



EATING THE GOSPEL: FOOD FOR THOUGHT IN ROMANOS THE MELODIST

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ABSTRACT

A series of seven interconnected meditations reflects on what eating, drinking, and tasting could mean for Christian theologizing. What might be the ecological implications of a theology that takes eating and digestion more seriously? The reflections are carried out in company with Romanos the Melodist and the broader Romanos tradition.

KEYWORDS

Romanos the Melodist; eating; drinking; dualism; ecology

I

I have to eat and drink. To live is to consume nutrients and water. No one can avoid it. These things characterize every living creature. The philosopher Aristotle imagined that there were different kinds of souls among beings—plants, animals, and humans—but what they all shared was the need for nourishment.¹ They all need to eat and drink. Nourishment, then, is a basic necessity of the soul. And for the late ancient poet Romanos the Melodist, eating is believing.

Romanos has been a celebrated and canonized hymnographer since his lifetime in the sixth century. In an anonymous kontakion written for the commemoration of St Romanos himself, a later poet writes:

The righteous [Romanos] flourished in the world like a date palm,
with the sweet fruit of song, which is eaten insatiably.
And from his tongue, as the writing says,
gushed honey and milk, the stuff that Scripture suckles.

1 Aristotle, *On the Soul* II.

He distributed teaching in abundance
to all the hungry, a food of beauty;
he offered an inexhaustible table of grace.²

Romanos was a palm tree that provided dates for the world; indeed, he provided milk and honey in cooperation with Scripture. His sweetness adds to biblical sweetness. With the ironic twist in this piece, the Melodist's own tongue provides sweet taste for other tongues to indulge, food for other mouths to swallow. It is almost as if he were a bird feeding his chicks from his own beak.

Romanos's characters are creatures of longing; they yearn to see, to touch, to kiss and, not least, they hunger and thirst for sweetness.³ His songs imagine sensual desire to be religious desire. The Melodist has a developed language of eating and drinking, of anticipated meals and enjoyable feasts. He thinks with the material world and is deeply rooted in sensual reality. With the staging of gustatory expectations and excitement, the kontakia invite the listener to long with the characters. In the famous first Nativity hymn the singer exclaims:

there [in Bethlehem] an undug well was discovered,
from which David yearned to drink;
there a virgin who gave birth to a baby,
quenched both Adam's and David's thirst.⁴

Those who sing with Romanos, thirst for the Virgin and her Son, a secret well, hidden in a cave, in the deep flesh of the Mother. As they sing or listen, they surrender themselves to their own senses, urges, and what Patricia Cox Miller calls their "corporeal imagination."⁵

II

In Romanos's telling, the harlot who anointed Christ is bursting with erotic love for the man she is about to massage, longing for intimacy with him. But she is also hungry when she physically meets Christ at the table. Imagined as a life-changing event, their encounter responds to all her yearnings:

2 Anonymous, *On Saint Romanos* 1. This and other Romanos translations are, unless otherwise noted, from Thomas Arentzen, *Romanos the Melodist: Songs about Women* (Dumbarton Oaks Medieval Library 83. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2024).

3 For a study of taste in Romanos, see Thomas Arentzen, "Struggling with Romanos's 'Dagger of Taste,'" in *Knowing Bodies, Passionate Souls: Sense Perceptions in Byzantium*, ed. Susan Ashbrook Harvey and Margaret Mullett (Washington DC: Dumbarton Oaks Byzantine Symposia and Colloquia, 2017), 169–82; for other desires, see Thomas Arentzen, "Sex and the City: Intercourse in Holy Week," *Journal of Early Christian Studies* 28, no. 1 (2020): 115–47; for the intersection of eating, other desires, and compunction, see Andrew Mellas, *Liturgy and the Emotions in Byzantium: Compunction and Hymnody* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020), 97–103.

4 Romanos, *On the Nativity (Mary and the Magi)* 1.

5 Patricia Cox Miller, *The Corporeal Imagination: Signifying the Holy in Late Ancient Christianity* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2009).

The scent from the table of Christ excited
 the straying woman who was now steadfast,
 in the beginning a dog, in the end a lamb,
 a slave and a daughter, both harlot and chaste.
 So, in greedy pursuit, she arrives at the table
 and forsaking the crumbs underneath, she takes up the bread.
 Hungrier than the Canaanite woman once was,
 she fed her empty soul, and thus she believed.⁶

The harlot catches the scent of bread, and as elsewhere, eucharistic imagery breaks into the narrative; her appetite is aroused by the tickling of her senses. Body and soul collapse into one as she feeds her soul by corporeal eating; profane and religious realms cannot be distinguished as hunger and eating are identified with believing. For Romanos, faith is not a cognitive process; it does not emerge from rational deliberation. Faith is a bodily craving, a natural hunger.

The poet chose to stage another New Testament woman too in his poetry, one who is already immersed in yearning, namely the Samaritan woman. Her desire consists of thirst:

By [Christ's] words the Samaritan was inflamed with thirst,
 and the order was reversed: she who offered water first
 was now thirsting, and he who thirsted from the start, suddenly offers it.
 She falls down before him: "Give me your water, sir,
 so I need no longer run to this well!"

[Christ replies:]

"I won't censure your thirst, I who with thirst drew you to thirsting.
 I acted out thirst, and I did feel thirsty,
 to show you your thirsting."⁷

For the poet, the encounter between a Samaritan woman and a Jewish man at a well offers the possibility for an intricate dialogue of thirst. Christ, who was originally thirsty, creates thirst in her. They both thirst, albeit in different ways. Thirst pulls him to her, but thirst is also what eventually pulls her back to him and his living water. She is then ready to drink his water. His thirst meets hers. Her water his.

Both these women abandon their other men or lovers to embrace Christ, but their encounters are not imagined as conversions into a community or as acceptance of certain dogma. They find Christ in their hunger and in their thirst. God longs for bodies as bodies long for God.

6 Romanos, *On the Harlot* 3.

7 Romanos, *On the Samaritan Woman* 10–11.

And what Romanos presents are not allegories, not physical symbols of an altogether different spiritual world. The hunger is concrete—and corporeal; the thirst is concrete—and corporeal; and both color the broader desire for intimacy. Romanos follows the logic of the Eucharist (if I may call it that): the chalice holds bread and wine—but at the same time it holds body and blood. Bread and wine do not symbolize Christ in any semiotic sense; a desire for communion, is a desire for both: body and bread, blood and wine.

The faithful, with all their desires and needs, may be “depicted in true colors,” the poet says, by the harlot and the Samaritan woman with their respective hunger and thirst.

III

Now, one might ask: Why does this matter? Why do we have to talk about taste, about eating, drinking, and all those bodily senses and cravings? Materiality has been on scholars’ lips for decades already. Why do we care? An immediate answer has to do with the dualism of Western modernity, which may have its roots somewhere in antiquity, but which crystalizes with Cartesian philosophy and its mechanistic worldview. This dualism threatens to divorce the rational spiritual realm from the material sensual realm. Everything material is subject to the jurisdiction of rational thought. Animals, plants, and babies are irrational and thus they ultimately lack any real value. After such a divorce—which has arguably, at least to a certain degree, taken place in modernity—the material world is left dead and void.

In the current moment of ecological crisis, a devaluation of everything beyond the human spirit or rationality represents a fatal move. If the material world is, as it were, empty, there is no reason for us to care about the creation around us, for as long as it is irrational—or not as rational as humans are—it carries no weight. This line of thinking has led us moderns to inflict enormous amounts of suffering on other animals. This line of thinking ultimately makes the Incarnation superfluous. This line of thinking does not make us good readers of Byzantine texts, either. And, in fact, with this line of thinking, there is no reason for us to care about our human bodies and our senses, for they are as material and empty as the rest of creation.

But is this the kind of creation God made? An empty void? Was that not what came before creation, when the earth was formless and void? Did God not create precious creatures? In his first *Hexaemeron* homily, Basil of Caesarea meditates on creation. He notes: “Take away black, cold, weight, density, the qualities which concern taste ... and the phenomenon itself vanishes.”⁸ For Basil, we *are* these qualities; we do not hide behind them, as spirits that happen to be draped in matter. Creation is these various forms and qualities.

8 Basil, *Hexaemeron* I 8.20–28; trans. from NPNF II, vol. 8.

Our material bodies, like the lilies of the field—variously ensouled—lean into God.

IV

Eating and drinking bring about change. Drinking changes people. Some of Romanos's women find themselves intoxicated or unable to behave in a sober way. It is not a question of drinking per se, but of reaching an emotional climax, a point where drunkenness is the only suitable metaphor, finding oneself beyond rational control.

When Anna, the Virgin's mother, has given birth, she feels woozy and identifies herself with the Old Testament Hannah, Samuel's mother, who in a similar situation prayed in a frenzy, ecstatically but silently—in a way that made the priest Eli think she was drunk:

“You have heard me, Master, like the Anna [i.e. Hannah] whom Eli accused of drunkenness.

She promised Samuel to the Lord as a priest
when he was born. Like her I have now
received your gift”⁹

Anna is not the only one who borders on intoxication. The harlot who anointed Christ, finds herself in the same influenced state, not drunk, but clearly not sober, overwhelmed by divine grace:

“My God is staying in the house of Simon.
I shall hurry to him and weep like Anna in her barrenness.
Though Simon may think I am drunk,
as Eli once thought Hannah; I too will continue praying
in silence, calling out ...”¹⁰

Her sobriety is drunk. Her silence is calling out. Her piety is her desire.

While these two women were paradoxically self-contained in their intoxication, the Samaritan woman does not stay silent. She returns from the well and rowdily shouts to the folks back in town:

She thirsts, yet pours till it spills, hasn't drunk, but offers a drink,
has not tasted, but shouts like a drunk to her compatriots,
“Come, see the stream that I have discovered!”¹¹

Romanos gestures toward holy folly, the ability to love in irrational ways and move beyond the boundaries of cerebral human sobriety. Drinking is believing. Maybe not literally, but at least in simile, as if...

9 Romanos, *On the Nativity of the Theotokos* 6.

10 Romanos, *On the Harlot* 8.

11 Romanos, *On the Samaritan Woman* 2.

V

The Byzantine intellectual Michael Psellos (ca. 1018–1081) was also a poet. In a short epigram he begged the Theotokos to grant him an inspiration comparable to the one she had once bestowed upon Romanos:

To Romanos, Lady, your worshipper of old,
 you gave a written document to eat;
 now fill my cup, O Virgin, to the brim
 with the sweet vintage drafts of wisdom.¹²

Psellos's piece, of course, refers to the legend about the young untalented Romanos, whose voice was hoarse and tone-deaf: One Christmas night, the Mother of God appeared to him and offered him a scroll to eat. Having swallowed it, he brimmed with song, and his famous Christmas hymn flowed from his lips.¹³ He ate and turned to song. In a way he became song, at least to posterity. Eating is transformation. As is drinking. Or so Psellos believed.

The modern theorist Mikhail Bakhtin thought of eating in grotesque terms. He writes: "In the act of eating, the body transgresses . . . its own limits: it swallows, devours, rends the world apart, is enriched and grows at the world's expense."¹⁴ Eating shows us a world in flux, a world in which one becomes the other, where one being is merged into another.

Plenty of transformative devouring takes place in Romanos's poetry. According to one resurrection hymn, the monstrous Hades gulps down Christ in his belly:

Hades takes Christ like any of the earthborn;
 he swallows the heavenly bread like a bait
 and gets wounded by the hook of divinity.
 With a tormented voice Hades cries out:
 "I am pierced in the stomach; I can't digest the one I've swallowed;
 what I've eaten has become strange food for me.

...

I vomit out Christ and all who belong to him."¹⁵

So all the dead are puked out from Hades' belly, and the untasteful scene transforms the monster figure into an empty shell. In the next stanzas,

12 For the Greek text, see José Grosdidier de Matons, *Romanos le Mélode et les origines de la poésie religieuse à Byzance* (Paris: Beauchesne, 1977), 190; trans. Paul Magdalino, "The Liturgical Poetics of an Elite Religious Confraternity," in *Reading in the Byzantine Empire and Beyond*, ed. Teresa Shawcross and Ida Toth (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018), 126. Magdalino is not convinced that Psellos is the author of this poem.

13 Thomas Arentzen, *The Virgin in Song: Mary and the Poetry of Romanos the Melodist* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2017), especially 1–6. We do not know when this legend first started circulating, but the epigram seems to presuppose an already existing story.

14 Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, trans. Helene Iswolsky (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1968), 281.

15 Romanos, *On the Resurrection (Adam and Hades)* 7–9; my trans.

Hades lies naked on the ground, derided. Eating is not a risk-free activity. Hades is transformed into a victim of his own consumption.

VI

We do not have to read eating grotesquely. Annemarie Mol approaches it differently. She writes:

I eat an apple. Is the agency in the *I* or in the *apple*? I eat, for sure, but without apples before long there would be no “I” left. And it is even more complicated. For how to separate us out to begin with, the apple and me? One moment this may be possible: here is the apple, there am I. But a little later (bite, chew, swallow) I have become (made out of) apple; while the apple is (a part of) me. *Transubstantiation*. What about that for a model to think with?¹⁶

Eating is literally a transformative process, where plants and animals become me as I swallow, or I become them if they swallow me. As Mol says elsewhere, “My food transubstantiates me.”¹⁷ In our need for eating or taking nourishment, God reveals that beings and species depend on each other and belong to each other and share in each other’s existences and agencies. Eating shows us that we are not independent, not individuals, not any of those modern human mythological names that we have given to ourselves. “To live,” says the American poet Wendell Berry, “we must daily break the body and shed the blood of Creation.”¹⁸ We are all deeply interwoven. And, of course, this is also the secret of the eucharistic communion: We are given a body, that is seen and tasted, to be corporeally eaten.¹⁹

When Jesus is walking toward the cross, he is facing a human death, a bodily transformation and disintegration, nailed to a tree, pierced. But Romanos lets him speak with his mother as he walks, and he describes his own bodily conception saying to her:

Don’t let the day of my passion seem bitter;
for this I came down from heaven—sweet, like manna,
not on Mount Sinai, but in your belly.
Within it I was curdled, as David foretold. Think, noble one,
of the curdled mountain. I am here,
for as Word I became flesh in you.
In that, I suffer, and in that, I save.²⁰

16 Annemarie Mol, “I Eat an Apple. On Theorizing Subjectivities,” *Subjectivity* 22 (2008): 30.

17 Annemarie Mol, *Eating in Theory* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2021), 44.

18 Wendell Berry, *The Gift of Good Land: Further Essays Cultural and Agricultural* (New York: North Point Press, 1981), 281.

19 For a sacramental Orthodox eco-theology, see John Chryssavgis, *Creation as Sacrament: Reflections on Ecology and Spirituality* (London: T&T Clark, 2019), esp. 125–8; for similar thoughts in a very different register, see Catherine Keller, “Tingles of Matter, Tangles of Theology,” in *Entangled Worlds: Religion, Science, and New Materialisms*, ed. Catherine Keller and Mary-Jane Rubenstein (New York: Fordham University Press, 2017), 111–35.

20 Romanos, *On the Way to Golgotha* 6.

This stanza is dense. Christ himself is stretched out between sweet and bitter, between Old Testament food and New Testament nourishment. It describes a transformative curdling in the flesh of Mary—just before the transformation in the crucifixion. Christ’s “curdling” feeds on an ancient idea of conception which goes back at least to Aristotle:²¹ as rennin curdles milk into cheese, semen curdles female fluidity into flesh. Romanos finds this process prophesied in Psalm 67.16 (LXX). As Christ is approaching the sacrifice in this kontakion, the poet subtly brings taste to mind. The listener is brought beyond the bitterness of suffering to the sweetness of his cheese, via the manna. The song fuses the Incarnation and the eucharistic transformation into a single gustatory movement.

Another kontakion tells of Christ’s birth. The Mother of God proudly holds her Son:

The [Virgin] Vine held in her arms, as in branches,
the Cluster of Grapes she grew without cultivation
and said, “You are my fruit!”²²

The imagery is joyful here at the outset—fruit is brought forth to the world, the sweet grapes that Mary holds in her arms. Jesus comes with a delightful taste. But eventually the Christ child has to tell her about his own suffering and death. And this, of course, scares his mother:

She cried, “My sweet Bunch of Grapes, don’t let the lawless crush you!”²³

But the listeners know that he must be crushed, as a winemaker would know that the grapes must be crushed in order for wine to be made. Romanos compares Christ’s crucifixion to the crushing of grapes. Without him saying so, then, his audience might understand that the violent destruction would eventually yield wine.

Central to the Christian understanding of the Eucharist is the common wisdom that we are what we eat. Without this insight, the chalice would not make the faithful participate in the body and blood of Christ. The Eucharist, like language, is a profound instance of transformation. Yeast and humans transform plants into bread and wine. The Spirit, in turn, transforms the transformed plants and fungus into body and blood. And by eating, Christian humans are transformed as participants in the transformed transformation. We become what we eat. Romanos became song. And palm dates.

21 Aristotle, *Generation of Animals* 1.20; for Romanos’s and other uses of the “curdled mountain,” see Ephrem Lash, “Mary in Eastern Church Literature,” in *Mary in Doctrine and Devotion: Papers of the Liverpool Congress, 1989, of the Ecumenical Society of the Blessed Virgin Mary*, ed. Alberic Stockpoole (Dublin: Columba Press, 1990), 70–1.

22 Romanos, *On the Nativity (Mary with Adam and Eve)* 1.

23 Romanos, *On the Nativity (Mary with Adam and Eve)* 17.

VII

“To eat is to savor *and* struggle with the mystery of creatureliness,” says Norman Wirzba.²⁴ To consider the religious significance of taste, food, and nourishment ultimately means to consider how devotion emerges from the depths of our embodied human state. In a sound Christian anthropology, there is hunger in the soul and faith in the body. Romanos taught this to our ancestors long before Descartes learned to say ‘cogito.’

It is also to consider how other bodies intersect with our bodies, and vice versa. This is the mystery of the Eucharist: the cheese in the mountain of flesh, the fruit crushed, the fungus of fermentation multiplying when eating the sweetness of the grapes and the grains, the divine and the wine, the communion of transformation. The Eucharist indicates our fundamental dependence on God, but also our radical dependence on other beings. Eating we participate in them, remaining in communion with them, as we partake of the body and blood.

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²⁴ Norman Wirzba, *Food and Faith: A Theology of Eating* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 4.

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