses his gratitude to God for the Corinthians. However, he does not commend them for the proceedings of their assembly (1 Cor 11:17). Paul claims that their assembly was not for the better but for the worse (11:17). This situation could not merit his commendation. He successively poses four questions in 11:22 and ends with *en toutō ouk epainō*.⁶⁰

Timing

Punctuality was the standard for banquets; however, some diners arrived late. If the hypothesis that the Corinthian *ekklēsia* had a common meal typology as other Greco–Roman associations holds, then it is plausible that some members of the *ekklēsia* could arrive late for meals. Plato indicates that at one time when dinner had begun, one of his diners, Socrates was absent. Even though Agathon, the host gave the directive to go for him he did not allow it. However, he later arrived about mid–way through the dinner.⁶¹

The incidence of diners arriving late for a meal was similar to the Corinthian situation where some members of the *ekklēsia* took their meal before the arrival of others. It illuminates how the *ekklēsia* could fit into the category of an association. If the assumption that the Corinthian *ekklēsia* was akin to the Greco–Roman associations holds, then the comparison helps in interpreting 1 Corinthians in the following ways: It helps in deciding on, for example, the verb *prolambanein*. In his reconstruction of Corinthian scenario, P. Lampe translates *prolambanein* as “premature beginning.”⁶² He suggests that the wealthy Corinthians

exaireton *ōsper* akropolis eph'houkatalitheis ho plousios entrophēsei tois eutelesterois; [Hence, if we should ensure equality, why not begin with this first and accustom people to recline with one another without pride and hard-heartedness because they see immediately they enter that the dinner is a democratic event and has no privileged place like an acropolis where the rich person is to recline and lord it over the less –privileged?] My translation.

⁵⁹ For further study on Paul's desire for *isōtētos* see 2 Cor 8:13–15.

⁶⁰ “In this I do not praise you.” 1 Cor 11:22e My translation

⁶¹ Plato, *Symp.*, 175 C–D.

⁶² P. Lampe, “The Eucharist: Identifying with Christ on the Cross,” *Interpretation* 48 no. 1 (1994): 39 poses the question: “Can their ‘premature beginning’ (*prolambanein*) be interpreted in the light of the Greco-Roman meal custom?”

began eating their own meal before the arrival of others. According to the *eranos* custom therefore, latecomers who for time constraint or lack of money to prepare their own food baskets had to remain hungry.⁶³

Drunkenness

Drunkenness was a regular feature at banquets in general and was “a convenient excuse for any other wise abnormal behavior.”⁶⁴ I include it because it provides a parallel to 1 Cor 11:21. Drunkenness is evident during the partaking of the meal in the Corinthian *ekklēsia*.⁶⁵ The *symposion* would usually end in general drunkenness.⁶⁶ It also buttresses the fact that the meal taken was analogous to what other associations partook. If the meal was already *kyriakon deipnon*⁶⁷ at the time Paul was writing then the portion given to an individual would be such that it could hardly make one intoxicated. H. Conzelmann comments that “Fellowship is canceled when one suffers want and another is drunk; this holds even if the reproach of drunkenness is not taken too strictly.”⁶⁸ J. A. Fitzmyer in his commentary on 11:22 states that “[t]he further description of one such diner who goes ahead as “hungry” and another as “drunk” stands in contrast to “those who have nothing.”⁶⁹ The understanding therefore is that the situation of a diner lacking an element would not arise if the celebration were the *kyriakon deipnon*.

Character

The character of some of the members in the Corinthian *ekklēsia* was similar to that of some of the guests at festive meals. According to Plato “men’s characters are brought to light over wine.”⁷⁰ The text under review is explicit that some of the members were drunk. This to some extent reveals their character. It can be inferred that they had more than enough and could have shared with other members but they declined.

⁶³ Ibid.

⁶⁴ D. E. Smith, *From Symposium to Eucharist: the Banquet in the Early Christian World* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2003), 36.

⁶⁵ It is noteworthy that here Paul is engaged in rhetorical exaggeration.

⁶⁶ Robert Flacelière, *Daily Life in Greece at the time of Pericles* (trans. Peter Green; 1st American ed.; New York: Macmillan, 1966), 175.

⁶⁷ The Lord’s meal or supper

⁶⁸ H. Conzelmann, *A Commentary on the First Epistle to the Corinthians* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 2008), [195](#).

⁶⁹ J. A. Fitzmyer, *First Corinthians: A New with Introduction and Commentary* (New Haven - London: Yale University Press, 2008) 434.

⁷⁰ Plato, *Symp.*, 129.

The behavior put up by the members of the *ekklēsia* could have its roots in the prevailing culture where invited guests could be marginalized. Theissen expresses the view that there is the likelihood that the rich Christians did not experience any guilty conscience in all that transpired. They would have thought of their actions as a means of offering help to the poorer members.⁷¹ Moreover, P. Lampe referencing Plato, Lucian and Athenaeus, points out that the wealthy Christians had a clear conscience when they started their meals before others. Their behavior was in consonance with the cultural context where guests who were late could participate in the Second Tables.⁷²

Social mobility

I now examine social mobility as one of the internal pieces of evidence that the Corinth *ekklēsia* is a voluntary association. Citing examples of Greek elections in Hellenistic and Roman epigraphic and literary sources and drawing examples from associations and correspondences, Richard Last submits that *hairesis* is a technical term used in antiquity for the kind of elections held in voluntary associations.⁷³ In a philological study he demonstrates that the verb *haireomai* and the cognate noun *hairesis*, as employed by Paul, connote “the act of electing” and the “actual election” respectively.⁷⁴ He cites an example of this use from Tebtynis (*P. PragueDem.1*; 137 BCE) on “factious behavior.”⁷⁵ Likewise, he alludes to an example from the Lanuvium inscription (CIL XIV 2112 = *AGRW* 310; Italy 136 CE) that mentions the involvement of magistrates in “factiousness.”⁷⁶ Just as Paul instructed that there be no *schismata* in the Corinthian *ekklēsia*, it is specified here that fines will be imposed on officers who struck members.⁷⁷

⁷¹ Theissen, *The Social Setting*, 161 ff.

⁷² Cf. Plato *Symp.* 212 CD, 223 B, Lucian *Lex.* 9, 13 and Ath. *Deip.* 5. 180 A.

⁷³ R. Last, “The Election of Officers in the Corinthian Christ-Group,” *NTS* 59 (2013): 365–381 at 375. Other words he employs include: *hairetheis*, *hoi harethentes*, *haireseōs*, *elesthai*, and *hairethēnai*. He cites an example where “a certain Mēnis was elected (*haireseis*) to become the group’s treasurer (*IG* 2 127 = *GRA* I 13, Attica, 299/8 BCE),” 374.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 375.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 372.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*; See also n 22. The examples include “*SEG* 31. 122= *GRA* I 50, Attica, early II CE; *P Lond.* VII 2193.8 11–12= *AGRW* 295, Philadelphia, Egypt, 69–58 BCE; *P Mich* VIII 511, unknown location in Egypt. Smith, *From Symposium to Eucharist*, 99–102.

While the objective of meeting at a banquet is to promote social interaction the distribution of food can bring disunity because “food is a subject so sensitive to social manipulation. . . .”⁷⁸ There is the likelihood that some of them could be officers. The physical setting of the gathering offers us the opportunity to understand the dynamics of social mobility in the Greco–Roman world. Related to this feature is Richard Last’s argument about the election of officers in the Corinthian *ekklēsia*. Last completely reorients the typical understanding of *haireseis* in this passage.⁷⁹ He contends that the use of *haireisis* in 1 Cor 11:19 by Paul indicates that the Corinthian *ekklēsia* elected rotating administrative leaders whose duties included the managing of affairs at the Lord’s Supper. In Last’s reading the “banquet problems (i.e. *schismata*)” associated with the communal meal were due to the lack of election of officers when their tenure of office expired.⁸⁰ This evidence also supports a parallel with a voluntary association rather than a patriarchal house–church arrangement.

In Last’s reading, the composition of the Corinthian *ekklēsia* was such that members could be elected into office for administrative purposes and exercise control over the distribution of food at table. This is indicated by the language Paul uses in 1 Cor 11:19. The notion of “flat hierarchy” of temporary and rotating officers gave room for social mobility. The refusal to allow elections to be held has been identified as one of the possible causes of the banquet problems which the Corinthian *ekklēsia* faced.⁸¹

These examples provide evidence for establishing the presence of leaders in the Corinthian *ekklēsia* in the following ways: First, the organizational structure of the Corinthian *ekklēsia* makes room for the appointment of officers (1 Cor 12:28). Second, Paul employed two terms namely *haireseis* and *dokimoi* (1 Cor 11:19) that are commonly applicable in civic and association elections. The examples serve as indicators of how the Corinthian *ekklēsia* operated in a manner similar to the Greco–Roman associations. The examples serve as indicators of how the Corinthian *ekklēsia* operated in a manner similar to the Greco–Roman associations. Moreover, it confirms that the *schismata* that the

⁷⁸ Mary Douglas, “Deciphering a Meal,” *Daedalus* 101 (1972), 83.

⁷⁹ Last, “The Election,” esp. 374–378. Transliteration mine

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, 380.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, esp. 368 ff.

Corinthian *ekklēsia* faced during their banquets which were typical of the proceedings of *thiasoi* and *collegia*.⁸² Furthermore, the examples provide key information regarding the social and religious life in Roman Corinth and supplement data in literary sources and give insight into “civic life at ground level as well as from the heights.”⁸³

Fractiousness

Fractiousness is a consequence of the above-stated elements, which I have analysed. It is common to both the Corinthian *ekklēsia* and Greco–Roman associations and often characterized the associations especially at meals.⁸⁴ Evidence for infighting is found in a guild regulation of the cult association of Zeus Philadelphia (Arsinoites, Fayûm, Egypt) *P Lond VII 2193*; 69–58 B. C. E.)⁸⁵ It specifies that: 1. all members respect the leader and the assistant in matters regarding the *koinon* (association);⁸⁶ 2. it is illegal to foment *schimata* or for a member to leave the *phratra* (brotherhood) of the leader to join another *phratra*; and 3. no member may insult one another at a *symposion* (banquet).⁸⁷ From the Lanuvium inscription, regulations were given concerning disputes at communal meal in the bylaws of a benevolent association. The bylaws prohibited members from causing disturbance.⁸⁸ In the case of the Iobacchi at Athens, for example, a member was not supposed to speak without the permission of the priest or the vice–priest.⁸⁹ In 1 Cor 14:28, 29, Paul is making a similar kind of argument when he asks the prophets within the *ekklēsia* to take turns.

⁸² See for example D. E. Smith and Hal E. Taussig, *Many Tables: The Eucharist in the New Testament and Liturgy Today* (London: SCM, 1990), 32; Mitchell, *Paul and the Rhetoric*, 72.

⁸³ James Rives, “Civic and Religious Life, in Epigraphic Evidence: Ancient History from Inscriptions,” in *Approaching the Ancient World*, ed. John Bodel (London: Routledge, 2011), 118–19.

⁸⁴ Kloppenborg, “Greco-Roman Thiasoi,” 211.

⁸⁵ C. Roberts, T.C. Skeat and A.D. Nock, “The Gild of Zeus Hypsistos,” *HTR* 29 (1936), 39–88; Richard S. Ascough, Philip A. Harland and J. S. Kloppenborg, *Associations in the Greco-Roman World: A Sourcebook* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2012), 295.

⁸⁶ *P Lond VII. 2193*.

⁸⁷ Roberts, Skeat and Nock, “The Gild of Zeus Hypsistos,” 39–88: *AGRW*, 295.

⁸⁸ *AGRW*. CIL XIV 2112, *AGRW* 310 Specifically, line 50 [15] stipulates: “... any member who moves from one seat to another so as to cause a disturbance shall be fined four sesterces.” Cf. J. S. Kloppenborg, “Greco-Roman Thiasoi,” 211.

⁸⁹ *SIG* 1109. 108; Smith, *From Symposium to Eucharist*, 130: “In the gathering no one was allowed to sing, cause a disturbance, or applaud. Rather with all order or decorum members shall speak and do their parts, as the priest or the head of the bacchic devotees directs.”

Conclusion

In the analysis, I notice that Greco–Roman meals can explain most of the features of the Corinthian *deipnon*. By way of summary, I have observed that the structure of the Greek, Roman and Jewish meals follow the same pattern.⁹⁰ The ancient peoples of the Mediterranean world, within the period circa 300 B. C. E. and circa 300 C. E. seemed to have common dining customs with some variations.⁹¹ The rules of the associations in the Greco–Roman world influenced the praxis of the Corinthian *ekklēsia*. There were marked similarities between the Corinthian *ekklēsia* and the voluntary associations of the Greco–Roman milieu. Members of the Corinthian *ekklēsia* partook in the *deipnon*. The associations had rules which governed the behavior of members at table. The problem of *schismata* was typical of the meetings of the *thiasoi* and *collegia*. Just as Paul had to address the problem of fractiousness in Corinthian *ekklēsia* so it was with the *thiasoi* and *collegia*. For instance, the bylaws of the Guild of Hypsistos prohibited *schismata: mēde schismata synistas[thai]*.⁹²

In the Corinthian *ekklēsia*, the quantity and quality of food; the posture of reclining reflecting statuses of guests; the relaxed atmosphere coupled with late dining all contributed to the keen desire for social status among the guests. The lack of an equitable distribution of food contributed towards the instability within the community. Some members were fully satisfied while others were hungry. Furthermore, there were others who got drunk. This state of affairs can be accounted for by referring to the nature of socio–cultural setting with its values within which the members of the *ekklēsia* found themselves. The comparison between the voluntary associations in the Greco–Roman world and the Corinthian *ekklēsia* reveals that there were similar ritual dynamics. The meal in the Corinthian *ekklēsia* had not yet been shaped as a distinctively Christian ritual. On this premise, I posit that some of the practices, for example, some members eating before others, could have accounted for the *schismata* that persisted within the Corinthian *ekklēsia*. Based on

⁹⁰ Smith, *From Symposium to Eucharist*, 19; Smith and Taussig *Many Tables*, 21.

⁹¹ Smith, *From Symposium to Eucharist*, 14. Depending on the basic data, he further asserts that “the evidence supports the hypothesis that basic customs tended to be the same throughout the Mediterranean world during this period.” 19.

⁹² Roberts, Skeat and Nock, “The Guild of Zeus Hypsistos,” 40–42, 50. The original word *schismata* is probably an error for *σχίσματα*. Cf. Smith and Taussig, *Many Tables*. “Do not exhibit *schismata*.” Translation mine.

the persistent nature of ritual rather than the temporary conditions in the socio-economic life of the people, I postulate that Paul, as a pastor, is thus capable to effect changes to the existing meal practices so as to bring stability to the Corinthian *ekklēsia*.

In conclusion, one important trait that characterized Greco–Roman associations was the sacrificial feast and common meal. The comparison of the Corinthian *ekklēsia* with the Greco–Roman associations depicts that there were similar characteristics and patterns for the meal tradition. It was usual for the guests to recline in accordance to their social status. The place given to a guest was a reflection of their social status. An influence may be either positive or negative depending on the prevailing circumstances. Invariably, some of the cultural values of the Greco–Roman associations, specifically in the area of honor and status, adversely affected the Corinthian *ekklēsia*. Notwithstanding the warrants, it is likely that in the Corinthian *ekklēsia* some privileged members held on to the norms and values of the Greco–Roman associations, especially those pertaining to status. This trait could contribute to the *schismata* with the result that it marred rather than promoted fellowship. D. E. Garland succinctly captures the state of affairs:

Values that were antithetical to the message of the cross – particularly those related to honor and status so basic to the Greco–Roman social system, in which power manifesting itself in ruthlessness and self-advancement is thought to be the only sensible course – percolated into the church, destroying its fellowship and its Christian witness as some members sought to balance civic norms and Christian norms.⁹³

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⁹³ Garland, *1 Corinthians*, 5–6.