

## The Agape<sup>1</sup> (Feasts)

What exactly did Jude have in mind when he wrote, “These men are blemishes at your love feasts, eating with you without the slightest qualm – shepherds who feed only themselves” (NIV Jude 12)? In particular what did he mean by “love feasts”?

This blog series will attempt to examine these and related questions. However as some of the necessary backdrop to our discussion we should first make a rough survey of what we later find in the early christian writings, and in other relevant texts.

By way of introduction, a suggestion of this blog series will be that even though there is a connection between Jude 12 and later christian writings, the connection is not as substantial as almost universally assumed and that far too much is read into the meaning of “*en tais agapais*”. There is quite an oddity to what Jude wrote and this oddity deserves considerable attention.

### *The Agape Meal in Later Writings*

“You must all follow the bishop as Jesus Christ (followed) the Father and (follow) the presbytery as the apostles; respect the deacons as the commandment of God. Let no one do anything apart from the bishop that has to do with the church. Let that be regarded as a valid eucharist [*eucharistia*] which is held under the bishop or to whomever he entrusts it. Where the bishop appears, there let the congregation be; just as wherever Jesus Christ is, there is the whole [*katholike*] church. It is not permissible apart from the bishop either to baptize [*baptizein*] or celebrate [*poiein*] the love-feast [*agapen*]; but whatever he approves is also pleasing to God, that everything you do may be sure and valid.”<sup>2</sup>

So wrote Ignatius early in the 2<sup>nd</sup> century A.D. in his letter to the Smyrnaeans. One of the intriguing questions concerning this very early reference to the “love-feast” outside of the New Testament is in what way were the “eucharist” and the “love-feast” related. Is the “feast” to be identified with the “eucharist”? Was one contained within the other or were they in some other way related? Certainly eucharistic celebrations and “love-feasts” are referred to as different entities in later writings, but was that the case with respect to Ignatius and the Smyrnaeans?

Tertullian writing in Latin towards the end of the 2<sup>nd</sup> century A.D. or at the beginning of the 3<sup>rd</sup> seemed to refer to them as separate practices when he wrote:

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<sup>1</sup> The Greek “agape” has a long “e” but is commonly written as in this heading.

<sup>2</sup> Ignatius, To the Smyrnaeans, 8.1,2 in **Ignatius of Antioch: A commentary on the letters of Ignatius of Antioch**, Schoedel, W.R., (ed.), Hermeneia - a critical and historical commentary on the Bible, Fortress, Philadelphia, PA, 1985, p. 238

“We take also, in meetings before daybreak, and from the hand of none but the presidents, the sacrament of the Eucharist [*eucharistiae sacramentum*], which the Lord both commanded to be eaten at meal-times [*in tempore uictus*], and enjoined to be taken by all (alike).”<sup>3</sup> And:

“Our dinner [*coena*] shows its idea in its name; it is called by the Greek name for love [*dilectio penes Graecos*]. Whatever the cost, it is gain to spend in piety’s name, for with the refreshment we help the needy ... We do not take our places at table until we have first tasted prayer to God. Only so much is eaten as satisfies hunger; only so much drunk as meets the need of the modest. They satisfy themselves only so far as men will who recall that even during the night they must worship God; they talk as those would who know the Lord listens. After water for the hands come the lights; and then each from what he knows of the Holy Scriptures, or from his own heart, is called before the rest to sing to God; so that is a test of how much he has drunk. Prayer in like manner ends the banquet [*convivium*].”<sup>4</sup>

Though in the second passage he doesn’t actually use the word “*agape*” it would appear that he had “*agape*” in mind. The descriptions he gives of the “sacrament of the Eucharist” and the “dinner” mark them out as distinctively different practices.

The apocryphal work, “The Epistle of the Apostles” possibly written sometime in the 2<sup>nd</sup> century A.D. also seems to indicate that “*agape*” meals were to be distinguished from whatever “celebration” was held that had its roots in the Last Passover meal. In the text, Jesus speaks of one of his apostles being thrown into prison then being released and then he says, “And when you have accomplished the memorial which is made of me, and the *Agape* (love-feast), he shall again be cast into prison.”<sup>5</sup> What is not clear however is the relationship between the two.

However what some called “*agape*” meals, at least in some places, were not above reproach. Clement of Alexandria writing around the same time as Tertullian is scathing in his comments on how some apply the word “*agape*” to their special meals. “Some, speaking with unbridled tongue, dare to apply the name *agape*, to pitiful suppers, redolent of savour and sauces. Dishonouring the good and saving work of the Word, the consecrated *agape*, with pots and pouring of sauce; and by drink and delicacies and smoke desecrating that name, they are deceived in their idea, having expected that the promise of God might be bought with suppers.”<sup>6</sup> And in another place he writes against the practices of the Carpocratians and their feasts [Latin: *coenas*] making references to “*agape*” as he does so. “These, so they say, and

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<sup>3</sup> Tertullian, On the soldier’s crown, 3.3,4 in **A New Eusebius**, , Stevenson, J. (ed.), S.P.C.K., London, 1965,, p. 183

<sup>4</sup> Tertullian, Apologeticus, XXXIX. 16 - 18 in **Tertullian Apology de Spectaculis Minucius Felix Octavius**, Glover, T.R. and Rendall, G.H. (trans.), Loeb Classical Library, No. 250, Heinemann, London, 1966, p. 181

<sup>5</sup> the Epistle of the Apostles 15, see <http://www.earlychristianwritings.com/text/apostolorum.html>

<sup>6</sup> Clement of Alexandria Paedagogus 2, see <http://www.newadvent.org/fathers/02092.htm>

certain other enthusiasts for the same wickednesses, gather together for feasts (I would not call their meeting an Agape), men and women together. After they have sated their appetites ("on repletion Cypris, the goddess of love, enters," as it is said), then they overturn the lamps and so extinguish the light that the shame of their adulterous "righteousness" is hidden, and they have intercourse where they will and with whom they will. After they have practiced [sic] community of use in this love-feast [agape], they demand by daylight of whatever women they wish."<sup>7</sup>

Origen however, writing in the first half of the 3<sup>rd</sup> century A.D., rises to the defence of the "love feast" in his dispute with Celsus, though from a legal point of view.<sup>8</sup> "The first point which Celsus brings forward, in his desire to throw discredit upon Christianity, is, that the Christians entered into secret associations with each other contrary to law, saying, that 'of associations some are public, and that these are in accordance with the laws; others, again, secret, and maintained in violation of the laws.' And his wish is to bring into disrepute what are termed the "love-feasts" of the Christians, as if they had their origin in the common danger, and were more binding than any oaths. Since, then, he babbles about the public law, alleging that the associations of the Christians are in violation of it." And a Canon of the Council of Gangra held between 325 and 381 AD, stated, "If anyone shall despise those who out of faith make love-feasts and invite the brethren in honour of the Lord, and is not willing to accept these invitations because he despises what is done, let him be anathema"<sup>9</sup>

However, having love-feasts in church buildings was soon outlawed. It would appear that the buildings having taken on a special religious character were regarded as inappropriate for holding meals which were probably being seen as more and more secular in character. The Synod of Hippo (393 A.D.): "It is not permitted to hold love feasts, as they are called, in the Lord's Houses, or Churches, nor to eat and to spread couches in the house of God."<sup>10</sup> And much later, the Trullian Council (692 A.D.): "It is not permitted to hold what are called Agapae, that is love-feasts, in the Lord's houses or churches, nor to eat within the house, nor to spread couches. If any dare to do so let him cease therefrom or be cut off."<sup>11</sup>

### *Early Christian Meals*

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<sup>7</sup> Clement of Alexandria Stromata 3.2.10, see <http://www.earlychristianwritings.com/text/clement-stromata-book3-english.html>

<sup>8</sup> Origen, **Against Celsus**, Book I, Ch. I, see <http://www.ccel.org/ccel/schaff/anf04.vi.ix.i.ii.html>

<sup>9</sup> Council of Gangra, Canon XI, see <http://www.ccel.org/ccel/schaff/npnf214.viii.v.iv.xi.html>

<sup>10</sup> Synod of Hippo, Canon XXIX, see note in <http://www.ccel.org/ccel/schaff/npnf214.xv.iv.iv.xliii.html>

<sup>11</sup> Trullian Council, Canon LXXIV, see <http://www.ccel.org/ccel/schaff/npnf214.xiv.iii.lxxv.html>

In addition to the references to “*agape*” meals, such as those above, the early literature post New Testament also contains references to the Christians having meals, without the meals being explicitly labelled as either “*agape*” or “Eucharistic” in character.

The letter of Pliny the younger, the governor of the Province of Bithynia, written around 112 A.D. to the emperor Trajan, reports on some of the behaviour of early believers. In it he writes “It was their habit on a fixed day to assemble before daylight and recite by turns a form of words to Christ as God; and that they bound themselves with an oath [*sacramentum*], not for any crime, but not to commit theft or robbery or adultery, not to break their word and not to deny a deposit when demanded. After this was done, their custom was to depart, and to meet again to take food, but ordinary and harmless food.”<sup>12</sup> One might want to call the meal these believers shared an “*agape*” meal but that would be to write that into the text.

Cyprian of Carthage, around the middle of the 3<sup>rd</sup> century A.D. wrote, “since this is a holiday rest, and a time of leisure, whatever remains of the day, now that the sun is sloping towards the evening, let us spend it in gladness, nor let even the hour of repast be without heavenly grace. Let the temperate meal resound with psalms; and as your memory is tenacious and your voice musical, undertake this office, as is your wont. You will provide a better entertainment for your dearest friends, if while we have something spiritual to listen to, the sweetness of religious music charms our ears.”<sup>13</sup> While the “holiday rest” may be a reference to a Sabbath of one sort or another, there is no explicit reference to the meal being either “*agape*” or “eucharistic”.

Minucius Felix (somewhere between 2<sup>nd</sup> to late 3<sup>rd</sup> century A.D.) writes of Christian banquets being not only temperate but modest unlike those of the Gentiles where sexual immorality was not uncommon.<sup>14</sup> The mention of “Christian banquets” could be a reference to “*agape*” meals though such is not explicit.

Whatever the relationship between the Eucharist and the “*agape*” meals, however this relationship developed and changed over time, whatever the nature of these “*agape*” meals and how this might have been different in different places and at different times, and whatever connection existed between these and other meals, the important question remains, how does any of this relate to the text in Jude 12?

### ***Jude 12***

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<sup>12</sup> Pliny, *Epistolae*, X. 96.7, 8 in **A New Eusebius**, Stevenson, J. (ed.), S.P.C.K., London, 1965, p. 14

<sup>13</sup> Cyprian, *Epistle 1, To Donatius*, 16, see [http://www.ssynaxis.org/cf/volume05/ECF05THE\\_EPISTLES\\_OF\\_CYPRIAN\\_00000022.htm](http://www.ssynaxis.org/cf/volume05/ECF05THE_EPISTLES_OF_CYPRIAN_00000022.htm)

<sup>14</sup> Minucius Felix, **Octavius**, Ch. XXXI, see <http://www.ccel.org/ccel/schaff/anfo4.iv.iii.xxxi.htm>

Acknowledging that there are some alternative readings, Jude 12a reads: “*Houtoi eisin hoi en tais agapais humon spilades suneuochoumenoi aphobos heautous poimainontes*”, which the NIV translates: “These men are blemishes at your love feasts, eating with you without the slightest qualm – shepherds who feed only themselves.” Similarly, the ESV: “These are blemishes on your love feasts as they feast with you without fear, looking after themselves” In both cases, “*spilades*” which on the surface seems to be a reference to “rocks over which the sea dashes”<sup>15</sup> has been rendered as “blemishes” the assumption presumably being that that “*spilos*” [blemish] is the noun involved rather than “*spilas*” . Given Jude 12b which refers to: “They are clouds without rain, blown along by the wind, autumn trees without fruit and uprooted – twice dead.” (NIV), it would not seem inappropriate to translate *spilades* in a way which refers to a physical entity such as rocks. Bauckham’s translation “These are people who feast with you at your fellowship meals without reverence, like dangerous reefs”<sup>16</sup> reflects this. (One should note at the same time that his reference to “fellowship meals” goes somewhat beyond, “*agapais*”.) The stance adopted in this paper is that the reference is to “rocks” rather than “blemishes”.

If we were to translate Jude 12a somewhat literally it could be rendered: “These are the ones, in your loves (?), sunken rocks, feasting together fearlessly, pasturing themselves.”

Leaving aside the problematic, “loves (?)” for the moment, we should notice how graphic the description Jude gives to these “certain men (who have) secretly slipped in amongst” (NIV) those to whom he is writing. Already in vv. 4 to 11 Jude’s description and identification of these people has been scathing, even frightening. Now in v. 12 our imagination is allowed to fill in the bare descriptions of them as dangerous rocks (that can cause the shipwreck of others), shepherds that feed only themselves (with no interest in helping the saints), clouds bringing no rain (people of no worth to others), simply blown along (they are under no control), trees without fruit (they have nothing to offer others) and blown over (essentially of no utter use) – twice dead (offering no life giving sustenance to others and no life within themselves?)

But what of “*agapais*” in the phrase, “*en tais agapais humon*” so commonly translated, “in/at/on your love feasts (or agape feasts)”? Does the phrase occur anywhere else in the New Testament? Unfortunately or otherwise, its only occurrence is in Jude 12 though there is some minor manuscript evidence that something like it occurs in 2 Peter 2: 13. The better attested reading there is, “*entrophontes en tais apatais auton suneuochoumenoi humin*.” [indulging in their deceits feasting with you], “*apatais*” [deceits] being preferred to “*agapais*”. Indeed there is minor manuscript evidence that “*apatais*” rather than “*agapais*”

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<sup>15</sup> Liddell, H.G. and Scott, R., “*spilas*” in **A Greek-English Lexicon**, 9<sup>th</sup> ed. with revised supplement, Clarendon, Oxford, 1968, p. 1628.

<sup>16</sup> Bauckham, R.J., **Jude, 2 Peter**, Word Biblical Commentary, volume 50, Word Books, Waco, TX, 1983, p. 77.

occurs at Jude 12. Bauckham suggests that the writer of 2 Peter purposefully alluded to the Jude text but by way of a deliberate pun.<sup>17</sup>

### Translating “*Agapais*” as Love Feasts?

So what does “*agapais*” mean in Jude 12 and how should it be translated? Though one is sorely tempted to make a reference in such a translation, to a meal in one form or another, “*agape*” of itself contains no such suggestion. Undoubtedly, the reference to “feasting together” indicates that some sort of meal is in mind. But it would not appear to be a simple meal. It is a feast. Is “*agape*” meant to behave as an adjective qualifying a noun something like, “feast” [*euochia*] - a noun that is assumed? This would make some sense. However, “*agape*” is itself a noun. The related adjective, “*agapetos*” does not appear in v. 12 and presumably does not do so because its use would have been inappropriate at that point.

Liddell and Scott give “*agape*”, in the plural, the secondary meaning of “love feast” but simply refer to the 2 Peter 2: 13 and Jude 12 passages in support of this claim.<sup>18</sup> In an earlier, abridgement of their work, which made no reference to these texts, the secondary meaning of “love feast” was again suggested but with the note that the derivation of this meaning was uncertain!<sup>19</sup> Uncertain indeed it is if in fact the claim is correct! It is probable that the only reason that the contributors had for assuming that there was a secondary meaning for “*agape*” that was equivalent to “love feast” and that this meaning was to be attached to “*agape*” as found in Jude 12 (and thought to be found in 2 Peter 2: 13) was the subsequent writings of the early christians! But claiming that “*agapais*” in Jude 12 refers to “love feasts” on this basis would be to assume beforehand what one is attempting to deduce. Furthermore, it should be recognised that “*agape*” even in the singular was, post Jude, sometimes understood to refer to a “love feast”. It did not have to be in the plural for the meaning of “*agape*” in certain contexts to appear to be such.

Moulton and Milligan while commenting on the rarity of “*agape*” in “profane” Greek (their words) fail to make any mention of “*agape*” as “love-feast”.<sup>20</sup> Stauffer in his only reference to “*agape*” in connection with “love-feast” remarks, “*Agape* becomes a

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<sup>17</sup> **ibid.**, p. 266.

<sup>18</sup> Liddell, H.G. and Scott, R., “*agape*” in **A Greek-English Lexicon**, *ibid.*, p. 6

<sup>19</sup> Liddell, H.G. and Scott, R., “*agape*” in **An Intermediate Greek-English Lexicon**, based upon the 7<sup>th</sup> ed. of the Greek-English Lexicon, Clarendon, Oxford, 1964, p. 4.

<sup>20</sup> Moulton, J.H. and Milligan, G., “*agape*” in **The Vocabulary of the Greek Testament**, Hodder and Stoughton, , London, 1930, p. 2

technical term for the fraternal love-feast which develops out of the beginnings of table fellowship”.<sup>21</sup> I think the emphasis should be on “*becomes*” a technical term.

The reality is that there is no compelling reason why “*agapais*” in Jude 12 should be translated “love-feast”. Jude refers to “love” (plural) in the context of feasting, but why does one have to translate the noun as though it is co-joined with another noun?

### **Translating “*Agapais*” as Loves?**

One supposes that the main reason for not translating “*agapais*” as “loves” is that as such it would not make sense in English! Perhaps we need to propose however, that “*agapais*”, appearing in isolation as it does in the Greek, is an oddity even from a Greek point of view. And if this is so, what are we to make of this oddity?

Perhaps, Jude was simply being subtle. Throughout the letter his language is extravagant in character, verse 12 being no exception. And even if “*euochia*” or something similar is to be assumed, Jude could be indicating that behind their “loves” there was not all that much love, not the love of which God would approve. What is being proposed here is that by simply referring to “*agape*” without explicitly mentioning “feast” or “dinner” or “banquet” Jude is highlighting that their “*agape*” was a so-called “*agape*” but not in reality an “*agape*” event. It seems to be more faithful to the text to not refer to “*agapais*” as “love feasts” but to restrict the translation to something akin to simply “loves” or, to make a little more sense, something like “love events”. At least “love events” allows for something more to be said about these events. The heading for this blog series, “The Agape [Feasts]” acknowledges that the common reference is to “the agape feasts” but it is intended by the use of the parentheses to cast some doubt on the appropriateness of introducing the term “feasts”. It is arguable that by not introducing the word, “feasts” we are more able to see what Jude is actually trying to do at this point in his letter.

It is suggested here that Jude’s subtlety amounts to his using a form of irony or even sarcasm. Either the number of people, whose character and behaviour are so scathingly outlined, is not small or if they are few in number their presence and the effect of their presence is quite marked. It is not that everyone at these meals is behaving improperly it is simply that the improper behaviour is dominant. Consequently, these “*agape*” events, as a whole are themselves called into question as to whether they really are “*agape*”. “*Agape*” might be what they these events were supposed to be but overwhelmingly they were not. They can only be referred to ironically or even sarcastically as “*agape*”. If the Greek had been written as, “*agapais* feasts” then there would be no suggestion of irony or sarcasm. The absence of a noun accompanying “*agapais*” creates an oddity – an oddity which can be understood as a device for conveying such as irony or sarcasm.

### **The Agape of Jude 12**

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<sup>21</sup> Stauffer, E., “*agapao*, *agape*, *agapetos*” in **Theological Dictionary of the New Testament**, Kittel, G. (ed.), Bromiley, G.W. (trans and ed.), Volume 1, Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, MI, 1964, pp. 21- 55, see p. 55.

Thus Jude 12a could be rendered in an expanded paraphrase: “These are the ones, in your so-called loving events, who should be recognised by you as dangerous shoals able to make shipwreck of your faith, feasting with one another, without any regard for you or for God, simply feeding themselves, satisfying their own sensuous desires.”

In this text what type of “agape” does Jude have in mind - the “agape” their meals should have displayed? There are seven uses of an “agape” or related term in the letter. The recipients are described as loved (*agapemenois*) by/in God (v. 1). Three times Jude uses the adjective “*agapetos*” (vv. 3, 17, 20) in addressing them, either a reference again to God’s love for them or Jude’s loving disposition towards them or both. Three times the noun “agape” is used (vv. 2, 12, 21). The first and last references relate to the love of or from God. With so much emphasis on God’s love for them one might expect that in v. 12, the reference again has to be in terms of that same love - God’s love. Yet such an understanding at first glance, does not seem to fit the context. Perhaps this is an additional feature that Jude has used to indicate that his reference to “agape” in v. 12 is ironic or even sarcastic. The love that God has for them is uppermost in his thinking and perhaps his perspective is that the “agape” that is the subject of verse 12 should have been characterised by an appreciation of that love perhaps with the concomitant result that they genuinely deeply loved one another. To the contrary, each individual member of a significant group, in a corrupt way, “loved” himself or herself immensely. The “agape” events are simply so-called “agape” events but holistically they are not the real thing! Overall, the events do not display an appreciation of God’s love for the participants nor do they display what should have followed – a genuine deep seated love for one another.

### ***Jude 12 and the Early Christian Writings***

The one clear thing that connects this text with the writings of the early Fathers etc. is the use of “*agape*” on its own rather than “*agape*” linked with a noun. For example, Ignatius simply refers to “*agapen*”. Tertullian contrasts “the Greek name of love” with the Latin, “*coena*” [dinner]. The Epistle of the Apostles refers to “*agape*” only. Clement of Alexandria has only to refer to “*agape*”. The use of “*agape*” in these and other texts, in isolation from another noun seems a reasonably clear indication that the Jude 12 text lies behind what came to be the common way of referring to the love meal/dinner/feast of the Christians. As Stauffer claims (see above), “*agape*” (in either singular or plural form), in certain contexts, came to have a technical usage.

What cannot be established is that these “love-feasts” mentioned post New Testament carry the same meaning that Jude intended when he wrote “*en tais agapais*”. If the proposition is correct that Jude is using irony or even sarcasm, the writers in many or most instances would surely want to have distanced themselves from what Jude was intending to convey anyway!

What did these later writers and those whom they wrote about understand by the use of the word, “*agape*” in the technical sense of “*agape* feasts”? Was it understood by some as encompassing love for the poor? There are references in the early christian texts to food being distributed to the poor in association with meals enjoyed by believers. (See the

Tertullian text above and its reference to helping the needy). Of course, there is no hint in Jude 12 that the poor are in mind. Was it love for one another that was dominant in their understanding of “love” in the “*agape*” meals of the post New Testament era? Was there much love displayed? Was it God’s love for them or their love for God that was uppermost in their thinking? Or in some instances was the “*agape*” meal seen as simply an enjoyable social event? Surely the answers to these questions would vary depending on the particular meal.

Whatever was meant by the “*agape*” meals in the post New Testament writings it is arguable that Jude 12 *ostensibly* had a focus on the love that believers were to have towards one another, a love arising out of an appreciation of God’s love for them. The problem was that genuine brotherly love was not the dominant feature of the meals to which Jude referred.

It is simply not possible to ascertain how the the “*agape*” meals of the early post New Testament Christians reflected anything of the meals referred to in Jude. One small part of the reality may be that while the post New Testament meals seem to have had a certain formality about them, the “*agape*” meals that Jude refers to may have had little formality or structure to them at all. We cannot know one way or another.

### ***Concluding Remarks***

Whatever conclusions we come to about what Jude intended to mean in v. 12 we should be careful not to claim too much for what seems to have been a fairly regular meal held at some place or another, in which some believers and some others took part. Appealing to later writings in order to elucidate the character of these meals is not at all helpful. It is likely only to be misleading.

The temptation however has been to read back into the earlier text, a temptation succumbed to by many. The oddity of Jude using “*agapais*” without an accompanying noun needs to be recognised as a feature of Jude and attempts to understand what Jude is doing need to be made without appealing to later writings. While this oddity serves to indicate an historical connection between the “*agapais*” of Jude and the “love feasts” of post New Testament writings, it needs to be recognised and understood without appeal to that material.

As just one example of where our temptations have led us, Bauckham, for all that is worthy in his commentary, surely says far too much when he writes with respect to, “*en tais agapais humon*”, “This is the earliest occurrence of the term “agape” in the sense of Christian fellowship meals”<sup>22</sup>. Jude is obviously making a reference to some meals in which believers and others, for which the term, “believers” seems utterly inappropriate, participated, but to what extent these meals are to be identified as “fellowship” meals is highly problematic. There is no evidence that at these meals, there was the fellowship (*koinonia*) spoken of in Acts 2: 42. To the contrary, while “feasting” characterised the meals that Jude refers to, the very early believers simply “broke bread”.<sup>23</sup> Unfortunately, Bauckham compounds the

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<sup>22</sup> **ibid.**, p. 84.

problem as he continues, writing in the same place, “It is equivalent to the ... term “the Lord’s Supper”. “The Lord’s Supper”!? How extraordinary! But that leads us to another story. And one already partly told elsewhere.

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<sup>23</sup> See an earlier blog series, entitled, “They devoted themselves ... to the breaking of bread”.