Symposion and Philanthropia in Plutarch

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The reading of texts at the Graeco-Roman symposium and in the Christian gathering

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Abstract
Classical scholars who researched the topic of the activities taking place at Graeco-Roman banquets, extensively described the artistic presentations that accompanied eating and drinking. They have paid much attention to the singing, dancing and dramatic performances given at banquets. Less attention has been given to the subject of public reading in the context of the after-dinner symposium. The custom of reading literary works at symposia is well attested in the symposiastic literature of the first and the second centuries CE. Plutarch’s *Moralia* are one of the more important sources that attest the reading of literature at the Graeco-Roman symposium. In the late 90s it has been argued by several scholars that the early Christian communities during their weekly gatherings followed the same pattern of Graeco-Roman dining. This paper seeks to argue that the reading of texts in the early Christian gathering is the historical counterpart of the reading of texts at the Graeco-Roman symposium.

Introduction

Classical scholars have carefully investigated the activities that accompanied Graeco-Roman banquets and the entertainment and artistic contributions that surrounded the eating and drinking. They have paid much attention to the singing, dancing and dramatic performances given at banquets. However, they have taken less interest in the subject of the public reading of literary texts in the context of the after-dinner symposium. The custom of reading literary works at symposia is well attested in the symposiastic literature of the first and second centuries CE. Plutarch’s *Moralia* is one of the more important sources for our knowledge about the reading of literature at the symposium. In the late 90’s of the last century, several scholars have convincingly shown that the weekly gatherings held by early Christian communities conformed to the custom of many voluntary associations in the Graeco-Roman world which would gather periodically for a supper and a symposium. However, it has not been argued sufficiently and in detail that various elements of the Christian gatherings such as reading of Scripture, preaching and singing have their origins in customs practised at Graeco-Roman banquets. This paper tries to argue that the reading of texts in the early Christian gathering is the historical counterpart of the reading of texts at the Graeco-Roman symposium.

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