

THE RITE OF THE EUCHARIST: A Consideration Of Roots

Jesus was a Jew, so were the twelve Disciples and the Apostle Paul along, with many – if not the majority - of the members of the Early Church. Jesus and the twelve attended Synagogue and kept the tenets of the Jewish Law. Jesus, himself, taught the people as a Rabbi, both in the synagogue and outside of it. Indeed, it could be said that, at its origin, Christianity was a 'Jewish sect'.

The Passover meal, the foundation of our Eucharistic practice, was a Jewish feast, celebrated in the midst of a Jewish festival. Given the above, it would be logical to expect to find that the language, ritual and practice of our Eucharistic rite would be fundamentally Jewish. However, in Luke-Acts, there is developed a theme of 'first to the Jews' that runs throughout both books. Only after they were rejected by the Jews did Jesus, and his followers, turn away to proclaim the Good News to the Gentiles. That change of direction, principally led by Peter and Paul, changed the nature of our worship – introducing Greek and Roman customs and Hellenistic influences the echoes of which remain to this day.

There are five versions of the Last Supper in the New Testament – in the Synoptic Gospels, in John and in the First Letter of Paul to the Corinthians. Of the five, John does not include a Passover meal, nor any specific references to Table rituals that translated into the Eucharistic prayer; although there is a direct metaphorical reference to the Body and Blood in the Jesus' teaching on the 'Bread of Life' at Capernaum (John 6). Mathew and Mark are virtually identical, as may be expected given the theories about their creation – Mark being the first Gospel, copied and 'improved upon' by Matthew and Luke. There are some variations in Luke. The version, which presents some substantive differences, is that found in First Corinthians, which is now acknowledged to be the oldest of the five – the closest to the time of Christ in origin.

The First Letter of Paul to the Corinthians was written in CE 53 or 54, little more than 20 years after the Last Supper and Crucifixion, and more than 10 years before the first of the Gospels – purportedly that of Mark.¹ It is understood that Paul knew and learned from Peter, and perhaps others of the original twelve, and thus had access to eyewitness accounts of what actually did happen at the “Last Supper”.

The rite of the Lord’s Supper, as Paul explains it in 1 Cor. 11 was a real meal to which the well off contribute food and drink. The celebration was a plenary session that should not begin until all participants have assembled. It opened with the customary Jewish blessing over the bread, which was then broken and distributed to everyone, probably with words of interpretation or distribution to identify it as the Body of Christ.² The meal continued, and at the end of it the ‘Cup of Blessing’ was produced, the thanksgiving said, and all drank from it. During the thanksgiving, the death of the Lord, the risen ever-present Lord of the community was proclaimed. The memorial was raised to God through the thanksgiving of those who were mindful and grateful, and the participants were enjoined to do so that they may remember ‘until he come’. – a paraphrase of the Aramaic ‘Maranatha’ which is still preserved in the Corinthian liturgy.³

After the meal, a Spirit-guided session of psalmody, teaching and prophecy ensued. The thanksgiving over the cup would occur either at the beginning or during the course of it.⁴ This session following the meal took the place of the wine session (*symposion*) that the Jews adopted on festal occasions.

It is not clear who presided at Corinth. By Jewish custom the father of the household would say the blessing over the bread, while the thanksgiving over the cup could be delegated to a privileged guest. We do know that there was some

¹ C.P.M. Jones, *The New Testament*, in Cheslyn Jones et al eds, *The Study of Liturgy*, (London, Oxford University Press, 1992), 190

² *ibid*, 192

³ *ibid*, 193

⁴ *ibid*

hierarchy in the Christian assembly – Apostles, prophets and teachers being the most ‘senior’ in rank. (1 Cor. 12:28)

Paul’s “rite” accords with Jewish meal customs on solemn occasions. The ‘bread words’ accompany the normal actions over the bread. The “wine words” accompany the expected thanksgiving over the cup.⁵ What is also significant is that Paul’s words refer to the cup explicitly and its contents implicitly, a clear effort not to offend against the Jewish abhorrence of drinking blood.⁶

Mark’s narrative is embedded in his passion story. The Last Supper is the Passover Feast, and the words and actions occur during the meal “ as they were eating”. (Mk 14:22) He presents the blessing and breaking of the bread and the blessing of the cup as two continuous actions, using a parallel form of language – “... this is my body ...this is my blood ...” (Mk 14:22-24). Jesus uses ‘any’ cup for this purpose, not the “Cup of Blessing” as in Corinthians.⁷ There is, of course, no mention of any study afterward. Matthew’s account is virtually identical, except for several minor differences in phrasing and some elaboration – Matthew places slightly more weight on the part of the disciples and the explicit command to eat and drink. He also emphasizes that the covenant is for the forgiveness of sins.⁸ In neither is there any requirement for the Christian Eucharist as a memorial of Jesus as Paul portrays in First Corinthians.⁹

Like Matthew, he copied substantially from Mark, and presents a fuller version. Luke’s account, regarded as being the last written among the Synoptic Gospels, presents a two-fold mention of the cup; depending on whether one is reading the longer or shorter version of Chapter 22. Since the Last Supper was a Passover Feast in Luke’s account, it is possible that here may have been as many as four cups of wine at different stages. His presentation of more than one cup, then, is no reason to discount his story.¹⁰

⁵ Jones, 195

⁶ *ibid*

⁷ *ibid*, 196

⁸ Alasdair Heron, *Table and Tradition: Towards an Ecumenical Understanding of the Eucharist*, (Edinburgh: The Handsel Press, 1983), 3

⁹ Jones, 196

¹⁰ Heron, 6

Each of the accounts of the Last Supper describes events as they were remembered by Christians of the first and second generations within the Church. Each is very brief, highlighting only certain details and smoothed out through much repetition over decades of telling and re-telling and use in worship.¹¹ To get a more adequate view, one would need to locate them in their original setting and attempt to trace the events that shaped them; as well as those that transformed them later.

For example, in a pioneering investigation Hans Lietzmann argued that there were actually two kinds of Eucharist in the early days of the Church: a fellowship meal among Christians in Jerusalem, patterned after the meals they had with Jesus during his lifetime (perhaps this is the tradition Peter related to Paul); and a sacramental meal where attention was focused on Jesus' death and its meaning. Lietzmann maintained that the latter stemmed from the development of the Church in Hellenistic circles influenced by Greek ideas of mystical communion through sacred memorial meals.¹² This, perhaps, reflects the account portrayed in the Synoptic Gospels, written some thirty years and more after the event, without the benefit of eyewitness accounts to guide them.

The Eucharist, as it is presented in the various New Testament accounts manifests in the following manner:

1. The context and meaning of the Eucharist is Jesus himself. It is because Jesus is 'the bread from heaven' that the eating and drinking of his body and blood are stressed.
2. The Eucharist is a means of real sharing in him, of a genuine union.
3. The Eucharist also establishes a bond among those who participate in it. The body is the community of the Church
4. The Eucharist directs us both backward – to the remembrance of Christ – and forward in anticipation of the Kingdom of God

¹¹ Heron, 6

¹² *ibid*

5. The question of the precise connection between Jesus and the Eucharistic bread and wine is not directly posed in the New Testament (although it is alluded to in John)
6. Relatively little is said about the Eucharist as sacrifice.
7. The New Testament does not portray the concept of sacrament, nor is it primarily interested in sacred rites. It speaks of revelation, not ritual.¹³

As the Apostles, and the Church, turned to the Gentiles changes were made in the rite of the Eucharist to correspond to cultural preferences and different understandings. In the Didache we see the gradual disengagement of the Eucharist from the meal. The non-baptized are excluded. Christians are asked to confess their sins, and to be reconciled with each other before coming to the Table.¹⁴

By the time of the earliest detailed account, that of Justin Martyr, in the mid-second century, the meal itself has not survived. The centre has become the Eucharistic prayer spoken by the President and acclaimed by the people's Amen. Moreover, the liturgy of the Word preceded the Eucharist.¹⁵ A sermon was introduced, prayers were recited for the Emperor and those in authority, the offerings were brought to the President and the Eucharist was distributed by Deacons.¹⁶

And so begins a long history of change, through Hippolytus, Tertullian, The Roman rite, the Reformation, and in our own tradition by Cranmer. In the view presented by Alasdair Heron, focus on the 'sacrament' raises the danger that the central mystery, Jesus Christ himself, could be lost in the process.¹⁷ Through all of the changes over the years it would appear that the danger is very real. Form, it would appear has been preferred over substance.

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¹³ Heron, 54-55

¹⁴ K.W. Noakes, *From the Apostolic Fathers to Irenaeus*, in Jones, 210

¹⁵ Noakes, 211

¹⁶ *ibid*, 212

¹⁷ Heron, 56