

EPHESIANS 5:18-20 AND MEALTIME PROPRIETY¹

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Summary

Ephesians 5:18 startlingly contrasts drunkenness with fulness with the Spirit. Previous attempts to relate this contrast to excessive behaviour within Christian gatherings have not convinced many. Instead of suggesting alternative improprieties, the present study explores behavioural patterns followed at various Graeco-Roman convivial gatherings. These patterns indicate that some people who regularly met for special meals commonly chose abstention from drunkenness in favour of stimulating, even religious, discussion. Accordingly, the present study suggests that the statements of 5:18-20, and ultimately others made throughout the moral teaching in Ephesians, simply reflect the writer's assumption that his readers regularly gathered in a mealtime context.

More than one commentator has suggested a possible link between the contrast found in Ephesians 5:18-20 and Christian mealtimes.² Most of these mention the possibility of an abuse of the Lord's Supper of the type found in 1 Corinthians 11. Instead of proposing the correction of abuses at Christian meals, others have considered that Ephesians 5:18a may be a mild polemic against Dionysian frenzies present at non-Christian meals.³ While there has been at least one detailed attempt to substanti-

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²Gnilka, *Der Epheserbrief* (Freiburg, Herder 1971) 269; J.A. Robinson, *St. Paul's Epistle to the Ephesians* (London, Macmillan 1928) 122; H. Schlier, *Der Brief an die Epheser* (Düsseldorf, Patmos-Verlag 1957) 246. J.L. Houlden, *Paul's Letters from Prison: Philippians, Colossians, Philemon, and Ephesians* (Philadelphia, Westminster Press 1977) 328, does not overtly mention mealtimes, though he does illumine the prohibition in Eph. 5:18 by mentioning 1 Cor. 11:21, which itself is addressed to a Christian meal, as a possible example of the 'esoteric' uses of alcohol creeping into community gatherings.

³M. Barth, *Ephesians 4-6* (New York, Doubleday 1974) 580; A. Patzia, *Ephesians, Colossians, Philemon* (Peabody, MA, Hendrickson 1990) 263; E.F. Scott, *The Epistle of Paul to the Colossians, to Philemon and to the Ephesians* (London, Hodder and Stoughton 1930) 233-34. Also see D.E. Aune, 'Septem Sapientium Convivium', in H.D. Betz (ed.), *Plutarch's Ethical Writings and Early Christian Literature* (Leiden, E.J. Brill 1976) 78.

ate the latter possibility,⁴ many have, with reason, recognised such suggestions as basically insupportable.⁵ Ephesians 5:18-20 makes no overt claim to be associated with any mealtime.

The basis for trying to explore such a background here is that the contrast in Ephesians 5:18 looks as though it belongs in a mealtime context. Drunkenness is to be opposed by fulness of the Spirit, which in turn leads to worshipful acts expressed to others, to oneself and to God. The writer might be charging his readers to avoid drunkenness at all times, and on pertinent special occasions to be filled with the Spirit. However, at least one Pauline letter indicates that drunkenness, worship, instruction and a meal could all take place at the same occasion.⁶ Acts 20:7-12 indicates that Christians on another occasion gathering for a special meal, whether or not simply the eucharist, at which instruction in the faith also occurred. Ephesians 5:18-20 looks as though it, too, could fit in such a setting.

P. Berger and T. Luckmann assert that language conveys social structure.⁷ If they are correct, then beneath the overt statements of 5:18-20 may lie some traces of a social institution—meals. That is not to say that Ephesians 5:18-20 is a correction of overt abuses of the Lord's Supper or other such gatherings, as 1 Corinthians 11 is. The passage mainly contrasts foolishness/sin and wisdom/righteousness (Eph. 5:15). Drunkenness appears as an example of foolish sin. Filling by (or with) the Spirit is a form of wisdom/righteousness, expressed through personal and corporate praise to God.⁸ It is

⁴C. Rogers, 'The Dionysian Background of Ephesians 5:18', *Bibliotheca Sacra* 136 (1979) 249-257.

⁵T.K. Abbott, *The Epistles to the Ephesians and to the Colossians* (Edinburgh, T. & T. Clark 1897) 161; A.T. Lincoln, *Ephesians* (Dallas, TX, Word Books 1990) 343-44; H.A.W. Meyer, *Critical and Exegetical Handbook to the Epistle to the Ephesians*, tr. by M.J. Evans, rev. and ed. by W.P. Dickson (New York, Funk & Wagnalls 1884) 505; R. Schnackenburg, *Der Brief an die Epheser* (Zürich, Benziger Verlag 1982) 241.

⁶Not just 1 Cor. 11:7-34 may be at issue here, but perhaps even chapters 11-14. For a comparison of Graeco-Roman mealtime practices with the material found in these chapters, see D.E. Smith, 'Meals and Morality in Paul and His World', in K.H. Richards (ed.), *Society of Biblical Literature 1981 Seminar Papers* (Chico, CA, Scholars Press 1981) 319-39.

⁷P.L. Berger and T. Luckmann, *The Social Construction of Reality* (Harmondsworth, Penguin 1966) 53-56.

⁸For a more detailed, sustained presentation of this passage as a contrast of foolishness/sin with archetypal wisdom/righteousness, see my

for this reason that many commentators are correct in asserting that Ephesians 5:18-20 is not primarily about meals.

An examination of mealtime issues should not preclude the main thrust of the statements in 5:18-20. These verses are not about mealtimes. However, the type of comparison present in the verses suggests that the social structure of mealtimes mediates the specific items mentioned in the contrast. This may be true not only for Ephesians 5:18-20, but also for a number of other specific statements found within the moral teaching that begins with Ephesians 4:1.

Though special mealtime functions were common among educated urban élite, evidence suggests that convivial gatherings could be popular even for poor country folk.⁹ People regularly gathered for meals, which often included drinking, singing and discussion. Pauline and Lukan traditions indicate that this could also have been true for some groups of Christians.¹⁰ Some extra-biblical evidence from the early second century displays this as well.¹¹ An examination of mealtime patterns recorded in various Greek writings may help to illuminate the sort of environment in which Christians held their meals. In the process, it will be seen that drunkenness and filling by (with) the Spirit need not be as startling a contrast as at first seems to be the case.

unpublished Ph.D. thesis, *Behaving as a Convert: Moral Teaching in Ephesians Against Its Traditional and Social Backgrounds* (University of Sheffield, 1992) 233-240, 245-46, 251-255.

⁹Dio Chrysostom 2.63 attributes the following words to Alexander the Great, who was idealising about the kingship based on Homer's writings: 'Nor, by heavens, should he ever utter such prayers as those we find in the ballads and drinking-songs of the Attic symposia, for these are suitable, not for kings, but for country folk and for the merry and boisterous clan-meetings', *Dio Chrysostom*, tr. by J.W. Cohoon (London, William Heinemann 1939) 2:91.

¹⁰Besides 1 Cor. 11:7-34 and Acts 20:7-12 cited above, see also Acts 2:46-47 and Gal. 2:11-13.

¹¹See, e.g., Pliny, 'Pliny to the Emperor Trajan' 10.94.7, in *Letters and Panegyricus*, tr. by B. Radice (London, William Heinemann 1969) 2.289: 'After this ceremony it had been their custom to disperse and reassemble later to take food of an ordinary harmless kind [*cibum, promiscuum tamen et innoxium*]; but they had in fact given up this practice since my edict, issued on your instructions, which banned all political societies'.

I. Graeco-Roman Mealtime Practices

A number of primary sources from various backgrounds disclose the basic format of the gathering, sometimes referred to as the *symposium*.¹² The term could apply to the drinking party occurring after the meal, and was also applied to a literary genre that claimed to have recorded specific conversations alleged to have taken place at a particular party. Generally, at such gatherings there would be the meal itself, followed by the drinking of some wine libation, followed by the singing of a song, usually a hymn of praise to a god, and then by entertainment, signalled by the inevitable arrival of the 'flute-girl', or further extended discussion, or perhaps more singing. While discussion could take place throughout the evening, there could also be set times when people would pose specific questions or problems needing to be solved. In an uncontrolled setting, the drinking could turn into a drunken orgy. In a controlled session, there would usually be some constructive form of entertainment or discussion.

Special songs, or *scolia* (σκόλια), were sung at such gatherings. One person would sing a line, to be followed by another who would try to provide some witty rejoinder. Aristophanes depicts the beginning of one such song in a parody of a banquet: 'I'll start the catch Harmodius. You're to cap it. "*Truly Athens never knew*" [the rejoinder] "*Such a rascally thief as you.*"'¹³

Dio Chrysostom records a *scolion* that is thought to be undignified:

Would that I became a lovely ivory harp,
And some lovely children carried me to Dionysus' choir!
Would that I became a lovely massive golden trinket,
And that me a lovely lady wore!¹⁴

This kind of singing could become quite raucous. Plutarch lists the 'singing of any kind of song' as one of many undesirable

¹²Aristophanes, 'The Wasps' 1208-1264, tr. by B.B. Rogers (London, William Heinemann 1924) 1.523-27 in tr.; Dio Chrysostom 27.1-4, 2.349-51 in tr.; Plato, 'Symposium', tr. by W.R.M. Lamb (London, William Heinemann 1925); Plutarch, 'Quaestiones Convivales', in *Plutarch's Moralia*, tr. by P.A. Clement and H.B. Hofflet (London, William Heinemann 1969) VIII; Xenophon 'The Banquet', tr. by O.J. Todd (London, William Heinemann 1923) 4.535-635.

¹³'The Wasps' 1225 (1.525 in tr.).

¹⁴Dio Chrysostom 2.63 (1.91 in tr.).

activities taking place when drinking parties got out of hand.¹⁵ Yet simultaneously he shows how the *scolion* was known to have filled a religious purpose:

As for the *scolia*, some say that they do not belong to a type of obscurely constructed songs, but that first the guests would sing the god's song together, all raising their hymn with one voice, and next when to each in turn was given the myrtle spray (which they called *aisakos*, I think, because the man to receive it sings) and too the lyre was passed around, the guest who could play the instrument would take it and tune it and sing, while the unmusical would refuse, and thus the *scolium* owes its name to the fact that it is not sung by all and is not easy.¹⁶

In the estimation of certain philosophers, those evenings with discussion centred on some worthwhile topic, or topics, were considered most preferable. Consider, again, Plutarch:

Then, too, there are, I think, topics of discussion that are particularly suitable for a drinking-party. Some are supplied by history; others it is possible to take from current events; some contain many lessons bearing on philosophy, many on piety; some induce an emulous enthusiasm for courageous and great-hearted deeds, and some for charitable and humane deeds. If one makes unobtrusive use of them to entertain and instruct his companions as they drink, not the least of the evils of intemperance will be taken away.¹⁷

In such situations, it is not at all unusual to see drunkenness purposefully avoided out of preference for thoughtful conversation. At the beginning of Plato's 'Symposium', the various participants in the evening's meal complain how they had been drinking too much at parties during the week. They choose, then, to forgo the normal bout of drinking, replacing it instead with discourses in honour of the god Love.¹⁸

Dio Chrysostom refers to a range of participants in describing what sorts of things go on at Symposia, referring to some who become drunk, to some who become loquacious, to others who sing incessantly regardless of their musical ability,

¹⁵Plutarch, 'Quaestiones Convivales' 1.1.614 (8.21 in tr.).

¹⁶Plutarch, 'Quaestiones Convivales' 1.1.615 (8.23 in tr.).

¹⁷Plutarch, 'Quaestiones Convivales' 1.1.614 (8.15-17 in tr.).

¹⁸'Symposium' 176E. Plutarch, 'Quaestiones Convivales' 4.6.671C-672C, 8.361-67 in tr., discusses 'Who the god of the Jews is', attempting to draw parallels between Jewish and Bacchic practices.

to others who ruin the evening through their abstention altogether from wine to

...the man that is gentle and has a properly ordered character, easily endures the rudeness of the others, and acts like a gentleman himself, trying to the best of his ability to bring the ignorant chorus into a proper demeanour by means of fitting rhythm and melody. And he introduces appropriate topics of conversation and by his tact and persuasiveness attempts to get those present to be more harmonious and friendly in the intercourse with one another. (27.3-4, 2.351 in tr.)

Xenophon describes a very ordered evening in his record of a Symposium. The host purposely invites those 'whose hearts have undergone philosophy's purification', whom he happens to meet on the way home, over 'generals and cavalry commanders and office-seekers', who would presumably disrupt the evening with drunkenness, bravado or some sort of flattery or foolish boasting (1.4, 4.535 in tr.). As the evening commences, the dinner guests are described as being so overcome with the atmosphere engendered by the god Love that they eat in silence, until interrupted by a notorious comic who arrives at the door, uninvited (1.8-13, 4.537-39). Even he cannot rouse the guests, but with his entrance, a series of interesting conversations begin.

Much of what takes place at these sorts of mealtimes depends on the kind of control exerted by the host or by some influential guest. Plato puts much stock in the commander of feasts when describing facets of his ideal state.¹⁹ Without proper direction, such meals easily degenerated into mindless frenzy.

II. Comparisons with Ephesians

The most illuminating correspondence between mealtime traditions of the philosophers and Ephesians 5:18-20 occurs in the mutual concern shared by each for appropriate singing and discourse to triumph over drunken debauchery. A mealtime background to Ephesians 5:18-20 does not necessitate that these

¹⁹Plato, *Laws* 640D-E and 671B-E, tr. by R.G. Bury (London, William Heinemann 1926) 1.55 and 151-53. Note also Plutarch, 'Quaestiones Convivales' 1.4.620A-622C, 8.49-63 in tr. Here the participants in the symposium all discuss what sort of person is the best to rule at such gatherings.

verses be considered either as a corrective for the specific type of behaviour denounced by Paul in 1 Corinthians 11 or as a polemic against Bacchic drunkenness. Rather, it may indicate a contrast that could have been quite familiar to many gentile readers.²⁰ Controlled discussion is to be preferred to drunken dissipation. The writer of Ephesians may be adapting this contrast when, instead of championing philosophy, he advocates a fulness of the Spirit that leads people to worship God and praise Christ. In the Pauline tradition drunkenness was a sin thought to be typical of outsiders.²¹ The writer of Ephesians is pitting foolish and sinful behaviour of unbelievers against the kind of activity that should both characterise the mutual interaction of saints and express their devotion to God.

Accordingly, God's influence should extend to all areas of the readers' lives. Drunkenness is not an indication of God's influence. Singing to one another in psalms, hymns and spiritual songs is. That such a contrast would be most meaningful in a mealtime context may indicate the writer's assumption that his readers regularly gathered for meals, which, like some meals among unbelievers, could have had some aspects of meaningful song, worship or discussion.

Mealtime patterns may also underlie a number of other statements in Ephesians' moral teaching. Throughout there is an unusual emphasis on speech, a facet seldom observed.²² The special kinds of individuals given according to 4:11 each have a speaking function. Those who learn from these individuals are

²⁰There is a realistic possibility that the readership of Ephesians may have had a strong Jewish element. See T. Moritz, "'Summing up all things': Religious Pluralism and Universalism in Ephesians", in A.D. Clarke and B.W. Winter (eds.), *One God, One Lord in a World of Religious Pluralism* (Cambridge, Tyndale House 1991) 92-94. Nevertheless, Eph. 2:11, 3:1 and 4:17 all indicate a significantly gentile readership.

²¹In 1 Cor. 5:11 the drunkard is listed along with the fornicator, the greedy person, the idolater, the reviler and the thief. In 1 Cor. 6:9-10 drunkards are included with an even larger number of offenders who will not inherit the kingdom of God. Drunkenness is one of the sinful deeds of the flesh in Gal. 5:19-21, the practitioners of which are said not to inherit the kingdom. In both Rom. 13:13 and 1 Thes. 5:7 drunkenness is depicted as a sinful practice of darkness, in contrast to the daytime-like behaviour to be exhibited by believers.

²²Two who have observed this are: Lincoln, *Ephesians*, 334; I.H. Marshall, *The Challenge of New Testament Ethics* (London, MacMillan 1946) 284.

themselves to be involved in speaking truth to one another (4:15). There is an unusual number of terms dealing with teaching and learning (4:17, 20-24, 5:5-6, 15, 17). Some of the sententious statements of 4:25-5:2 deal with speech issues—lying (4:25), useless as against good words (4:29), slander and shouting (4:31). The main proscription in 5:3-5 is against speaking about certain sinful activities,²³ a proscription that makes enormous sense when reading some examples of non-Christian mealtime conversations.²⁴ Some sins are even to be ‘exposed’ [ἐλέγχετε, 5:12], an activity that certainly can involve oral behaviour (5:12).²⁵

Such a heavy concentration of speech concerns may indicate that the meeting of a gathered fellowship, which some traditions indicate could involve a meal, stands behind much of the paraenesis, not as an overt concern, but as a mediating social structure. This would not at all be surprising in a letter

²³αἰσχροτης μωρολγία εὐτραπεία ὀνομαζέσθω πορνεία ἀκαθαρσία πλεονεξία in verse 3. This is contrary to the view that wants to see the terms in 5:4 stand alone as predicates of a brachylogy that supplies the notion ‘let there not be’. Lincoln and Schlier argue that the additional subjects are more consistent with the pleonastic style of Ephesians than the more stylistically sophisticated brachylogy. Additionally I observe that in the context the writer principally proscribes, not the committing of specific sins, but the association of believers with an unconverted lifestyle.

²⁴One illuminating example from the later writings of Athenaeus, *The Deipnosophists*, tr. by C.B. Gulick (London, William Heinemann 1929) shows the difficulty of trying to distinguish between the individual ‘sins’ listed in vv. 3-4, while illustrating the moral problems inherent in talking about someone else’s conversations, whether these report on immoral deeds, foolish talk or witticisms: ‘Once, in the presence of Lark, who had the reputation of being a [male] prostitute, the conversation turned on the high price of thrushes, and Philoxenus the Ham-cleaver said, “Yes, but I can remember when the lark cost only a penny”’ (6.241E, 3.87 in tr.).

²⁵ἐλεγχω ἐλέγχειν and Conversion in the New Testament,’ *Zeitschrift für die neutestamentliche Wissenschaft* 80 (1989) 93-100, emphasises the verbal confrontation with a wrongdoer that this term so frequently describes. The context of Eph. 5:12 assumes a concretely performable act, which can be verbal just as easily as it can be non-verbal. This act is directed not at doers of wrong deeds but the deeds themselves. This helps resolve what seems to be a contradiction. The writer posits exposure by the light as a different activity from saying what is done in secret. His basic thought is that verbal exposure of evil deeds makes them visible, i.e. displays them for what they are. Talking about them is a form of participation in them; exposing them in the Lord’s light is a renunciation of them.

that seems to have no specific circumstances to which it was addressed. One can easily envisage the writer being guided by what he would consider familiar structures in the absence of pressing concerns.

If this is the case, it may also help explain how the writer could move so freely from an exhortation involving worship activities to one involving household issues in the verses that follow. The church would not only have gathered for a meal, it would have met within the context of a household.²⁶ Again, this would not mean that the writer addresses his concerns to church conduct. Only that the realities of the social situation in which the writer assumed his readers met would themselves mediate the type of statements the writer would make.

Conclusions

Though admittedly speculative, this study has suggested the application of a known historical model to the data as it appears in Ephesians. Its usefulness lies in proffering a general, but familiar, human situation for the moral teaching. Recognition of such a setting does not necessarily change the meaning of any of the exhortations found in the moral teaching of Ephesians. It can, however, help to explain how some of these could appear the way they do in the letter.

Ephesians 5:18-20 contrasts, principally, drunkenness as a deed of foolishness/sinfulness and filling by the Spirit resulting in praise to God as a deed of wisdom/righteousness. Such a contrast appears startlingly unusual to modern readers. This study suggests that some first-century readers would find it to be completely normal. Without referring to any known spiritual problem among its readers, the exhortation discloses an underlying setting common for gatherings of all types of people.

²⁶R. Banks, *Paul's Idea of Community* (Grand Rapids, William B. Eerdmans 1988) 33-42; W. Meeks, *The First Urban Christians* (New Haven, Yale University Press 1983) 21.