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Domestic Eucharists and Wedding Feasts in Fourth-Century Egypt

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Abstract

While scholars have dedicated numerous studies to the gradual shifts in eucharistic practice of late antiquity – especially the move away from "sympotic eucharists" and the change from domestic spaces to purpose-built churches – one of the most important witnesses to the continued lay sponsorship of domestic eucharists is regularly ignored. The *Canonical Responses*, likely composed in fourth-century Egypt, contain a fascinating allusion to laity inviting clergy to offer the eucharist within the context of a domestic wedding feast. Unlike some of the late antique synodal and homiletic evidence for lay-sponsored eucharistic activities that tends toward criticism, the *Canonical Responses* give no condemnation of the practice as such. This article explores the potential context for such eucharists within the ritual landscape of weddings in late antiquity and underscores that while the relationship between eucharist and meal has never really disappeared from (esp. Eastern) Christian practice, the most significant eucharistic shift of late antiquity concerned precisely the link between family domestic feast and eucharist that the *Canonical Responses* still affirm as operative in fourth-century Egypt.

Keywords

Domestic Eucharists | Wedding Feasts | Eucharist and Meal | Lay-sponsored Worship | Alexandrian Canonical Responses | Egypt | Early Church / Late Antiquity

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Gabriel Radle

That early Christians tended to gather for prayer within domestic contexts (although not exclusively) is a well-known fact. While the existence of domestic eucharists may be undisputed, the characteristics of these domestic gatherings have long featured in scholarly hypotheses and debates, including such topics as the relationship between the eucharist and other forms of meal fellowship, the roles of women in house churches, and the architectural (re)arrangement of domestic spaces for ecclesial use.[1] The

[1] Without rehearsing the large bibliography on early Christian eucharistic practice, I cite some examples of various studies here, with others cited further afield: Alistair Stewart, Breaking Bread. The Emergence of the Eucharist and Agape in Early Christian Communities, Grand Rapids 2024; Predrag Bukovec, Die frühchristliche Eucharistie (WUNT 499), Tübingen 2023; Paul Bradshaw, Eucharistic Origins, Eugene, OR 2012 [²2023]; id., Continuity and Change in Early Christian Eucharistic Practices. Shifting Scholarly Perspectives, in: SCH 35 (1999) 1–17; Paul Bradshaw – Maxwell E. Johnson, The Eucharistic Liturgies. Their Evolution and Interpretation, Collegeville 2012, 1–59; Karen O'Donnell, Women and the Eucharist. Reflections on Private Eucharists in the Early Church, in: FemTh 27 (2019) 164–175; Andrew McGowan, Ascetic Eucharists. Food and Drink in Early Christian Ritual Meals, Oxford 1999; id., Rethinking Agape and Eucharist in Early

move from house churches to purpose-built spaces – especially basilicas of various dimensions – is largely connected with the results of the Constantinian shifts of the fourth century, although pre-Constantinian texts and even sites like the church at Dura Europos make it clear that Christians were thinking about symbolic meaning, spatial arrangement and formal order of their worship traditions long before the Edict of Milan.[2] Yet the widespread freedom to build "public" churches – and the realization in the succeeding decades that this freedom was not fleeting – led to a gradual abandonment of domestic spaces as the primary locus of the Church's eucharistic practice.

As the eucharist and other worship acts of the Church moved to the growing plethora of basilicas, monastic chapels, and smaller purpose-built churches and shrines, the process of relinquishing domestic eucharists doubtless took place at varying speeds in different places, as mapped out in the works of numerous books and articles in recent decades. Indeed, depending on how one defines monastic chapels in late antiquity and beyond, one can reasonably argue that the concept of domestic eucharists never really ceased.[3] In recent years, however, scholars have routinely returned to this topic, as well as the related but independent question of when and how the specific eucharistic elements of bread and wine were separated from a (usually domestic) meal. With some notable exceptions, discussions on the early Christian eucharist largely consist in

North African Christianity, in: StLi 34 (2004) 165–176; Harald Buchinger, Liturgy and the Early Christian Apocrypha, in: Andrew F. Gregory et al. (eds.), The Oxford Handbook of Early Christian Apocrypha, Oxford 2015, 361–377, here: 367–369; Dennis E. Smith, From Symposium to Eucharist. The Banquet in the Early Christian World, Minneapolis 2003; Edward Foley, From Age to Age. How Christians Have Celebrated the Eucharist, Collegeville 2008, 1–78.

2 Cf. Michael Peppard, The World's Oldest Church. Bible, Art, and Ritual at Dura-Europos, Syria (Synkrisis. Comparative Approaches to Early Christianity in Greco-Roman Culture), New Haven – London 2016.

3 Specifically for Egypt, these issues were discussed recently by my doctoral student, Arsany Paul, Communion Access in Medieval Egypt. Social Context and Eucharistic Participation, conference paper presented at the international conference, "Coptic Liturgy" (Cairo, February 2025) [publication forthcoming].

(re)analyzing the (paucity of) early Christian texts from different scholarly perspectives so as to render a good deal of early Christian liturgical scholarship an exercise in "perceptional rivalry"[4].

Regarding the perdurance and disappearance of meal/sympotic eucharists, scholarly discussions of late have tended to circle around the same group of texts – such as the synods at Laodicea (ca. 363–364) and Seleucia-Ctesiphon (410), among others – while recently in this journal, Nathan Chase asked how archaeological evidence might help to illuminate the question.[5] Yet now and again, neglected textual sources come to the fore, allowing us to incorporate new data into old questions. This short

4 Bryan D. Spinks, Perceptional Rivalry. Another View of the Anaphoral Epiclesis, in: EO 40 (2023) 361–372, here: 361 f.

5 See Nathan P. Chase, Kitchens and Communion. The Eucharist and Communal Meals in the Fourth and Fifth Centuries, in: ExF 3 (2024) 217–295. While the incorporation of archaeological evidence into this question is an important methodological point, as Chase admits, it is inconclusive whether the specific kitchen and dining spaces he analyzed had any tighter connection between meal and eucharist within the actual *ritual ordo* at these sites than suggested by other late antique sites, such as the monasteries of Scetis or Upper Egypt, which had refectories located near their main chapels. For late antique Egyptian refectories and alternative discussions about the relationship between chapel, kitchen and meal fellowship in both monastic and non-monastic contexts in Egypt, see Dana Robinson, Food, Virtue, and the Shaping of Early Christianity, Cambridge 2020, 158–160. 172–178 *et passim*, and ead., The Kitchen in the Church Complex. Work and Sacred Space at 'Ain el-Gedida, in: Religion in the Roman Empire 10 (2024) 127–148. On the use of the "knocking signal" for summoning to both prayer and the refectory in late antique Egypt, here within the Upper Egyptian Shenoutan tradition, see Bentley Layton, The Canons of Our Fathers: Monastic Rules of Shenoute, Oxford 2014, canons 165, 200, 209, 255, 328, 411, 497. For some further discussion of monastic dining, see also Karel Innemée, The Lord's Table, *Refrigerium*, Eucharist, *Agapè*, and Tables for Ritual Meals in al-Bagawat and in Monasteries, in: Gawdat Gabrat – Hany N. Takla (eds.), Christianity and Monasticism in Alexandria and the Egyptian Deserts (Christianity and Monasticism Series), Cairo – New York 2020, 281–296. On later refectory architecture and decoration in the Christian East as part of the "zone of worship", see Alice-Mary Talbot, Mealtime in Monasteries, in: ead. (ed.), Studies in Byzantine Monasticism, London 2024,178–192, here: 179–181 and bibliography.

article does not aim to revisit – yet again – all of the data points and debates around the sources for domestic eucharists and meal-/symposium-embedded eucharists. Neither does it offer a source unknown to scholarship on early Christianity. Instead, this note serves to correct the scholarly neglect of one significant canonical source of probable Egyptian origin that adds considerable color to our image of the perdurance of domestic eucharists in late antiquity and offers one of the strongest testimonies to a continued link between meal-feast and eucharist within fourth-century Egypt.

Domestic Eucharists within the Alexandrian Canonical Responses

The so-called *Canonical Responses* are a collection of opinions from late antiquity that are attributed in the manuscript sources either to the Alexandrian pope Peter I († 311) or his later successor, Timothy I († 389), and, in the case of an Armenian version, also to Athanasius († 373).[6] While the precise attribution of the collection is not stable, there is a strong likelihood that the collection does indeed stem from Egypt. Not only were the *Canonical Responses* broadly associated with various Alexandrian bishops, but the extant manuscripts attest to a strong circulation of the collection within Egypt and related regions. An early translation into Ethiopic Ge'ez likely originated in the Aksumite era from an Egyptian Greek *Vorlage*,[7] while the oldest known extant Syriac version appears to have been produced in Egypt itself.[8] The responses were canonized by the Council in Trullo (691–692),[9] ensuring their perdurance within Orthodox canonical collections to the present day.

While the collection is well known to scholars of early Christianity, those publishing on early liturgy have seemed unaware of the potential

6 On the attributions, see Alessandro Bausi, La versione etiopica delle *Risposte canoniche* di Timoteo I attribuite a Pietro di Alessandria (*CPG* II, Nr. 2520), in: Scrinium 2 (2006) 41–57.

7 Cf. ibid.

8 Cf. F. Nau, Littérature canonique syriaque inédite, in: ROC 14 (1909) 1–49.

9 Cf. Michael Featherstone – George Nedungatt, The Council in Trullo Revisited (Kanonika 6), Rome 1995, 64–69, can. ii.

importance of this collection for tracing domestic eucharists.[10] Within the *Canonical Responses*, we find a question dealing with the subject of early Christian weddings:

> Ἐάν τις καλέσῃ κληρικὸν εἰς τὸ ζεῦξαι γάμον, ἀκούσῃ δὲ τὸν γάμον παράνομον, ἢ θειογαμίαν ἢ γοῦν ἀδελφὴν τελευτησάσης γυναικὸς τὴν μέλλουσαν ζεύγνυσθαι, εἰ ὀφείλει ἀκολουθῆσαι ὁ κληρικὸς ἢ προσφορὰν ποιῆσαι;[11]
>
> If anyone calls a cleric to celebrate [literally, "yoke"] a marriage, but he hears that the marriage is unlawful, or avuncular, that is to say, it is the sister of a dead wife who is about to be married, is it possible for the cleric to officiate or make the offering?

The canon refers to what was a typical practice in late antique communities of East and West, namely, inviting clergy to attend domestic weddings where they could offer prayers upon the newlyweds.[12] The Greek alludes to the cleric officiating in some capacity. Although the word ἀκολουθῆσαι here could also be translated simply as "proceed," "attend" or "follow through" instead of "officiate" as I have done here, the substantive ἀκολουθία already refers to ritual ordo in pre-Christian texts, and the question here likewise alludes to the priest participating in the "yoking", which

10 To cite just a few examples of studies that treat the topics of domestic eucharists and sympotic eucharists in late antiquity but do not engage this source: Stewart, Breaking Bread; Clemens Leonhard, Morning *salutationes* and the Decline of Sympotic Eucharists in the Third Century, in: ZAC 18 (2015) 420–442; Kimberly D. Bowes, Private Worship, Public Values, and Religious Change in Late Antiquity, Cambridge 2011; Chase, Kitchens and Communion; Reinhard Meßner, Die Synode von Seleukeia-Ktesiphon 410 und die Geschichte der ostsyrischen Messe, in: id. – Rudolf Pranzl (eds.), Haec sacrosancta synodus. Konzils- und kirchengeschichtliche Beiträge, Regensburg 2006, 59–85.

11 Canonical Responses, 11, in: Discipline Générale antique (IVe–IXe s.), vol. 2: Les canons des Pères Grecs, ed. by Périclès-Pierre Joannou (Pontificia Commissione per la Redazione del Codice di Diritto Canonico Orientale. Fonti 9), Grottaferrata 1963, 246 f. The translation is my own.

12 On this practice, see Gabriel Radle, The Christianization of Marriage Ritual in Late Antiquity. Ecclesiastical Rites at the Bridal Chamber, in: Marriage, Families, and Spirituality 26 (2020) 49–64; id., Marriage in Byzantium. Christian Liturgical Rites from Betrothal to Consummation, Cambridge 2024, 62 f. 74–84 *et passim*.

could be read generically as the couple's union, but may also hint at specific ritual actions, such as the ceremonial joining of right hands, or *dextrarum iunctio*, that was already being performed by clergy elsewhere in the fourth century, as attested by Gregory Nazianzen.[13] The question puts in relief the problem of clergy being requested to perform such actions in cases of illicit weddings, such as in an avuncular marriage (in which a man is marrying his niece) or when a man intends to marry his sister-in-law. The Alexandrian response is predictably negative. While ancient Judaism supported a widow marrying her brother-in-law in a Levirate marriage, a widower was not to marry his deceased wife's sister.[14] Thus, when John the Baptist criticizes Herod Antipas for his unlawful marriage to Herodias (Mt 14:4; Mk 6:18), it is precisely because Herod had no right to his brother's wife (although interestingly, John makes no mention of the fact that she was also his niece).

Yet what interests us here is not the intricate question of marriage prohibitions in ancient Judaism and early Christianity. Rather, it is the fact that the question does not just pose the problem of whether a cleric should attend (or ceremonially officiate) the nuptial joining, but also whether he can "make an/the offering" (προσφορὰν ποιῆσαι). While the text might be vague in precisely what is "offered", the expression "make an offering" resonates with the celebration of the eucharist.[15] Not only do later Coptic sources make use of this Greek loanword for "offering" as a

13 Cf. Gregory Nazianzen, Ep. 193: "Ἐπεὶ τῷ γε βούλεσθαι καὶ πάρειμι καὶ συνεορτάζω καὶ τῶν νέων τὰς δεξιὰς ἀλλήλαις τε ἐμβάλλω καὶ ἀμφοτέρας τῇ τοῦ θεοῦ." (Gallay 2, 84). On the early Christian use of the *Dextrarum iunctio*, cf. Radle, Marriage in Byzantium, 33–35. 40. 63. 76 f.

14 For discussion, see Dvora E. Weisberg, Levirate Marriage and the Family in Ancient Judaism (HBI Series on Jewish Women), Waltham 2009, 83 *et passim*.

15 Already in the middle of the last century, Korbinian Ritzer assumed the passage as evidence of an Egyptian custom of celebrating nuptial Masses within private homes, but this interpretation went largely unnoticed in subsequent scholarship dealing with early liturgy. See Korbinian Ritzer, Le mariage dans les Églises chrétiennes du 1er au XIe siècle, Paris 1970, 140 f., translation of id., Formen, Riten und religiöses Brauchtum der Eheschließung in den christlichen Kirchen des ersten Jahrtausends (LQF 38), Münster 1962.

term for celebrating the eucharist, but this technical use can be found already across texts of the late antique period in which the *Canonical Responses* originated (e. g. Apostolic Constitutions: "ὁ μὲν ἐπίσκοπος διδότω τὴν προσφορὰν λέγων […]"[16]; Synod of Laodicea: "Ὅτι οὐ δεῖ ἐν τοῖς οἴκοις προσφορὰς γίνεσθαι […]"[17]; etc.). Most importantly, two questions prior, the same *Canonical Responses* use a nearly identical expression when posing the question of whether a priest should offer the eucharist in the presence of Arians ("[…] αὐτὸς ποιῇ τὴν εὐχήν, ἤγουν τὴν προσφοράν").[18] The fact that the answer to this question about Arian participation begins with the words "In the divine anaphora […]" ("Ἐν τῇ θεία ἀναφορᾷ […]") makes it even clearer that προσφορά in the *Canonical Responses* refers specifically to the eucharistic offering.

The interpretation that we are dealing with a cleric being invited by a family to offer the eucharist is made explicit in non-Greek texts of the *Responses*. According to the Ethiopic version published by Bausi, the redactor specifies that the issue concerns precisely a priest being called "for the *qurban*" (ቡፍርባን), that is to say, for celebrating the eucharist.[19] Further evidence that the question concerns a eucharistic offering can be found in the Greek text of the answer given to this question. The canonical ruling stresses that the priest must not accept the invitation because he should not "*commune* in the sins of others" (οὐκ ὀφείλει ὁ κλήρικὸς κοινωνεῖν ἁμαρτίαις ἀλλοτρίαις), an expression that underscores the *koinonia* that would be affected by his prosphoric action. Given the strong testimony for the domestic practice of marriage ritual in the fourth century and the very setup of the question that speaks of a cleric being *invited* to what was a family event, these readings of the *Canonical Responses* suggest the offering of the eucharist within a domestic context.

That the original text of the *Canonical Responses* reflects a domestic eucharistic offering can also be argued by how some scribes opted to

16 ConstAp 8,13,15 (SChr 336, 210; Metzger).

17 Laodicea, can. 58, in: Discipline Générale antique (IVe–IXe s.), vol. 1/2: Les canons des synodes particuliers, ed. by Périclès-Pierre Joannou (Pontificia Commissione per la Redazione del Codice di Diritto Canonico Orientale. Fonti 9), Grottaferrata 1962, 153.

18 Canonical Responses, 9 (Joannou 2, 245).

19 Bausi, La versione etiopica, 52–53.

update the wording of this question at a time when it made little sense to them, doubtless because the idea of a domestic nuptial eucharist was no longer conscionable. Thus, in one eighth-century manuscript originally from the Suryan Monastery in Wadi El-Natrun but today housed in London, the scribe simplified the text by removing any allusion to the eucharist, instead making the matter only a question about whether it was acceptable for a priest to pray at an illicit wedding.[20] While the idea of priests attending domestic weddings for prayer made sense to the Syriac translator (or the scribe of the prototype manuscript), the notion of a priest offering the eucharist on such an occasion was so foreign a concept that it was deemed in need of expunction from the question altogether.

This fourth-century text is the first extant witness to a Christian wedding that is directly connected to the celebration of the eucharist. Although one could argue that a vague earlier reference in Tertullian might likewise connect marriage ritual with the eucharist, the interpretation of that passage is far from certain.[21] In any case, it must be stressed that a custom of nuptial eucharists is very rare in the early sources, including those purporting to describe Egyptian marital traditions. In the *Lausiac History*, composed by the non-Egyptian Palladius of Galatia in the early-fifth century, we read about the Egyptian wedding of St. Amoun of Nitria, in which rites were performed within the bridal chamber but with no indication of the offering of the eucharist.[22] While an *ex silentio* argument is never strong, the fact of the matter is that the only other late antique

20 This variant in the Syriac text of *London, British Library Add 12155* is noted in Nau, Littérature canonique, 36. In turn, we might add that such updating of canons in Egypt should caution us from assuming – as scholars have often done – that medieval manuscripts preserve late antique canonical texts without updates, a methodological point stressed recently by Arsany Paul, Women and Blood Impurities in Christian Egypt. Menstruation, Childbirth, and Liturgical Participation among Late Antique and Medieval Copts, in: DOP 79 (2025) 161–191.

21 See discussion in Radle, Marriage in Byzantium, 61–63.

22 Greek text in Cuthbert Butler, The Lausiac History of Palladius. The Greek Text Edited with Introduction and Notes, vol. 2 (Texts and Studies. Contributions to Biblical and Patristic Literature 6/2), Cambridge 1904, 27. English translation in Palladius, The Lausiac History [transl. by Robert T. Meyer] (ACW 34), London 1965, 41 f.

source to include the eucharist (in this case, presanctified communion) within a domestic wedding ceremony is the description of the sixth-century imperial marriage of Emperor Maurice and Constantina in 582, which the author, Theophylact Simocatta, implies was a rather unique ceremony for the day, not necessarily reflecting the practices of the general populace at Constantinople.[23]

Be that as it may, it is easy enough to imagine a context in which the eucharist could be offered as part of domestic wedding ritual at a time of still fluid liturgical development in the fourth century. While this may not have been a mainstream custom in Egypt or other parts of the Mediterranean, it certainly fits logically with what we know about the development of both the early Christian eucharist and weddings among Christians. Marriage ritual in the ancient world was embedded in religiosity, much of which was centered in the home, just as the early Christian eucharist was commonly associated with domestic spaces. The course of late antiquity witnessed a negotiation process whereby Christians – both laity and church leaders – attempted to navigate the extent to which older ritual forms of marriage were congruent with Christianity, and multiple witnesses survive of late antique Christians inviting clergy to attend their domestic weddings and offer prayer.[24] In a transitional period in which Christians were both continuing to celebrate the eucharist within domestic contexts and likewise replacing some of the religious activities of the wedding process with Christian alternative forms of ritual practice, a domestic nuptial eucharist makes perfect sense.[25] After all, if family-sponsored rit-

23 Discussion and further bibliography in Radle, Marriage in Byzantium, 105–120. Nevertheless, there is some very limited medieval testimony for the reception of the eucharist at home within the context of the nuptial process, such as the manuscript El Escorial X. IV.13, on which, see ibid., 213 with 239, n. 118, and the edition of the manuscript in Stefano Parenti, Un eucologio poco noto del Salento. El Escorial X.IV.13, in: SOrCr 15 (2011) 157–197, here: 183 f.

24 See, for example, Radle, The Christianization of Marriage Ritual, esp. 51–58.

25 On lay-sponsored eucharists in late antique Egypt, see, for example, Dana Robinson's discussion of Shenoute's critique of such in Robinson, Food, Virtue, 158–165. For broader discussion of domestic eucharists, see

ual meals at cemeteries attracted the eucharist,[26] why not family-sponsored wedding banquets? But to glean further insight into what such potential eucharistic practices may have looked like, we must explore how they would have fit within a typical Mediterranean wedding of late antiquity.

A Wedding Feast Eucharist in Context

Marriage in the Greco-Roman Mediterranean concerned the socially recognized legitimate cohabitation between a man and woman. Thus, one of the primary gestures of the ancient wedding process involved the transfer of a bride to her new domicile. This ritual conveyance, or *domumductio*, was typically accompanied by much fanfare that could include music, torches, and the carrying of the bride on a litter.[27] Late antique Christian authors and medieval sources make it clear that such customs continued long after the spread of Christianity.[28] Either side of this transfer process was likewise filled with rituals. After arrival at the house of the bridegroom, it was customary to perform speeches and songs in connection with the bridal chamber of consummation. Prior to the bride's transfer, the bride's family often hosted a meal.[29] This was often the primary place of gathering and communal feasting before the bride's ultimate departure

Bowes, Private Worship, Public Values, 127–174; Chase, Kitchens and Communion, 254–257 and bibliography.

26 Cf. Stewart, Breaking Bread, 135–147; Robinson, Food, Virtue, 159.

27 See, for example, Karen K. Hersch, The Roman Wedding. Ritual and Meaning in Antiquity, Cambridge 2010, 135–225.

28 Cf. Radle, Marriage in Byzantium, 55. 82. 107. 273. 318. 326–328 *et passim*.

29 Cf. Anne-Marie Vérilhac – Claude Vial, Le mariage grec. Du VI^{e} siècle av. J.-C. à l'époque d'Auguste (Bulletin de correspondance hellénique. Supplément 32), Athens 1998, 299–304; Susan Treggiari, Roman Marriage. *Iusti coniuges* from the Time of Cicero to the Time of Ulpian, Oxford 1991, 162 f.; Z. Benincasa, *Deductio in domum mariti* and the Conclusion of an *iustum matrimonium*, in: Miscellanea Historico-Iuridica 11 (2012) 14–26, here: 15. 18. 23. While a feast could also take place at the house of the groom, Karen Hersch preferred a more agnostic approach to the location of the feast, against the grain of the evidence, cf. Hersch, The Roman Wedding, 213.

from the home of her youth. Indeed, the wedding banquet would often include the ceremonial arrival of the groom and his retinue, a custom captured in the gospel parable of the wise and foolish maidens (Mt 25:1–13).[30] In the ancient world, a wedding banquet would likewise be preceded by various preparations, both practical and religious. Thus, in addition to arranging food, music and the bridal trousseau, families would often carry out sacrifices on the morning of the feast or the day prior, just as they would encourage the proclaiming of omens prior to the bridal transfer, typically within the context of the banquet.[31]

In discerning the origins and nature of the wedding eucharist alluded to in the *Canonical Responses*, two options appear as the most likely socio-historical catalyst for the custom. One option would be that a nuptial eucharist filled a ritual void created by the absence of bridal sacrifices from Christian weddings. Numerous early sources attest to a gradual Christianization of various Roman wedding customs, such that the speeches and "pagan" prayers typically recited by rhetors at the bridal chamber were often replaced by prayers recited by clergy.[32] So too, given the widespread practice of making bridal sacrifices in the Roman Mediterranean, the Alexandrian indication of a Christian priest "making the offering" could fit within this movement of Christianization. Since bridal sacrifices were typically done at the early stages of the wedding process, prior to the bride's transfer, we might imagine a priest attending the home of a bride in the context of the preparations for the wedding feast.

The text of the *Canonical Responses* could support such a reading. It is notably focused on the identity of the bride about to be wed. The wedding is described as being that of a "*sister* of a dead wife". This wording does not mention the groom – who, as the male party to the marriage, would have been regarded in many ways as the perpetrator of the illicit act, just as Herod has been – but instead paints a picture of a bride-focused context, potentially alluding to the preparation that would take

30 See discussion in Radle, Marriage in Byzantium, 54–56.

31 Cf. Hersch, The Roman Wedding, 117–122; Treggiari, Roman Marriage, 163–165.

32 Cf. Radle, The Christianization of Marriage Ritual; id., Marriage in Byzantium, 60–87 *et passim*.

place within her family home. While the nature of a Christian eucharistic offering is of course different from a "pagan" sacrifice, just as the one addressed in prayer would be different, the ritual impetus toward religious performance at this pivotal moment preceding a bride's transition in identity did not disappear with the adoption of Christianity. Indeed, as anthropologists and ethnographers have long noted, traditional societies the world over have historically regarded the bride as being in a spiritually volatile state as she changes her domicile and, by extension, her identity, and such notions carried over into popular Christian understanding and practice.[33] Thus, one can easily imagine a eucharistic offering standing in for previous types of pagan sacrificial offerings in the marriage process.

Yet there is also another option, which is not mutually exclusive to the first, namely, that a wedding eucharist could have functioned as a part of – or introduction to – the nuptial feast. Such banquets were typically viewed as the centerpiece of hosting guests and were typically hosted by the family of the bride, as indicated on extant papyrus invitations from Egypt.[34] This would not only explain the wording of the question, which alludes to the house of a bride, but it would also find resonance with early Christian banquet observances, especially as practiced by elite Christian families. The earliest Christian accounts clearly conceived of the eucharist as embedded within – or even substantially consisting of[35] – a meal, and the separation of eucharistic elements from the context of a

33 See, for example, Anne Schwerdtfeger, Ethnological Sources of the Christian Marriage Ceremony, Stockholm 1982, 50 f. *et passim*. On Chrysostom's observation of the "satanic processions" that were thought to guard a bride during her liminal state of transfer, see Margaret M. Mitchell, Chrysostom on Paul. Praises and Problem Passages (WGRW 48), Atlanta 2022, 254–261 and Radle, Marriage in Byzantium, 81 f., as well as for later context, ibid., 326–328.

34 Cf. Alba de Frutos García, Banquets, Reputation and Social Obligation in Roman Egypt. Some Notes on the Dinner Invitations in Papyri, in: EM 90/2 (2022) 327–351, here: 334 and n. 20. See also S. Zaki Bassiouni, Invitations in Roman Egypt, in: Bulletin of the Center of Papyrological Studies 7 (1990) 69–85, here: 76–79; Select Papyri, vol. 1: Private Documents, transl. by A. S. Hunt – C. C. Edgar (LCL 226), Cambridge/MA 1932, 400 f. (no. 174).

35 Cf. McGowan, Ascetic Eucharists, 5–12 *et passim*.

"full" ritual meal took place with different speeds in different places. Yet even when the specific eucharistic elements were received within a ritual ordo independently from a full meal, it was still common that eucharistic gatherings included meal fellowship. Precisely how long and how common a "meal eucharist" or "sympotic eucharist" continued to operate in early Christianity is not always easy to pinpoint in the sources, in part because meals continued to characterize Christian gathering long after the eucharistic elements began to be more concretely separated from the reception of other food items. At the very least, banqueting continued to feature strongly in many early Christian communities as a regular reinforcement of fellowship and identity – and a practical means of sustenance – whether such banquets included eucharistic elements or were shared within a communal context that was temporally separated – even if juxtaposed – from a ritual ordo of prayer with the reception of ("token") eucharistic elements.

Within the *Canonical Responses*, we find what is perhaps a strong hint at a tight connection still operating between banquets and the eucharist in the fourth century, something alluded to by the fourth-century Synod of Laodicea that condemned agape meals and dining couches in churches (canon 28) and the offering of the oblation in private houses (canon 58), as well as the Synod of Seleucia-Ctesiphon that similarly condemned what appears to have been a type of sympotic eucharist still known in some Syriac circles as late as the early fifth century.[36] As Plutarch writes for the ancient Mediterranean, "there is no occasion for a feast as much discussed as that of a wedding."[37] Bridal banquets would have continued to feature as large occasions for feasting among Christians. And yet, among Christians of late antiquity, we can likewise imagine that many of the closest friends and family in attendance were themselves Christian, and in some cases, especially among the devout, we

[36] Discussion, for example, in Robert F. Taft, The Frequency of the Celebration of the Eucharist Throughout History, in: id. (ed.), Beyond East and West. Problems in Liturgical Understanding, Rome ^{2}1997, 87–110, here: 89 f.; Meßner, Die Synode von Seleukeia-Ktesiphon; Chase, Kitchens and Communion, 257–260.

[37] Plutarch, Moralia Quaestiones Convivales 4,3,2 (LCL 424, 334 f.; Clement – Hoffleit).

might even imagine contexts in which those gathered may have even been exclusively Christian.[38] In such a case, the wedding would have brought many members of the church community together for a feast, an activity that was itself so integral to church identity and associated with eucharistic gathering.

If many Christians considered communal meals – whether these included the reception of eucharistic elements of bread and wine (or water) or accompanied a separate ritual ordo with a "token" eucharistic distribution is less relevant to our discussion – as key markers of their religious practice, it follows that the major festal banquets within individual families could attract similar ritual behaviors. This would have especially been the case among families who had already served as patrons for hosting eucharistic gatherings for their local Christian community. In other words, the *Canonical Responses* may be suggesting to us that for some Christians as late as the fourth century, a domestic banquet without any association to the offering of the eucharist was not truly the fullest expression of a Christian banquet. This does not necessarily mean that the eucharistic elements were consumed alongside "regular" food items in the midst of the wedding banquet. Indeed, the *Canonical Responses* clearly allude to a specific clerical action that is singled out, for which we might expect the reservation of an appointed time and space for such an offering to occur. What the *Canonical Responses* do suggest is that important Christians festive banquets in fourth-century Egypt could still operate as ritual magnets for attracting eucharistic activity.

Conclusion: Beyond the Either/Or Approach to Domestic Eucharists

The New Testament and various other early Christian writings showcase that the eucharistic elements of bread and wine (or sometimes water) were typically received alongside a shared meal. Recent years have seen

38 On social practices of commensality and preoccupations about eating with those of other religious communities, cf. David M. Freidenreich, Foreigners and Their Food. Constructing Otherness in Jewish, Christian, and Islamic Law, Berkeley 2011, and specifically on late antique Jewish concerns around attending wedding banquets of Gentiles, see ibid., 74–76.

scholars expend much energy attempting to decipher the dynamics around how and when a definitive break occurred between the eucharistic elements and a communal meal and whether the eucharistic elements within individual sources preceded, followed or were embedded within such a meal. However, when one looks to Christian monastic practices around the globe, it is clear that there has never been a definitive separation between the eucharistic elements and the sharing of a ritualized communal meal by the eucharistic assembly. This is also the case in some parochial settings across multiple Eastern Christian communities, as documented in the Levant, Ethiopia, India, and parts of Eastern Europe.[39] In the West, however, outside of monasticism, it is common that no such ritualized communal meals regularly take place (the situation common to many Roman Catholic parishes) or they might consist of a simple "coffee hour" that parishioners can opt to join and mull around with pastries that may or may not be prayed over (such as occurs in many Protestant denominations), with a major exception being the practice of a "potluck" meal found within some Protestant communities of North America.[40]

The fact that regular, ritualized meals extending from the eucharist are no longer common within Western Christianity might explain why the question of the separation of the eucharist from a meal has largely dominated the scholarship of those liturgists who are themselves from traditions that lack such meal practices. In emphasizing the importance of the communal meal to early Christian practice, some scholars have suggested that the earliest Christian eucharists were by definition fellowship meals without necessarily any emphasis on specific food items (i. e.

39 That some Eastern Christian communities preserve traditions of ritual meals following the eucharist was already noted in the classic study of Richard L. Cole, Love-Feasts. A History of the Christian Agape, London 1916, 125. 259–262. For a recent study on India, see James Ponniah, *Anna-daan* in Christianity. Origin, Meaning, and Varieties, in: K. V. Raju – S. Manasi (eds.), *Anna-daan*, Food Charity in India. Preaching and Practice, London 2024, 140–169.

40 Examples of popular interest in the potluck include such posts as The Holy Sacrament of Potluck (June 1, 2019), in: Pulpit & Pen, or Jesus Loves a Potluck (October 30, 2021), in: Lisa May Leblanc.

bread, cup).[41] This theory can certainly aid scholarship as an exercise in balancing the search for early Christian eucharistic meaning with the rich evidence beyond the dominant Last Supper accounts, but it must also be acknowledged that from the perspective of current historical-critical biblical research, such theories are difficult to affirm one way or another.[42] If some of the earliest Christians did have concepts of the eucharist as a fellowship meal without any interpretive emphasis being given to specific food items, these practices were nevertheless supplanted so quickly as to leave no definitive trace, and in any case, an importance attached to eucharistic bread and cup can be discerned already in the oldest layers of reconstructable Christian narratives that were being shared prior to the beginning of the writing of the New Testament.[43]

41 One influential study within anglophone scholarship has been Paul Bradshaw, Did Jesus Institute the Eucharist at the Last Supper?, in: Maxwell E. Johnson (ed.), Issues in Eucharistic Praying in East and West. Essays in Liturgical and Theological Analysis, Collegeville 2011, 1–19, esp. 17 f. Building upon Bradshaw, Kimberly Belcher recently affirmed, "[…] the Eucharist arose as a ritualized commemoration of Jesus' table fellowship, but in the process of ritualization, it developed modes of differentiation from ordinary table fellowship." See Kimberly H. Belcher, Ritual Systems, Ritualized Bodies, and the Laws of Liturgical Development, in: StLi 49 (2019) 89–110, here: 98.

42 Current biblical and liturgical scholarship on the question of New Testament evidence for eucharistic practice (which modifies some of Bradshaw's earlier presumptions about such passages) and the unattainability of concrete data on the historical Last Supper can be found in Bukovec, Die frühchristliche Eucharistie, 21–160, and bibliography therein.

43 In his conclusion to his analysis of the various strands of discourse on both Jesus as bread and Last Supper memories that informed the writing of the New Testament, Bukovec suggests a strong possibility that the historical Jesus of Nazareth identified himself with broken bread in the context of a *Basileia* message delivered in anticipation of the coming events of his arrest and death, which would then be read by the post-paschal church as the "core historical memory" and "quickly transformed into the double structure [bread/cup] and enriched with early Christian theologoumena," such that at least two different strands of this memory circulated prior to the period of the New Testament's composition. See ibid., 159 f. *et passim*.

There are many reasons to resist an either/or approach to the relationship between fellowship meals and the eucharistic elements of bread and cup. Into the fourth century (and into modernity!), many Christians would continue to associate eucharistic offerings with significant communal meals, even if such offerings were not necessarily enveloped so explicitly within a larger meal that contained other food items. The *Canonical Responses* allude to non-clerical, fourth-century Christians inviting clergy to their home to offer the eucharist on the occasion of a major family feast, namely, a wedding. While we cannot ascertain a liturgical ordo (i. e. whether the eucharist was viewed as independent from or part of the *cena nuptialis*), the most interesting aspect of the *Canonical Responses* is that it gives concrete testimony to the non-monastic *domus* continuing to operate as a eucharistic space in what is likely fourth-century Egypt, and that it paints a picture of non-clerical sponsorship over eucharistic gatherings. Moreover, in contrast to Laodicea's condemnation of domestic eucharists and Seleucia-Ctesiphon's disapproval of what appear to be sympotic eucharists, this Egyptian canonical text presumes the acceptability of a priest offering the eucharist within the context of a domestic wedding. According to the *Responses*, when a major feast for a family celebration occurred, the family's initiative to include the eucharist was considered perfectly normal. Thus, the *Canonical Responses* remind us that the most revolutionary and long enduring shift during late antiquity was not so much the removal of meals from eucharistic gatherings, but rather the isolation of the eucharist from significant non-monastic domestic lay feasts.

Abbreviations

ACW	Ancient Christian Writers. The Works of the Fathers in Translation
DOP	Dumbarton Oaks Papers
EM	Emerita. Revista de Lingüística y Filología Clásica
EO	Ecclesia Orans
ExF	Ex Fonte – Journal of Ecumenical Studies in Liturgy
FemTh	Feminist Theology
LCL	Loeb Classical Library
LQF	Liturgiewissenschaftliche Quellen und Forschungen
ROC	Revue de l'Orient Chrétien
SCH	Studies in Church History
SOrCr	Studi sull'Oriente Cristiano
StLi	Studia Liturgica
WGRW	Writings from the Greco-Roman World
WUNT	Wissenschaftliche Untersuchungen zum Neuen Testament
ZAC	Zeitschrift für Antikes Christentum

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