CHAPTER FOUR

AND THE FLESH BECAME WORDS . . .¹

Athenaeus’ Deipnosophistae purports to narrate the events and conversations surrounding a party at the house of a Roman host named Larensis. Near the close of the book, the most prominent guest at the gathering, Ulpian, concludes his final speech, and the narrator informs the reader that Ulpian’s death will soon follow. The relevant passage reads as follows (15.686 b–c):

[Ulpian said], ‘As for myself, I shall at this point stop speaking for today, yielding the discussion of perfumes to those who want to carry it on . . . Thus, indeed, will I make my exit, as in a play, after my speech.’ Not many days after that, as if he himself had had a premonition of the silence that was to be his, he died happily, allowing no time for illness, but causing grief to us his companions.

This passage resonates with both of the preceding chapters of this study. As with Jesus’ dramatic exit, Ulpian departs “as in a play” after his “Big Speech,” and death awaits him soon after he departs. Further, in his going, he causes “grief to his companions” just as Jesus grieves his companions by leaving them behind. That Jesus departs from a supper further likens him to Ulpian. Unlike Ulpian, however, Jesus comforts his companions when he exits. Precisely how Jesus comforts his table companions, the topic of the previous chapter, will continue to occupy the present analysis.

In this chapter, however, center stage goes not to the exit of Jesus, but to the exit of Judas. The first half of the argument will culminate in the exit of Judas, and the latter half will develop out of Judas’ exit. As in the previous chapters, the purpose here is not to explore every possible connection between the Farewell Discourses and the literary symposium tradition. The emphasis will be on the form and function of Jesus’ discourses, and, more specifically, on how the particular style of symposium that John presents preserves

¹ The phrase is a modified borrowing from Patrick Chatelion Counet, John, A Postmodern Gospel: Introduction to Deconstructive Exegesis Applied to the Fourth Gospel (Biblical Interpretation Series 44; Leiden: E.J. Brill, 2000) 301.
the discourses of Jesus for later generations. The broad thesis of the chapter is that the form of the supper, which is not a feast of food but a feast of words, is designed to render the absent Jesus present to the readers of the Gospel. The Word who became flesh is now present in his words.

The Symposium: Friendship and Enmity

Although a peculiar way to begin, the first step in this argument is to insist that John’s Last Supper is not a symposium per se. Aune correctly notes that no Christian example of the literary symposium exists prior to the work of Methodius, the 4th century bishop of Olympus. Just as the second chapter compared Jesus’ farewell to the dramatic exit to death, without thereby claiming that the Fourth Gospel is in fact a tragic poem, the present chapter will stop short of declaring John’s Last Supper scene to be a paradigmatic example of a symposium. Josef Martin’s Symposion: Die Geschichte einer literarischen Form represents what amounts to a grammar of the literary symposium. Of the several key figures and circumstances that typify the literary symposium, John’s Farewell Discourses include perhaps only one major figure. Even so, Martin concludes his study

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2 Each of the canonical Gospels, in some sense, renders Jesus present to later generations through the commemoration of his words and deeds. Moreover, the Gospels depict Jesus’ past words and deeds through the filter of the Resurrection. But the Gospel of John is most obvious in this type of anamnesis, articulating explicitly what the Synoptic Gospels imply. Cf. Nils Dahl, “Anamnesis: Memory and Commemoration in Early Christianity,” in Jesus in the Memory of the Early Church (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1976) especially 28–29.


5 The primary topoi of the genre are surveyed under two headings: Stehende Figuren (Symposion, 33–115) and Situationstopoi (ibid., 116–148). The stock figures are characters such as “the Host” (Der Wirt); “the Jester” (Der Spaßmacher); “the uninvited Guest” (Der ungebetene Gast); “the Physician” (Der Arzt); “the late Guest” (Der späte Gast); “the Drunkard” (Der Weinende); “the Offended Guest departs” (Der Gekränkte geht); “the long-lasting Drinker” (Der große Zecher); “the pair of lovers” (Das Liebespaar). The Situationstopoi investigate either the typical events that inspire a symposium (Szenische Motive), such as a victory celebration; or common occurrences at the table,