

The Roots of the Eucharist in Jesus' Praxis

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"This is my body—this is my blood": these are the words of Jesus which we routinely associate with that famous and mysterious meal called the Lord's Supper. While Christian churches generally hold on to their traditional and often vague interpretations of the eucharistic words, biblical specialists are trying to find the oldest and perhaps original meaning of the words of Jesus. Here one such attempt is made in the hope of stimulating an old discussion in need of fresh ideas. The eucharistic words of Jesus, we suggest, must be seen in a *sacrificial* context. They seem to derive from a presentation formula used or coined for use at the offering of animal sacrifices at the Jerusalem Temple. Jesus, using this formula, declared bread and wine, consumed in fellowship meals, as his new sacrifice. By doing so, he made no reference to his own death, but distanced himself from the sacrificial practice of the Temple.

The paper represents a response to Bruce Chilton's admirable book on *The Temple of Jesus*. In his study of Jesus' relationship with the Jerusalem Temple, Chilton places the early-Christian ritual meal in the context of sacrifice.

While this has been done very frequently, in fact by the gospel writers themselves, Chilton's theory is quite distinctive. Unlike earlier authors, he does *not* think of the Passover sacrifice as the context in which the Lord's Supper must be understood. He avoids the exegetical and historical pitfalls associated with the Passover-theory—the synoptic idea that Jesus celebrated the first eucharist at a domestic Passover ceremony that followed the Passover sacrifice at the Temple. Paul, in 1 Cor 11:23–25, dating from ca. 55 CE, in no way implies a Passover setting of the Last Supper. Scholars scrutinizing Mark's gospel, which does identify the Last Supper as a Passover meal (Mark 14:12–25), have expressed their doubts about the originality of the Passover frame given to the Supper. S. Dockx (1984) and M.-E. Boismard (1972, 38–385) suspect that the Passover frame has been added to an earlier account that simply spoke of a last meal of Jesus. Perhaps one can invoke here R. Bultmann's "law of increasing distinctness and detail" characteristic of the development of the gospel materials (Bultmann 1961, 22). Of course even late, secondary authors could have elaborated an information actually implied in the original, shorter version. In the present case, however, the Passover theory of later editors has proved to be misleading. Accordingly, attempts at elucidating the meaning of the Lord's Supper in the context of a Passover meal have failed (see the refutation of J. Jeremias's hypothesis by Léon-Dufour, 1987, 306–308). Chilton is therefore justified to neglect the traditional Passover context of the Lord's Supper.

We follow Chilton in two basic assumptions: (a) The Lord's Supper must be seen in a sacrificial context which is not to be identified with the Passover (neither with the Passover sacrifice at the Temple, nor with the domestic celebration). If in the following analysis we refer to the Passover sacrifice, then only in order to illustrate sacrificial practice in general. (b) We also assume with Chilton that whatever the eucharist means, it does not originally imply any reference to the (sacrificial?) death of Jesus.

Our paper tries to elucidate one small but crucial element of the eucharist, namely the "eucharistic words": "This [bread] is my body" and "This [cup] is my blood," which are central not only in the New Testament reports, but also in early Christian eucharistic worship. Justin, around the middle of the second century CE, uses them in what we suggest to come close to the original form used by Jesus: *τουτῆστι το σωμα μου* and *τουτο εστι αιμα μου* (Justin, *Apology* I:66; PG 6:428).

We develop our interpretation in six steps.

(1) "*Body*" and "*blood*" were the standard components of an animal sacrifice at the Jerusalem Temple. Sacrificial slaughter of an animal, normally a lamb, separated "body" and "blood." While the blood was always poured at the altar, sacrificial law regulated the use and disposal of the body. Often, the "body" was partly burnt (for the deity) and partly consumed (shared between the priests and the sacrificer).

All attempts to elucidate the eucharistic words of Jesus have to start with this fact. One of the foremost writers on the subject, Joachim Jeremias, actually argued this in his book on *The Eucharistic Words of Jesus*. Jesus, according to Jeremias and his many precursors, identified himself with the Passover lamb. The two central eucharistic words express this identification. The reconstructed Aramaic of Jesus, according to Jeremias, is unequivocal: *den bisri* "this is my [sacrificial] flesh"; *den 'idmi* "this is my [sacrificial] blood" (Jeremias 1967, 214). He takes great care to show that binary expressions like *κερασ/αιμα*, *σαρξ/αιμα*, and *σωμα/αιμα* regularly denote the two main components of an animal sacrifice in the Old Testament (Septuagint), in Philo, and in Hebrews (Heb 13:11; cf. Jeremias 1967, 213).

I think that Jeremias was on the right track, at least for a moment. However, he was led astray, first by suggesting that Jesus here speaks about himself (his own, human body), and second, by identifying the sacrifice in question as specifically a Passover sacrifice. My exploration of the two sentences "this is my body" and "this is my blood" proceeds without these two additional—and misleading—assumptions.

(2) "*This is my body*" and "*this is my blood*" can be understood as formulas of presentation. Such a formula would be used by sacrificers after the slaughtering of the victim. By using it, a sacrificer would designate a sacrifice as *his* (I assume that only *men* had access to the altar.)

The use of a formula of presentation makes sense in a sacrificial procedure which involved the sacrificer, attendants, and one or more priests. The formal presentation would make obvious, to the deity, *whose* sacrifice was given: that of a lay person or that of a priest. A priest would certainly offer some sacrifices for himself and make clear, to the deity, that he acts on his own behalf rather than on someone else's. Thus the emphasis is on the possessive pronoun: "this is *my* body, *my* blood," and it must be spoken by the person owning the animal. We know that one gesture, placed at the very beginning of the procedure, also served to make explicit to whom the sacrificial animal belonged. Before handing an animal over to the Temple personnel responsible for the immolation, the sacrificer identified

his animal through a gesture of laying his hands on the head of the victim. This gesture is prescribed by law (Lev 3:2).

Although we know very little about words spoken during Jewish sacrifices, the Bible furnishes two examples: Exodus 24 and Deuteronomy 26. "Behold this is the blood of the covenant that Yahweh has made with you," says Moses when applying sacrificial blood not to the altar, but to the people present (Exod 24:8). Priests may have pronounced similar formulae when tossing blood at the altar and when throwing parts of the victim into the fire burning on the altar.

In Deuteronomy 26, we have an entire text to be pronounced not by a priest, but by a lay person: the peasant who brings harvest gifts to the Temple. This text includes a presentation formula for handing over the basket to a priest: "Now I bring here the first fruits of the land which you, Yahweh, have given me" (Deut 26:11). The law goes on to specify that upon having said the words prescribed the peasant is to place his fruit basket "before Yahweh" and to bow down in worship before him. These parallels establish at least the possibility that many more words were used during the performance of sacrifice. We can hardly believe that the presentation was a silent affair!

(3) *Since, in the days of Jesus, lay sacrificers had little to do with the actual sacrificial procedure, it makes sense to assume that the use of a formula of presentation was suggested or promoted.*

Of course there is no proof that anyone has actually used the formulae "this is my body" and "this is my blood." In the days of Jesus, it is actually unlikely that people used it, for they had very little to do with the actual sacrificing. The immolation and the other ritual acts had all become something temple personnel and priests took care of. If there was any formal presentation of the sacrificial "body" and "blood" to the deity, the priest in charge would presumably have said: "This is so-and-so's body" and "This is so-and-so's blood," thereby identifying the sponsor of the sacrifice.

In Jesus' day, lay persons wishing to present a private sacrifice seem to have been reduced to being paying sponsors. They would pay, in the Court of Gentiles, for a sacrificial animal which was then handed over to Temple personnel. Sponsors would probably wait for some time until they got certain parts of the slaughtered victim (in the case of so-called peace offerings and thank offerings). Paying and receiving part of a slaughtered animal: this was all that happened in the foreground. The actual sacrificing—the slaughter, collecting the blood, the ritual disposal of blood and fat, even the laying on of hands—happened as it were back stage, invisible to the sponsor. This reduced, minimal involvement of laymen of course made sense; it facilitated and speeded up the routine performance of a large number of sacrifices by trained priestly specialists. The practice also kept women and non-Jews out of the sacred areas, while their sacrificial gifts, simplified to payment or handing-over of an animal, were accepted.

While the exclusion of lay involvement with the sacrificial procedure made sense to the priests, it was not necessarily popular with the sacrificers.

(4) *Jesus was among those who promoted lay participation at the Temple.*

There were sacrificers who did not like the impersonal atmosphere of the Temple routine. Sacrificers, they insisted, must be present at the actual slaughtering and the ensuing ritual acts. Tradition, codified in the Mishna, acknowledges that someone's offering cannot be made "while he is not standing by its side" (Mishna, Taanit 4:2). We can invoke the Talmudic tradition of Rabbi

Hillel, almost a contemporary of Jesus, who objected to the impersonal, clericalized manner of sacrifice (Babylonian Talmud, *Besah/Yom Tob* 20a). According to Hillel, offerings should not simply and informally be given to the priests for slaughtering. Rather, the owners should lay hands on their animals' head prior to handing it over to the officiating priest. Apparently this ritual gesture, prescribed by the law, indicated both the ownership of the lamb and served as a gesture of offering. Hillel's suggestion made such an impact on one Baba Butha, that he brought large numbers of animals to the Temple and gave them to those willing to lay hands on them in advance of sacrifice.

Like Hillel, Jesus can be imagined to have been one of those who promoted more lay participation in the Temple ritual. While we do not know anything about Jesus' view of the laying-on of hands on the victim's head, we can at least speculate about a formula of presentation with which he wanted people to designate a sacrifice as their own. Perhaps they should offer the various parts of the slaughtered and cut-up animal using the formula: "This is my body," i.e., here I bring my sacrificial body; it belongs to me and I place it onto your altar. Similarly, they should offer their blood saying, "This is my blood," i.e., here I offer the blood of my sacrificial victim.

(5) *Jesus' motive for suggesting more lay involvement with sacrifice was his idea of the purity of God's people.*

In the olden days, the actual slaughtering of a sacrificial victim had *always* been the task of the offering person himself (cf. Lev 3:2). Now this participation had become very rare indeed. In Jesus' day, only the Passover ritual permitted the laity to immolate. "The whole people sacrifice," reports Philo of Alexandria, "every member of them, without waiting for their priests, because the law has granted to the whole nation for one special day in every year the right of priesthood and of performing the sacrifices themselves" (Philo, *De Decalogo* 30/§ 159). As each man killed his own lamb, a priest caught the blood in a silver or a golden bowl.

Those who wished to offer a sacrifice had of course to be "pure," i.e., to fulfill certain ritual requirements (like not touching a dead body).

In the olden days, a man would normally immolate his animal himself, perhaps assisted by Temple personnel. A priest would slaughter an animal only if the offerer found himself in a state of impurity (2 Chron 30:17).

The Temple routine of Jesus' day, for all its practicality and reasonableness, could be given a quite unpleasant interpretation. The priests, one might say, dealt with *all* sacrificers as if they were impure. Which of course would be both unfair and untrue.

For Jesus, God's people *are* pure (Mark 7:14–23) and for this very reason should have more involvement with the sacrificial procedure than the contemporary Temple establishment granted them. He wanted people to have access to the altar and present their sacrifices in a formal way, i.e., by using a formula of presentation: "This is my body; this is my blood."

Obviously, Jesus failed in his endeavor to introduce a reform in the sacrificial procedure, and the so-called "cleansing of the Temple" (Mark 11:15–19 and parallels) no doubt echoes both the attempt and the failure.

(6) *After failing in his attempt to reform the sacrificial cult of the Temple, Jesus began to practice a new sacrifice, the one that developed into the Christian eucharist.*

After realizing the impossibility of reforming the sacrificial procedure, Jesus came to oppose private sacrifice at the Temple. He thought of it as procedurally

deficient and hence ineffective and invalid. He was not the only one to protest against ritual abuses surrounding sacrifice. He would side with the Essenes who rejected Temple worship as currently practiced (though for reasons different from those of Jesus—they rejected the contemporary high priesthood as illegitimate).

Unlike the Essenes, Jesus would not consider sacrificial worship as impossible to perform. He did not wish to give up the practice of sacrifice. The idea that the offering of the body and the blood of an animal built a sacred bridge between the human and the divine remained too strong with him. So he would create his own substitute for private Temple sacrifice. He continued the already well-established tradition of joyous meals which he shared with large crowds, with "publicans and sinners," with his wealthy sponsors, and with the narrower circle of his disciples. He began to introduce into these meals a new and unprecedented ritual action, one that involved the use of sacrificial language. Jesus declared a simple gesture performed with bread and wine a new sacrifice. Bread would stand for the sacrificial body of the slaughtered animal and wine for the blood tossed at the foot of the altar. The declarative formulae, "This is my body" and "This is my blood," designate bread and wine as unbloody substitutes for private sacrifice. Not the eating and drinking, but the *presenting* (expressed in the formula of presentation) constitutes the new sacrifice.

We must beware of reading any hidden meanings into this symbolic presentation. Bread and wine neither take on special, magical qualities nor is there any link to the (sacrificial) death of Jesus. A simple and straightforward declaration said over bread and wine had, in the mind of Jesus and his followers, *replaced* private sacrifice as performed at the Temple.

Jesus' new ritual gestures had of course their natural place in the context of communal meals. Although considered significant sacred acts, they were not performed in isolation. One may well imagine that at one point of a communal meal, as a blessing was pronounced over bread and wine, Jesus and his followers added the sacrificial formulae "This is my body" and "This is my blood." The complete prayer said over the bread may have looked as follows: "Blessed are you, O Lord our God, King of the Universe, who brings forth bread from the earth: This [bread] is my body" (for the traditional blessing said over bread and wine, see Mishnah, Berakhot 6:1.) The addition of the presentation formula to the traditional benediction did not involve any major stylistic problem; both the traditional blessing and the formula addressed God. Thus Jesus took the core of sacrificial worship away from the Temple in order to practice it in a new and symbolic way.

According to the Talmud, a Jewish meal was opened with a blessing said over bread and concluded with a blessing pronounced over wine (see esp. Talmud Yerushalmi, Berakhot VIII 12a, 52ff. and the sources discussed in Hofius 1988, 379–382). Paul's account of the Lord's Supper presupposes this pattern (1 Cor 11:23–25). If Jesus followed it, he presumably added his sacrificial presentation to each blessing, so that his meals were given an impressive sacrificial frame.

By way of conclusion we may again state our contention that the two words used in Christian eucharistic worship—"This is my body" and "This is my blood"—(1) go back to Jesus himself and (2) make sense when taken to be formulae of sacrificial presentation either used or designed to be used at the Temple of Jerusalem. Rooted as they are in the thought, life, controversies, and institutions current in the days of Jesus, the eucharistic words can be understood only when seen in their original historical context.

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