

Esther Kobel, *Dining with John: Communal Meals and Identity Formation in the Fourth Gospel and its Historical and Cultural Context* (Biblical Interpretation Series 109; Leiden – Boston: Brill, 2011). Pp. 375. \$176.00. €135.00. ISBN 978-90-042-17-782 (Hardback)

### JANUSZ KRĘCIDŁO

Faculty of Theology, Cardinal Stefan Wyszyński University in Warsaw  
address: ul. Dewajtis 5, 01-815 Warsaw, Poland, e-mail: oldicerkj@gmail.com

The book is a revised version of doctoral dissertation submitted to the University of Basel's Faculty of Theology in 2010. The thesis was written under the guidance of excellent Bible scholars Prof. Dr. Ekkehard W. Stegemann (University of Basel, Switzerland) and Prof. Adele Reinhartz (University of Ottawa, Canada). The main hypothesis of the dissertation is that communal meals were a central locus for the formation of community and group identity for the members of Johannine communities. The thesis is not new, but its painstaking application to the Gospel of John was needed. The way in which the thesis is elaborated is inscribed in the requirements doctoral dissertation should be pursued. It consists of two main parts precluded by an introduction (pp. 1-36) and presentation of the state of the quest (pp. 37-66).

Food and communal dining are often addressed in the Bible. In the Gospel of John accounts of meals and various passages in which motifs of food and drink appear play a very important role. They do not only give us significant data about the addressees' diet, and Johannine communities' life experience, but indicate a metaphorical use of food and drink that generates vital theological meaning. Ester Kobel aims at showing how the Fourth Gospel links "the physical act of eating to meanings that surpass the mere consumption of calories" (p. 3). She intends to demonstrate how "narratives and discourses about food, drink, and meals are an important vehicle for achieving the Gospel's overall purpose, which is to create and strengthen belief in Christ and adherence to his group of followers" (p. 3).

For Kobel the most apt method of investigation of the chosen subject is Vernon Robbin's social-rhetorical analysis. The choice seems proper to me, hence the method is very ample giving a scholar an opportunity of manifold investigation without imposing on him too tight corset. After presenting the method of social-rhetorical analysis in the first chapter the Author of the thesis refers main presuppositions concerning authorship, date, location, integrity,

addressees, and the nature and purpose of the Gospel of John. This seems to me unnecessary, for two reasons: 1) it is rather superfluous because it is impossible to discuss all the crucial problems concerning such broad issues giving to them such little space (pp. 15-33); 2) these issues are crucial for developing the argument of the thesis and for that reason they should not be taken in farther exegetical analyses of passages from the Fourth Gospel as resolved, but rather should be demonstrated in course of the examination of Johannine passages how various assessments on these issues can influence the results of Author's investigation on social, historical, and cultural reality of the addressees.

Part one of the book consists of but one chapter. Using some criteria of narrative analysis Kobel aims at demonstrating the role of meal scenes, and discourses on food and drink in the narrative of the Gospel of John. She emphasizes that meal scenes punctuate the narrative of the Gospel as a whole. Then she is giving a very helpful chart that indicates every passage of the Fourth Gospel in which food is mentioned. The next step of the analysis is a brief report on each of the nine meal scenes of the Gospel of John, and finally the Author takes an effort to explain food symbolism that helps to understand theological and spiritual dimension of these accounts.

The second part of the book (pp. 111-316) is entitled: "Meal accounts and discourses about food and drink in the life of the Johannine community". It consists of six chapters that could constitute an independent monograph. The first of these chapters (number four) is dedicated to an exploration of the role of communal meals for identity in some Mediterranean groups of that time. E. Kobel investigates three non-Christian (Qumran, therapeutae and haberim) and three Christian communities (Pauline communities, communities reported in the Acts of the Apostles [beside Pauline], and Didache community). The survey of food issues and information on communal meals enabled the Author to draw some important conclusions: the central role of the communal intake of food, integrative function of communal meals, food as a metaphor for expressing communal relations. The conclusion is that meals are of prime importance in community formation and identity.

Remaining chapters are dedicated to careful exploration of particular issues and motifs concerning food, indicated in the cursory narrative analysis of the Fourth Gospel prepared in the first part of the book. In chapter five Kobel examines the manner in which Eucharistic language is present in the Gospel of John. Special attention is given here to John 6 and John 13. I find the analyses performed here very interesting, but I think that relatively insufficient concern is given to John 21 as to the chapter that explains ways of remaining of the Risen Christ in the post-Easter Johannine (Church) community.

A very interesting section of the monograph is chapter six where John 6 is explained in the perspective of mystery cults of Demeter and Dionysus. Allusions to these mystery cults detected in John 6 serve above all to support the theological notion that Jesus Christ is the Son of God. In chapter seven Kobel deals with accusations against Christian-believers concerning cannibalism and immorality. The issue is directly connected with the theme of communal meals. In the Gospel of John it can be alluded in 6:51-58, especially when Jesus speaks about “chewing his flesh”. The expression aims at demonstrating a very close relation of the community of Jesus disciples with him but it is misunderstood by Jewish opponents and rouses aggression.

Chapter eight is focused on the problem of historicity of Jesus being betrayed by Judas. The Author combines the Evangelical account with the theme of persecutions of Christ-believers. Kobel briefly relates such broad issues as Jewish and/or Roman persecutions of the primitive Church and at the end of the investigation states that members of first Christian communities probably were not persecuted either by Jews or by Romans, and that the whole theme of persecutions may simply result from the awareness that “There is hardly anything more unifying than a common enemy” (p. 293). Conclusions that Kobel draws are to me somewhat misleading because the problem is not put properly. Considering first Christians’ persecutions one should not polarize the issue: either Roman or Jewish, but take into account that various forms of enmity against Christ-believers were not institutional but came from their families, neighbors, and local people. As to Jewish or Roman responsibility for Jesus’ death – the fact is that he was condemned and died on the cross – it was not a suicide but someone real murdered him. Hence, what Christian-believers commemorated during their Eucharistic meals were not just a question of “unifying idea of a common enemy”.

The last section of the monograph is an appendix dealing with the problem “Jesus on a diet?”. Kobel examines here Johannine narrative analyzing Jesus’ behavior around food and drink. She intends to answer the question: “why does the story never portray Jesus consuming food in its several meal scenes?” (p. 315). The only passage that openly indicates that Jesus consumed human nutrition is when he drank wine given to him immediately before he died on the cross. The Author rightly emphasizes that it is a feature indicating Jesus’ corporeality and humanity.

My overall assessment of the monograph is very positive. Esther Kobel did a great work and her doctoral thesis deserves our attention and appreciation. Johannine scholars and students can certainly find in it many inspiring thoughts.