The origins of few early Christian rituals have been debated as intensively as those of the Eucharist. From the mid-twentieth century to this day, liturgical scholars have devoted a flood of articles and books to the subject, sparked off by Gregory Dix’s *The Shape of the Liturgy*, which appeared in 1945, just before World War II came to an end.

If one attempts to chart the main lines of thought that emerge from the vast amount of secondary literature, one is struck by the fact that approaches have changed conspicuously in recent decades. After the appearance of Dix’s extensive and influential monograph, scholars turned at length to the Jewish roots of the Eucharist in their search for parallels with Jewish meal traditions. Certain Christian Eucharistic prayers and Jewish prayer texts were believed to be similar. They included blessings pronounced before and after meals (especially the ‘birkat ha-mazon’, the grace after meals) and blessings, thanksgivings and supplications said on other occasions (the blessings before and after the Shema and the benedictions of the Amidah). Scholars concluded from such parallels that the early Christian Eucharist could be traced back largely to Jewish meal traditions, which would have been transformed by Jesus and the first generations of Christians. Outspoken exponents of this approach were Louis Bouyer (1966), Louis Ligier (cf. esp. 1968, 19–57 English translation: 1970, 113–150; 1972, 181–202 English translation: 1973, 161–185), Thomas Talley (1976, 11–39; 1984, 404–420; 1992, 15–43), Herman Wegman (1980, 263–278; 1991, 193–216) and Enrico Mazza (see esp. the articles collected in 1992 and 1996 [French and English translations 1999]).

---

1 I myself have tried to sketch the development of the Eucharist and the Eucharistic prayer of early Syriac Christianity (the first four to five centuries), starting from the birkat ha-mazon as reconstructed by Louis Finkelstein and the Eucharist underlying Did
In the past two decades, however, this approach has been increasingly criticised. The main objection, voiced particularly by Paul Bradshaw, concerns an uncritical examination of Jewish liturgical traditions which, moreover, are often attributed to a far too early period. (See in particular his book 2002. See further Bradshaw’s monograph on the origins of the early Christian Eucharist 2004 and his article 2003, 21–36.) At the same time, several scholars have explored new paths by drawing attention to similarities between the early Christian Eucharist and Greco-Roman banquets. The latter, often designated as symposia, were a common phenomenon in the Mediterranean world; they cut across religious and ethnic boundaries (Jews, Greeks and Romans) and usually followed a general pattern involving a number of customs and rituals. It has been proposed that the Christian Eucharist originated and developed as a variety of this symposium. (See in particular Klinghardt 1996; de Jonge 2001, 209–237 and 2006; Smith 2002. See also McGowan 1999, esp. 45–60; Bradshaw 2004, 43–44. See for the symposia also: Leyerle 1999, 29–61.)

Unlike scholars investigating Jewish origins of the Eucharist, most adherents of the symposium theory are less interested in liturgical texts than in the social dimensions of the early Christian Eucharist. Rather than analysing prayers, blessings and thanksgivings and their theological significance, they examine social structures and internal hierarchies, and non-verbal, material aspects such as the architectural setting, the compilation of the menu and the choice of food. Some scholars draw their main inspiration from social theory, derived from sociology or cultural (social) anthropology. A typical example of this emphasis on the social and material aspects of the early Christian Eucharist is Andrew McGowan’s study Ascetic Eucharists, which deliberately leaves aside prayer texts to focus on meanings encoded in food and drink (esp. McGowan 1999, 1–9).

In this paper I would like to offer a brief critical evaluation of theories regarding the pre-Christian origins of the Eucharist. I shall consider objections to the Jewish roots of the Christian Eucharist and the early dating of Jewish liturgical traditions. I shall also assess the symposium

ch. 9 and 10, which in my view is based on Jewish meal customs (see: Rouwhorst 1980, 211–240). For a survey of the research of the Eucharistic Rites, see Bradshaw 2002, 118–143.