PART THREE

THE NEW TESTAMENT AND EARLY CHRISTIAN WORLD
DRINKING THE WATER THAT JESUS GIVES: 
A FEATURE OF THE JOHANNINE EUCHARIST?

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INTERDISCIPLINARY CONVERSATIONS

In recent years, students of Christian liturgical origins have benefited greatly from conversations with their counterparts in the field of New Testament studies. To this dialogue, New Testament scholars have brought the richness of their engagement with the social context of early Christianity within the ancient Mediterranean world and formative Judaism. The results have, to some extent, shaken the foundations on which an earlier generation of liturgists had built up some of their theories of the origins of Christian worship. Among the weaker features of the construction was the notion of a dominically instituted archetypal rite of the Eucharist. Its collapse has cleared the ground for an approach to the early Eucharist that takes far greater account of cultural history and of the literary genres of ancient writings. This has also encouraged liturgists to allow a pluralism in early eucharistic understanding and practice that mirrors the diversity of early Christianity itself. This essay suggests some ways in which the benefit may now be flowing back in the other direction. The insights of liturgists may well now shed new light on the New Testament text. It is my pleasure and privilege to offer this essay to Professor Sean Freyne. He may recognize in it the map of a learning journey on which he has been an inspiring guide and a delightful companion.

THE “INSTITUTION NARRATIVE”

Until this interdisciplinary conversation happened, we tended to regard as pertinent to eucharistic origins only those New Testament passages

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1 Even though, strictly speaking, the term “eucharist” is anachronistic for the NT period, it is used here, for the sake of brevity, to refer to the distinctive community meal of the early Christians, i.e., “the Lord’s Supper” (1 Cor 11:20), “the table of the Lord” (1 Cor 10:21), “the breaking of bread” (Acts 2:42).