Exploring the modern roots of how we perceive the Last Supper and a comparison with the ancient way

I have given considerable thought to what might be the roots of our modern perception of the Last Supper. Curiosity drove me to do an online exploration of artists' paintings of the Last Supper. I don't think I have plumbed the depths of the topic but I have looked at the artists' renditions of Duccio (1308-1311), Andrea del Castegno (c. 1421-1457), Domenico Ghirlandaio (1480), Leonardo Da Vinci (1495-1498), Hans Holbein the Younger (1524-1525), Willem Key (1550-1560), Titian (1557 & 1564), Juan de Juanes (1560s), Tintoretto (1594), Juan de Sevilla Romero (17th century), Peter Paul Rubens (1632), Frans Pourbus (1569-1622), Nicholas Poussin (1640-1649), and J. Baptist (1678).

Our church here in Quakertown, for the last fifteen years running, has re-enacted the Last Supper on Maundy Thursday of each year. But a few years ago a friend in our church, who himself is intimately involved in that re-enactment, asked me if they could "improve" their presentation by making the re-enactment "more accurately reflective of the time of Jesus"? I told him I would explore the matter. During our church's rendition each of the disciples arises to give his "speech" about how he followed Jesus during his ministry and ends with his question to the Lord's statement that someone is going to betray him. Each disciple asks, "Is it I, Lord?"

By far, the most famous artist illustrating the Last Supper, is Leonardo Da Vinci. One can see the visuals in that meal including the prominently displayed table cloth on which the utensils and vessels are placed. The re-enactment works perfectly for our purposes because each "actor" is able to get up, look at the one playing the role of Jesus, and yet still face the congregation, and give his entire presentation as if he were on a stage with all its props.

In Da Vinci's portrayal, the table cloth is quite prominent

(See: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Last_Supper_(Leonardo_da_Vinci)

Has more recent art influenced how we think the actual Last Supper actually happened?

Of all of the above artists I found the interpretations of the Last Supper (1640-1649) and the Eucharist (1647) by Nicholas Poussin one of the most interesting. This is because both paintings match more closely than any of the others to what I know of first century dining and therefore, to how the Last Supper might have been before Jesus' crucifixion.   Notice that in all three the triclinium mode is the preferred choice of depicting the Last Supper and Jesus' anointing.

However, I recommended to my friend at the church that, to accomplish what the church wanted to do, the best way would be to continue with the re-enactment of Da Vinci Last Supper because there would be problems presenting to a congregation the individual speeches since some of the disciples, using the first century rendition, would have their backs to the audience. But, aside from that, there are many things about the medieval and Renaissance paintings that do not reflect accurately how the Jews in the time of Jesus would have done it.

Sacrament of Penance by N. Poussin

the artist has used artistic license in depicting the table cloth, the vessels and utensils. Even if one keys into the computer "triclinium" one must use the finds critically. When we look at what has been preserved we notice that in the actual structures, the tables are small, and in the murals they are never depicted with cloth coverings.

Two examples of the remains of a triclinium at Pompeii

The safest way to judge the dining of the first century is to employ archaeology and stick to the murals found in Pompeii. Tables with wooden legs were burned due to the volcano in 79 AD (Pompeii & Herculaneum) and the ravages of time wherein organics—such as wood, cloth, and other perishable items—and are no longer available to give us a truly accurate picture of dining in the first century.

The Feast of Trimalchio, wall mural, Pompeii
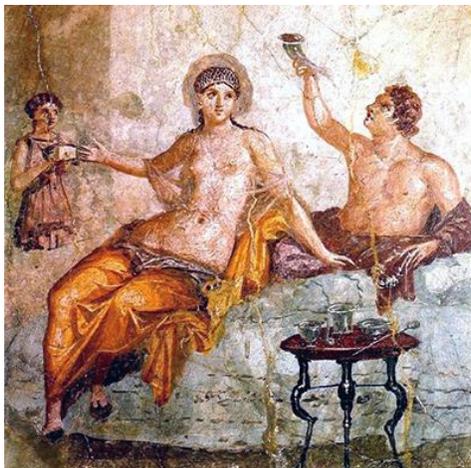
(See: https://domusromana.es/?page_id=661)

Notice the two small round tables with three legs in the mural of the Feast of Trimalchio, and the single table in the mural directly above. Since these were wooden, they did not survive the volcano of Vesuvius in 79 AD. Notice also that in the mural there is no cloth covering any of the wooden tables. And, again, in the following photo of a triclinium at Pompeii, the small round stone table in the center on which the utensils and food would be placed.

Dining in Jerusalem

But one may argue, "The Last Supper was not held in Pompeii, but rather in Jerusalem." I have no problem with that argument. However, little would have changed except for the application of Jewish laws of kashrut in vogue in the first century Jerusalem. The Jews would have preferred the use of stoneware, stone vessels, and stone tables because stone is eternally incorruptible. Nahman Avigad found the following single pedestal stone table in the "Burnt Quarter" (first century Jewish quarter) in Jerusalem. It is about 2 feet by 3 feet on a side.
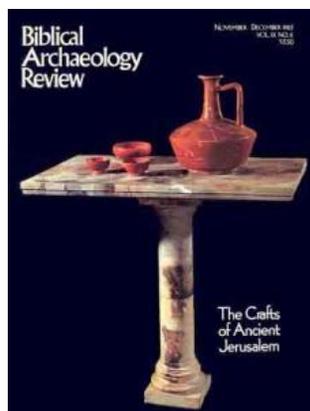
But he also found round table tops of stone remarkably like those depicted in Pompeii.

(See: http://www.baslibrary.org/biblical-archaeology-review/9/6/3)
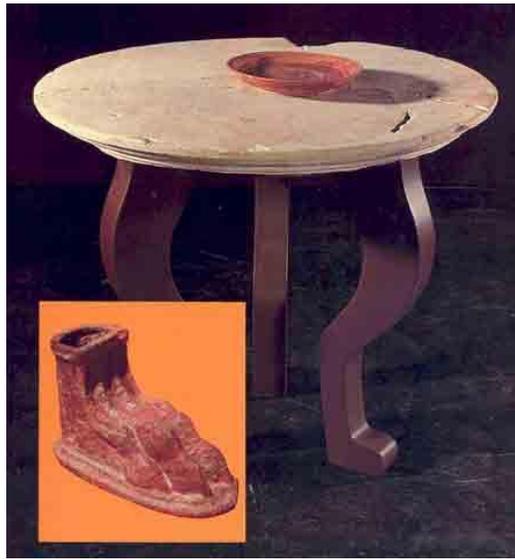
The following **artist's reconstruction** of the ancient way of dining is probably the most accurate interpretation I have discovered in my research. The following illustrates it best:

Notice that the table in this case is rectangular and is not covered with cloth. See:
http://tweedlandthegentlemansclub.blogspot.com/2011/09/triclinium-roman-dining-room.html

At dinners food and drink were normally served by women or slaves (sorry ladies, it was a "man's world" back then).   In ancient Palestine women were the ones who went to the well to draw the water. So the following scripture about where the Last Supper should be held is very interesting: The disciples ask Jesus: "Where will you have us prepare it? He said to them, 'Behold, when you have entered the city, *a*

man carrying a jar of water will meet you; follow him into the house which he enters, and tell the householder, The Teacher says to you, Where is the guest room where I am to eat the Passover with my disciples?" (Luke 22: 9-11). What? A *man* carrying water? How odd!! Dr. Eliyahu Lizorkin-Eyzenberg, of the Israel Study Center, (Israel Bible Institute, Tel Mond, Israel) has made an interesting suggestion explaining this. It was known that there was an Essene Quarter in first century Jerusalem and the entry to that area of Jerusalem was by the "Essene Gate." Dr. Lizorkin-Eyzenberg has thus suggested that the man was an Essene because some of that sect did not affiliate with women, leaving the men to do the jobs that first century women would normally do. The Essenes were among the most conservative of all Jewish sects but I have never been able to find any reference to the use of a tablecloth in their literature either from the Dead Sea Scrolls or from the Damascus Document. Have I missed it?

Robert Eisenman, in his book **JAMES THE BROTHER OF JESUS…,** on page 101, mistakenly and misleadingly uses the word "tablecloth" to translate the word in Acts 10:11 (Greek: othonē) which is rendered in the Classical Greek Lexicon by Liddell, Scott, Jones as "sail." But the late great James Barr in his seminal **THE SEMANTICS OF BIBLICAL LANGUAGE** emphasized that a word does not by its nature carry its meaning inherently within that word! For example, on p. 234 Barr says, "…Thus the word becomes overloaded with interpretative suggestion;…" The late Dr. Louis S. B. Leakey taught us in our archaeological excavation work never to use an interpretive word—for example, if we found what looked like a "hearth" that indicated to us it had once been a "fireplace" we were banned from giving it that interpretive tag! We had to use the innocuous word "feature." Dr. Barr insisted that it was not how a word was *defined* **in the lexicon** BUT how it was *used* **in its context.**

Acts 10:11 is an absolutely perfect illustration of Barr's complaint about interpretation! And about how researchers make serious mistakes about *meaning*. We note the following: "…and [Peter] saw the heaven opened, and something descending, like a great sheet, let down by four corners upon the earth. In it were all kinds of animals and reptiles and birds of the air. And there came a voice to him, "Rise, Peter; kill and eat." (Acts 10: 11-12). Here is a good example of the use of a large sheet ("othonēn megalēn") as a vessel carrying potential (non-kosher) foods! There is no hint in this use of "othonē" as a tablecloth. Clearly, it is a device to *convey* to Peter the selections of animal foods that were once considered off-limits but could now, by the Voice's command: "Kill and eat!" The sheet was *used* as what I have described here as a "vessel of conveyance" Dr. Eisenman, well meaning as he was, has used the wrong methodology about which James Barr has warned against. Of course, I know by the context that the deeper meaning of this simile was that Gentiles would now be accepted into Christian ranks. It behooves every well-meaning scholar to read this book!

THE REAL PROBLEM: EXTRAPOLATING

I have tried to refrain, over the years I've been studying the Shroud, from making a psychological commitment to whether or not the Shroud is **Medieval** or **first century**! For many years we had no radiocarbon date for any location on the Shroud. So we used "internal evidences" based largely upon **cultural items** from which to extrapolate the date. The real

problem is that we have no truly solid scientific basis for drawing a firm conclusion. The only radiocarbon date we have is based upon a deeply flawed sample selection.

It is only one sample taken on April 21, 1988, removed from a controversial corner—controversial because it might have represented a repair--and cut up into pieces and sent to three labs (two pieces went to the NSF lab in Tucson, Arizona), whose results were announced on Oct. 13, 1988 as between 1260 to 1390 AD.

Those who believe that this date is not only precise but also correct are **extrapolating** from that test result to the entire Shroud. But does that extrapolation represent the real date of the entire Shroud or does it represent the date of a proposed repair?

On the other hand, those who believe that the cloth is from the first century and represents the actual burial have been **extrapolating** from numerous cultural items that lead scholars to believe it represents what is portrayed in the Gospels about the burial of Jesus. The text of the Gospels seems to provide a wonderful basis upon which to interpret what we see on the Shroud. For example, the late Dr. Gino Zaninotto argued in an unpublished paper that the mode of crucifixion on the Shroud represented the *first century Roman practice of crucifixion.* The late Dr. F. T. Zugibe pointed to the long neck on the dorsal end of the Shroud and the lack of a clearly visible neck on the frontal cloth as evidence of a genuine crucified victim and convincing evidence of a mode of upright hanging consistent with the Gospels of a practice that was outlawed by Constantine the Great some time after 306 AD when he became Emperor. Crucifixion had not been practiced for centuries if we accept that the Shroud is Medieval.

Dr. Alan Whanger presented his view that there was a phylactery on the forehead of the Man of the Shroud. His goal was to demonstrate that such a phylactery could prove that the Man of the Shroud was Jesus the Jew. Unfortunately, his imagery of the phylactery was a medieval one. Here following is a neat comparison of the size and style and shape of a medieval/modern phylactery compared with one found among the Dead Sea Scrolls of the first century:

(See: http://www.redeemerofisrael.org/2015/02/phylacteries-and-tassels.html)

When mounted on the forehead it would have looked like this:

(See:
https://www.google.com/search?hl=en&site=imghp&tbm=isch&source=hp&biw=1524&bih=76
8&q=Dead+Sea+phylactery&oq=Dead+Sea+phylactery&gs_l=img.12...4021.11207.0.14414.19.1
9.0.0.0.0.70.475.19.19.0....0...1.1.64.img..0.12.346...0j0i5i30k1j0i8i30k1j0i24k1.jIYGlO9ysao#im
grc=u7tb_pqSdV8OiM:&spf=1498847121305)

But this was an **extrapolation** from a Medieval phylactery to a first century context. A major caveat has been the perdidolia that humans tend to see what they are familiar with.

Cultural items are fraught with all kinds of challenges that make them *equivocal.* From a strictly scientific point of view we cannot firmly conclude that the Shroud is either first century or medieval. We are forced to extrapolate. If we use the only result from radiocarbon dating, we are extrapolating. If we use cultural items based upon the imagery we see in the weave of the cloth, we are extrapolating. If we draw from medieval Jewish practice and superimpose it on what we believe is first century, we are extrapolating.

WHAT MUST WE DO?

It seems to me that the only way through this conundrum is to establish the following rules:

1.   We need to appeal to Church officials to re-do the radiocarbon testing by taking samples from many different areas of the Shroud.

2. Discover written sources (among the Dead Sea Scrolls or contemporary cave discoveries) that show the use of a table cloth during that time frame by Jewish practitioners. This is important because culture changes over time.

3. Discover pictorial sources (from Pompeii or Herculaneum that are precisely dated to 79 AD), that demonstrates that a table cloth could have been used in the first century. Such finds must unequivocally be shown to have come from or representative of a dining context.

Without this kind of evidence, we are reduced to extrapolating.