In the Beginning was the Meal: Social Experimentations and Early Christian Identity.

Hal Taussig’s study of early Christian meals joins a growing number of books that seek to interpret the development of a distinctive Christian identity not in terms of doctrinal beliefs or institutional forms, nor its cultural construction through textual rhetoric, but through the patterns of social practice that the early “believers” adopted. In so doing, he seeks to be fully sensitive to the familiar mantra of “diversity” and to the inappropriateness of fixed labels in the earliest period, while not succumbing to a counsel of despair that wonders if there is anything left about which to speak. Yet “meals” are not just a particular choice that could as easily have been replaced by any one of a number of other practices. Taussig argues that in human society generally and in the Greco-Roman world of the early Empire in particular, meals constituted a “laboratory”—a now popular model—where patterns of social relationships and identity could be played out, challenged, thought about, and experimented with in a time of social, cultural, and political change. Here “meal” indicates not the routine individual or family consumption of food, but those occasions on which groups of members drawn from a variety of different households and social contexts met together for a “festive” and more formalised meal. Exemplary of such meals would be those that were a regular feature in the regulations or descriptions of Greco-Roman “associations” or collegia, although they should not be restricted to these; literary accounts of and discussions about dining are also a necessary and valuable source.

Framing chapters imaginatively reconstruct a range of “meal experiences” and locate the present study in the context of recent debate about early Christian identity, and, after a reflective summary, briefly consider implications for 21st-century Christian worship. The bulk of the book sets out the shape, practices, and ideals of contemporary Hellenistic meals, drawing particularly on recent work by Dennis Smith (From Symposium to Eucharist: The Banquet in the Early Christian World [Minneapolis: Fortress, 2003]) and by Matthias Klinghardt (Gemeinschaft und Mahlgemeinschaft: Soziologie und Liturgie Frühchristlicher Mahlfeiern [Tübingen: Francke, 1996]). To this are added insights from the work of theorists of ritual, notably Catherine Bell, Mary Douglas, Jonathan Z. Smith, and others. Further, early Christian meals are set in the context of recent study of “associations” (Philip Harland; John Kloppenborg), and of the identification within early Christian literature of a variety of responses to, and of strategies of resistance to, Roman imperial power (Warren Carter; Richard Horsley; and others). Readers of this review will be fully aware of the debates surrounding the latter in particular and will have their own assessment of them. However, Taussig does not set out to engage with such debate; his purpose is to bring together these various insights in order to explore what meals “did” in shaping social relationships internally and towards “the outside world” in early imperial society in general and within early Christian communities in particular.

There are weaknesses in this approach; where the reader would like to find evidence, particularly for some of the more generalising statements, the notes refer only
to the other secondary literature. There is a tendency to present what elsewhere has been seen as broadly standard patterns of meal structures as fixed templates allowing of little variation. Apparently authoritative claims mask the debates that surround them: for example, that “after Caesar Augustus’s military victory in Egypt, all meals were also to have included a libation in honor of the genius of the emperor” (75, 78) surely invites acknowledgement of scholarly discussion about the precise freight of “genius” in the original account, and of the continuity of the practice towards other emperors. References, where given, do not always support the statement made, particularly where the latter is somewhat expansive; the claim that “a wide variety of accounts of diaspora Jews gathering include descriptions of meals” is supported by a general reference to “the Qumran literature” and to Philo, On the Contemplative Life (95n. 40). There is also a tendency to over-compensate for previous scholarly silence about meals, by detecting their presence everywhere, for example that Κοινωνία at 1 John 1.1-3 or 1 Cor. 1.9 necessarily refers to the fellowship experienced in meal gatherings. Similarly, it is assumed that “hymns” in “Luke, John, Romans, 1 Corinthians, Ephesians, Colossians, 1 Timothy, Hebrews, and the Revelation [were] socially located within the meal gatherings of early Christians” (37, 50); potentially alternative patterns, such as suggested by Pliny’s well-known letter to Trajan (X.96), are nowhere discussed. The insights regarding the significance of “mythmaking”— the term used by Burton Mack in the jacket blurb — are important, but perhaps here squeezed unnecessarily into a single straightjacket.

Although commendably seeking to locate early Christian meals securely in their cultural context, and also rejecting monochrome interpretations of how they functioned, the picture still is in danger of lacking texture or of ignoring the multiple layers of meaning. It is assumed that the language of friendship and of χαρίς necessarily implies egalitarianism, albeit often utopian; indeed, the tendency to see the egalitarian goal of meals as primary may unconsciously reflect North American notions of an ideal social pattern, and may also fail to analyse the relationship between social convention and the philosophical analysis within a Platonic tradition on which Taussig or his scholarly sources draw. Moreover, some recent studies suggest that caution is needed before assuming that “friendship” or “grace” (χαρίς) necessarily indicates a relationship between equals (see James R. Harrison, Paul's Language of Grace in its Graeco-Roman Context [Tübingen: Mohr, 2003]; David Konstan, Friendship in the Classical World [Cambridge: CUP, 1997]). Similarly, the reduction of Paul’s response in Rom. 14 as being to “the question … about whose food customs would prevail,” and as missing “the power of meals—as good rituals—to place tensive basic schemes alongside one another,” ignores the extensive scholarly analysis of the situation and its background, and of Paul’s own theological logic. Indeed, this quotation reflects the feeling sometimes given that “meals” are accorded more agency than those who organised or participated in them.

A further area of concern surrounds the “early Christian” of the sub-title. In practice, as demonstrated by the “Scripture Index,” the passages discussed or cited are almost entirely restricted to the New Testament. A claim about the vocabulary of