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17. Food and Fellowship, the Kingdom and the Empire: Biblical and Patristic Perspectives

Peter-Ben Smit, Old Catholic Churches of the Union of Utrecht

If catholicity is a quality of Christian community, it may be expected that this quality is both expressed and nurtured by the "source and summit" of Christian community (*Lumen Gentium* 11), namely the Eucharist. A eucharistic ecclesiology is part of Anglican, Aglipayan, and Old Catholic tradition. But can a eucharistic ecclesiology be of any help in answering the overarching question of our commission, what it means to be catholic churches in a globalized world? I here address this question through an exegesis of Mark 6:17–29, the account of Herod's birthday banquet, and the immediately following passage, Mark 6:32–44, the first account of a miraculous feeding in Mark.

As an early Christian author, Mark uses literary means to create a contrast between one symposiastic scene that can be seen as representing the ruling empire and one that must be seen as representing the community of and around Jesus. The question is one of the "ecclesiology" of empire contrasted with the ecclesiology of the church. The underlying thesis is that meals are a vehicle for a social vision.

The two meals or banquets in Mark 6, Herod's birthday party and Jesus' miraculous feeding, are commonly and correctly seen as two stories that stand in contrast to each other (see, e.g., France 260; Hartmann 159–62). Jesus' simple but magnanimous hospitality is fully at odds with Herod's luxurious and destructive symposium, which also constitutes a contrast with the austere lifestyle of John the Baptist and the disciples whom Jesus had sent out just before this pericope (see Pesch 339; Shepherd 174–75). Mark thus contrasts the two hosts, thereby expanding his narrative depiction of Jesus' identity. This contrast also explains his insertion of this pericope in the gap between Jesus' sending out of the disciples and their return (cf. Anderson 118). The meaning of this contrast can be understood further when the character of Herod's celebration and its consequences for his presentation as Jesus' direct opposite are considered further. That is the aim of this paper.

As the point of the paper is literary and theological rather than primarily historical, the parallel texts Matt 14:3–12 and Josephus's *Antiquities* 18:109–19:136–37 need not be considered. For the same reason, the traditional-historical prehistory of the pericope is not a primary concern.

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From a form-critical perspective, the story of Herod's banquet should be seen as a "court legend," following Gerd Theißen, though a characterization of Mk 17–29 as "court gossip" probably makes the intent of the story clearer.[1]

The Banquet as a (Failed) Birthday Celebration

According to contemporary ruler ideals and ideology, a ruler such as Herod should demonstrate his power and authority by celebrating his birthday worthily by (among other things) putting on a well-organized banquet, necessarily incorporating an appropriate atmosphere, a peaceful and harmonious course of events, appropriate dishes (and their appropriate distribution), and appropriate conversation and entertainment. If one of these elements was lacking, the host would incur considerable loss of face or loss of honor.[2]

The Celebration as a "Pagan" Dies Natalis

The mention of Herod's birthday celebration contributes to his negative characterization: birthdays were generally seen as "pagan" and not as Jewish (see Geerlings 532; Stuiber 224–25). The only two other biblical references to birthday celebrations are the birthday of Pharaoh (Gen 40:20–23) and, probably more important, the compulsory monthly participation of the Jews in the celebration of the birthday of Antiochus IV Epiphanes, as described in 2 Macc 6:7–9. Herod's identity as Jewish ruler, not unquestioned to begin with, is further compromised by the mention of a birthday celebration after a pagan example (see Vogel 296–301).

Whether the actual birthday (in the modern sense of the word) was meant, or whether the commencement of the rule of a ruler was celebrated, what was truly celebrated was always (even *nolens volens*) the power of a ruler, the deities who were favorably inclined towards him, and, in a common (meal) celebration, the unity of a ruler's realm. Apart from the explicitly religious aspect, all of these elements are present in the description

[1] For other approaches to these parallel texts, see, e.g., Focant 336–40; Gnilka 84–87; Theißen 85–90; Berger; Dibelius; and Hartmann 221–25.

[2] On a successful symposium, see, e.g., Dennis Smith, From Symposium 13–46; and Klinghardt 21–174.

of Herod's birthday celebration: his foremost servants and officials and the leading subjects have been invited (Mk 6:21), and with his repeated promises to the girl (Mk 6:22b–23), he presents himself as a powerful and generous ruler. Everything, even entertainment (Mk 6:21a), is provided to celebrate not only the ruler's birthday but also his rule. Two striking intertextual links confirm this conclusion: just like King Darius in 1 Esdr 3:1, Herod prepares a banquet, and just as King Ahasuerus promises Esther half of his realm, Herod also promises the dancing girl half of his realm (cf. Est 7:2; Est 5:3, 6–7). Indeed, as Joachim Gnilka writes, "In this pericope Herod Antipas, the tetrarch [*Klientelfürst*], acts like an Oriental emperor" (Gnilka 88).

The Entertainment

The Dance

The Marcan story shows that Herod tries his best to prepare an appropriate banquet according to the tradition of contemporary and earlier rulers. It goes without saying that entertainment should be part of this banquet. At Herod's symposium, the entertainment consists of the girl's dance (Mk 6:22) – it may remain undecided whether she is the daughter of Herod or of his brother, Herod Antipas, as the question is unimportant for Mark. Dance as entertainment is common, but not with a princess as dancer, because, given the general status of female dancers, she compromises herself and her family by dancing for the company (Hartmann 167–68; Vogel 302). Mark does not recount who has asked whom to dance or to be allowed to dance, but the fact that Herod allows the dance makes him implausible as an honorable ruler and father (Eckey 185; Glancy 40).

Even though it is theoretically possible that – in accord with the originally Greek custom – the banqueting company consists of both women and men, the fact that the girl seems to go elsewhere to converse with her mother may indicate that the mother is not in the immediate vicinity of the king and is therefore probably in a different room (Mk 6:24) (see, e.g., Theißen 98). The decadence of the dance is increased by the favor the girl finds in the eyes of Herod and his male guests, perhaps with an erotic overtone – favor that further discredits both the ruler and his guests (see, e.g., Vogel 302; Eckey 185). If, as Theißen thinks, the original context of this story was the "court gossip" of the common inhabitants of Herod's realm, one may concur with Gnilka's observation that existence of a folk-

loric tradition about the dancing daughter of Herodias illustrates the poor reputation of Herod and his court among the populace (Gnilka 89). The king, who is enchanted with the dancing girl (Glancy 39–40), allows himself to be carried away by this entertainment to such an extent that without reflecting he makes public (Mk 6:26) and "royal" promises and commitments, which will cost him dearly. This aspect of the banquet is a disaster for Herod; he (together with his guests and family) is thoroughly discredited. However, matters get worse.

The Conversation

Conversation, an important part of every meal and hence also of Herod's symposium, takes place here in three steps. It begins with Herod's repeated promise to the royal dancer (Mk 6:22b–23). That promise shows him as a man who has lost control over himself by allowing himself to be carried away by his passions. The dance and the dancer have enchanted him, and his passions lure him to an act of hubris – a threat to the well-ordered course of a symposium – when he makes grandiose promises. Herod is anything but the picture of a ruler who, as he should, allows himself to be led by virtue and self-control (Klinghardt 160).

The second part of the conversation consists of the princess's conversation with her mother, whom the princess asks for counsel about Herod's request that he be allowed to give her whatever she wants. This conversation also connects the story of the banquet to its introduction and prehistory in Mk 6:17–20. The murderous intention of Herodias, which had been presented as the context of the entire banquet (cf. Mk 6:21), now becomes part of the action of the story itself. From the perspective of the ideal banquet, which Herod must be assumed to be intending, the conversation between mother and daughter strengthens the theme of death (cf. Mk 6:24a) and in fact introduces it into direct conversation at the banquet. Death, however, was precisely the theme that was considered the least appropriate to any festive banquet. Contemporary authors fully concur with each other on this fact: the topic of death does not harmonize with the life-affirming atmosphere of a symposium.

The third part of the conversation takes place between the princess and Herod, who is still enchanted by her. This final portion builds on the two preceding parts as she asks for the head of John the Baptist and specifically demands that it be brought to her on a platter (Mk 6:25). Thus the death of John the Baptist, as it was narratively prepared for in Mark 6:21

and reintroduced in Mark 6:24, continues to be the central event of the story and provokes a significant reaction from Herod. Mark 6:26 mentions that Herod becomes sorrowful, an emotion that undermines the preferred happy atmosphere of a symposium (Klinghardt 168–72). At the end of this threefold conversation, the full consequences of Herod's irresponsible promise, with which the conversation started, become clear. Because of the public and royal character of the promise, Herod must keep it if he is to retain any credibility as a ruler (Mk 6:26). Once again, his honor is at stake. He has managed to maneuver himself into a perfect loss-loss situation.

The Menu

That Herod's banquet is an anti-banquet is immediately clear from the fact that the only course of this meal that is mentioned is the head of John the Baptist, which is brought on a platter to the royal dancer (Mk 6:25–28), who presents it to her mother (see Anderson 126). Even though dishes were not the most important part of a symposiastic gathering (e.g., Rom 14:1–23, esp. v. 17), they nevertheless contributed considerably to its success or failure (e.g., 1 Cor 11:17–34) and therefore to the creation or destruction of a community. As the head of John the Baptist is apparently the only dish served, the banquet is shown as destructive and life-denying. It is a macabre perversion of a meal. What the story communicates is that the rule of Herod, represented by his hospitality, issues in death. It is hard to think of a more damning characterization. The latter may well be illustrated with a reference to Suetonius's biography of Caligula, who notes that this emperor was in the habit of conducting interrogations during meals or symposia, including torture and even decapitation of prisoners (Vita C §32).

Herod and his family perfectly illustrate this tradition of a decadent and perverted court life (Dormeyer 101). Though this passage does not mention the serving of a head or any other body part at a meal, rabbinic literature and literature from other traditions offer parallels, for example Midrash Esther on Est 1:19–21, about the head of Vashti and other traditions.[3] The Anti-Ruler celebrates an Anti-Symposium (see Focant, title).

[3] See, e.g., Diogenes Laertes, *Life of Anaxarchus* 9:58; Dio Chrysostomos, *Orations* 11:7; Seneca, *Octavia* 437; cf. *Novum Testamentum*, on Matt 14:11 (413–14).

The Anti-Ruler Celebrates an Anti-Symposium

These considerations suggest that the pericope in Mark 6:17–29 intends not only to recount the death of John the Baptist but also to present Herod as an untrustworthy and implausible ruler, whose grand birthday banquet can be best described as an anti-symposium. Everything that can go wrong does. There is chaos when the host loses self-control, the entertainment is highly embarrassing, death is the main topic of conversation, the menu is scandalous, and the red thread of it all is that Herod slowly but certainly loses all his power to his wife, who has been plotting John the Baptist's death from the start (Anderson 127).

As all participants in the banquet behave equally scandalously, all lose their good reputation. Apart from Herod, the princess loses her good reputation by dancing like a *hetaere*. Herodias, who is not afraid of an execution in the midst of a festive banquet, has little left that would resemble a positive image, and the guests, who allow themselves along with their king to become enchanted by the dancing princess, are also portrayed rather negatively.

The Contrast with the Subsequent Miraculous Feeding (Mk 6:32–44)

It is now possible to turn to the narrative that follows almost at once, namely the narrative of the first miraculous feeding in Mark. It is no accident that Mark juxtaposes these two stories, both of which concern meals and prominent hosts. The passages offer seven points of contrast.[4]

First, the narrative of the miraculous feeding also fundamentally recounts a large meal, implying a relationship with the preceding meal.

Second, Mark explains Jesus' concern for the hungry crowd by his compassion for them, which he conveys in his observation that they are like sheep without a shepherd (Mk 6:34). The crowd is without a shepherd because Herod has just failed so spectacularly as a ruler. Indeed the use at the beginning of this pericope of the metaphor of shepherd, commonly used for rulers, highlights the importance of the themes of rule and authority in the narrative that follows.

[4] For the following see, e.g., Donahue and Harrington 209; Hartmann 159–62. Fowler points to further parallels (120–21).

Third, even though the disciples' attempt to disperse the crowd into the villages in order to find provisions there initiates the pericope's discussion of the miraculous feeding, the contrast between Jesus' discussion with his disciples and the tripartite conversation in the preceding pericope among Herod, the princess, and Herodias, mainly on the subject of John the Baptist's death, is startling: the theme of death in the birthday narrative contrasts with the theme of providing a hungry crowd with nutrition; now instead of Herod's serving up the head of John the Baptist as a perverse main course, Jesus and his disciples seek to provide nourishment.

Fourth, the sovereign performance of Jesus as shepherd, guided by his compassion for the crowd/his flock (Mk 6:34), constitutes a marked contrast with Herod's performance, just a few verses earlier, deregulated as it was by his succumbing to his passions.

Fifth, the chaos that characterizes Herod's banquet emphasizes the order that emerges at Jesus' banquet. Out of a chaotic crowd, Jesus creates a well-structured meal fellowship.

Sixth, Herod begins his birthday banquet as a powerful king but concludes it with only a shadow of the honor that belongs to that rank, while Jesus does not claim a title but rather establishes himself at the miraculous feeding as a credible and trustworthy shepherd of his people. This contrast is strengthened by the fact that only Jesus and Herod are called kings in Mark.

Seventh, Herod's celebration presumably takes place at his court in the company of the administrative and social elite of the realm, while Jesus' meal takes place in the desert with common if not poor people, while the elite, Jesus' disciples, serve the crowds (Mk 10:41–44). The paradigmatic function of these elements can hardly be overestimated (Ebner 29–31).

In general, one may agree with Detlev Dormeyer that the Anti-Gospel of Herod's banquet constitutes a powerful contrast with the Gospel of the Kingdom of God that Jesus preaches and enacts (Dormeyer 100).

Patristic Observations

Patristic authors show their awareness of the imperial or at least the political aspects of this story by commenting on Herod as a ruler and comparing the disorder of his court with the virtuous order brought by Jesus. Bede, especially, offers some striking comments on Herod and Pharaoh as well as on Herod and Roman officials; his comments are excerpted not only by Saint Thomas Aquinas in the *Catena Aurea* but also by other authors included in the pertinent volume of the *Ancient Christian Commentary*

on Scripture (86–88). Bede follows Ambrose and Chrysostom in noting the enslavement of Herod to his passions, his perilous oath, the notorious dance of the princess, the disgusting serving of the head of John the Baptist, and therefore Herod's general unworthiness as a ruler.

The contrast of the eucharistic celebration with the imperial order is probably brought out best, however, by the way in which it conflicts with and thus challenges the imperial order. Justin Martyr articulates this conflict in his *Apologia*:

> We who valued above any other the way towards wealth and possessions now transfer what we have into a common lot, sharing with everyone who needs; we who hated and destroyed each other and would not make use of the same hearth with people not of like kind because of different customs now, since the appearance of Christ, live familiarly together. (Apologia 1.14:6–8)

Another relevant text, which covers just about all aspects of Roman society, is *Traditio Apostolica*, which distinguishes among (possible) baptismal candidates, people who will become part of the eucharistic community:

1. They will inquire concerning the works and occupations of those who are brought forward for instruction.
2. If someone is a pimp who supports prostitutes, he shall cease or shall be rejected.
3. If someone is a sculptor or a painter, let him be taught not to make idols. Either let him cease or let him be rejected.
4. If someone is an actor or does shows in the theater, either he shall cease or he shall be rejected.
5. If someone teaches children [worldly knowledge], it is good that he cease. But if he has no [other] trade, let him be permitted.
6. A charioteer, likewise, or one who takes part in the games, or one who goes to the games, he shall cease or he shall be rejected.
7. If someone is a gladiator, or one who teaches those among the gladiators how to fight, or a hunter who is in the wild beast shows in the arena, or a public official who is concerned with gladiator shows, either he shall cease or he shall be rejected.
8. If someone is a priest of idols, or an attendant of idols, he shall cease or he shall be rejected.
9. A military man in authority must not execute men. If he is ordered, he must not carry it out. Nor must he take military oaths. If he refuses, he shall be rejected.
10. If someone is a military governor, or the ruler of a city who wears the purple, he shall cease or he shall be rejected.
11. The catechumen or faithful who wants to become a soldier is to be rejected, for he has despised God.

12. The prostitute, the wanton man, the one who castrates himself, or one who does that which may not be mentioned is to be rejected, for they are impure.
13. A magus shall not even be brought forward for consideration.
14. An enchanter or astrologer or diviner or interpreter of dreams or a charlatan or one who makes amulets, either he shall cease or he shall be rejected.
15. If someone's concubine is a slave, as long as she has raised her children and has clung only to him, let her hear. Otherwise, she shall be rejected.
16. The man who has a concubine must cease and take a wife according to the law. If he will not, he shall be rejected. (Trad Ap 16)

Thus the conflict between two orders is the place where the contrast between Eucharist and Empire becomes the most apparent.

Ecclesiological Contrasts and Insights

Meals, both literary and real, are vehicles for expressing and constituting community; as such, they embody a particular social vision (and a social critique). In fact, they may well present a middle axiom, mediating between praxis and theory (see Danaher, chap. 12 above).

The particular portrayal of the two meals just discussed makes it clear that in the early church meals as expressions of community and the ideals for community interacted with other forms of community that were seen as destructive, such as the rule of Herod. Two meal ideologies conflict with each other; in fact, one can just as well say two ecclesiologies – leaving aside the specifically ecclesial connotation of *ecclesiology* and including its broader application as a discourse about community in the context of all other possible discourses about community.

The question of ecclesiological principles remains. It is difficult to formulate a Herodian ecclesiological principle, apart from an apparent desire for power and attempts to retain it. It may be more profitable to ask for Jesus' ecclesiological principle as far as meal fellowships are concerned and, in doing so, to move beyond general references to the great commandment and remarks about inclusiveness and exclusiveness. Jesus begins what may be called his nutritional ministry because of his compassion for the crowd for their lack of a shepherd. This theme obviously echoes the care God gave to his people either directly or through intermediaries such as Moses and David (see Ps 23, etc.).

Still, the question remains of what this care and leadership amount to. Doubtless Herod would have claimed for himself the prerogative of being the people's shepherd, just as Mark claims it for Jesus. The difference,

therefore, is not in the claim but in the way in which it is lived out and, therefore, what it means. Jesus does not state any principles in Mark 6 but rather enacts them.

For principles, one must think briefly of the climax of all of Jesus' meals in Mark, beginning with the Last Supper in Mark 14:22–26 and from there moving back to Mark 10, where Jesus teaches James and John, explicitly contrasting his rule with that of Gentile rulers:

> 42. So Jesus called them and said to them, "You know that among the Gentiles those whom they recognize as their rulers lord it over them, and their great ones are tyrants over them.
> 43. But it is not so among you; but whoever wishes to become great among you must be your servant,
> 44. and whoever wishes to be first among you must be slave of all.
> 45. For the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many." (Mk 10:42–45)

According to Mark, Jesus' central ecclesiological principle, which Jesus acts out during the Last Supper and during his Passion, is self-giving in the interest of the broader community, as it is demanded not by the community but by Jesus' persuasive example. It is a principle that builds community rather than destroying it and that can still be used as a measuring rod to evaluate social and other contexts and principles. What such a principle might look like is illustrated by the contrast between Herod's and Jesus' meals in Mark 6.