

## Christianity's Eucharistic Tradition: Its Pauline Origin<sup>1</sup>

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### I. The Greco-Roman Roots of the Christian Eucharist

The earliest account of the last supper eucharistic liturgy observed by Christians for almost 2000 years is found in First Corinthians, Paul's letter to his church at Corinth. In that letter Paul reminds the Corinthians of the following (1 Cor. 11:23-25):

For I received from the Lord what I also passed on to you, that the Lord Jesus on the night on which he was delivered up took bread, and having given thanks, broke it and said, 'This is my body that is for you. Do this in memory of me.' In the same way also, the cup after supper, saying, 'This cup is the new covenant in my blood. Do this, as often as you drink it, in memory of me' [translation from the Greek: TJW].

Decades later this Pauline eucharistic liturgy was adapted by Mark (14:22-25) to create his last supper narrative, with Matthew (26:26-29) copying Mark, and Luke (22:14-20) adapting Paul's liturgy, adding his own liturgical flourish plus some Markan features, for his last supper account.<sup>2</sup>

But it is unlikely that Jesus ever instituted such a liturgy, for it is implausible that Jesus, as a Jew, would have directed his Jewish disciples to drink his blood, even symbolically. Jews were forbidden by Torah to consume blood (Lev. 17:10):

If anyone of the house of Israel or of the aliens who reside among them eats any blood, I will set my face against that person who eats blood, and will cut that person off from the people.

For this reason Jesus Seminar Fellows concluded that the last supper described by Paul, and subsequently by the Gospel writers, likely originated in "a pagan context," where symbolic drinking of a god's blood was a common practice (*Acts of Jesus*, 139). The Fellows also held (*Acts of Jesus*, 141) that "[t]he last supper as it is depicted in Mark was not a historical event."

Confirmation that the Pauline eucharistic tradition arose in a Greco-Roman context is provided by the observations of Dennis Smith and Burton Mack. Smith contends (*From Symposium to Eucharist*,<sup>3</sup> 188-190) that Jesus' purported reference in the meal to the bread as his "body for you" and his "blood" are characteristic of Greco-Roman martyrological language used in recounting the death of a martyred hero. Mack notes (*A Myth of Innocence*,<sup>4</sup> 118) that the conventional way of speaking of the self in antiquity was to speak of the "body" and the "soul." In martyrological texts, however, the terms used were "body" and "blood." "The martyr," Mack observes, "gives his body or his soul into the hands of the tyrant 'for the sake of' his cause." That is precisely what Jesus is depicted as doing in the Pauline narrative: Jesus purportedly offers the broken bread (symbol of his broken body) to his disciples stating, "This is *my body* which is

for you,” i.e., sacrificed for you (1 Cor 11:25; emphasis added). Mack states with respect to the significance of “blood” in martyrological texts: “The tyrant . . . spills [the martyr’s] blood in the act of taking his life.” Thus, the eucharistic tradition reported by Paul was all but certainly created to interpret Jesus’ death as a martyrdom.

## II. The Origin of the Last Supper Eucharistic Liturgy.

If the last supper Eucharist did not originate with Jesus, where did it originate? It is all but inconceivable that it originated in the church at Jerusalem, for most scholars agree that the Jesus community in Jerusalem remained Torah observant. James, the brother of Jesus and long-time leader of the Jesus movement in Jerusalem, was an epitome of such Torah faithfulness.<sup>5</sup> As such, how could he have countenanced even a symbolic drinking of the blood of his brother Jesus? Moreover, the so-called “Apostolic Decree” (Acts 15:28f.), considered to have been formulated in Jerusalem (cf. Acts 15:1-30), enjoined the Leviticus 17 prohibition (15:29) upon all Gentile converts. It is, therefore, inconceivable that James or the Jerusalem church ever practiced such a eucharistic rite, much less created it. Very likely, the Jerusalem Jesus people observed a Eucharist found in the *Didache* (see Hyam Maccoby, *Paul and the Hellenists*, 94-122), a liturgy that makes no mention of Jesus’ body and blood, namely, *Didache* 10:1-5.<sup>6</sup>

But, if not in Jerusalem, where did Christianity’s eucharistic tradition originate and with whom? The Fellows of the Jesus Seminar concluded that it was probably spawned “in the communities of Asia Minor and Greece where Paul had established churches” (*Acts of Jesus*, 139). Some scholars, such as Joachim Jeremias, have argued that it originated in the Jesus community at Antioch.<sup>7</sup> But that seems quite implausible, given the controversy that erupted among Jesus people there over faithful observance of Torah in table fellowship. As Paul reports (Gal. 2:11-14), certain persons from James arrived at Antioch and became incensed over the Antiochene practice—advocated by Paul and followed by Peter—of the uncircumcised (i.e. Gentiles converted to the Jesus movement) eating with the circumcised (i.e., converted Jews). Such a furor was raised by these Jerusalem visitors that Peter removed himself from the mixed table fellowship, a defensive response that led Paul to denounce Peter as a hypocrite (Gal. 2:11-13). It is highly unlikely, then, that members of the Jesus movement in Antioch practiced the Pauline eucharistic rite. For, if the James people had found that table fellowship at Antioch included not only the breakdown of ethnic boundaries between Jews and Gentiles, but also a Eucharist celebrating the drinking of the blood of the martyred Jesus in violation of Torah, the uproar would have been deafening. Yet Paul neither mentions nor even implies that James people condemned Antioch’s eucharistic practice.

The Pauline eucharistic tradition must be one Paul promulgated after his break with the Antioch church, having lost the battle with James people over the inclusion of uncircumcised Jesus people in table fellowship. How then did Paul come upon his eucharistic tradition? The

only clue he gives is that he “received it *from the Lord*” (1 Cor. 11:23; emphasis added). But what does he mean by that? Scholars offer four interpretations: (1) Paul received his eucharistic meal account from Jesus via the normal transmission of a report by Jesus’ disciples of what he did at the supper; (2) Paul received his account via a direct revelation to him by the risen Jesus; (3) Paul received the facts about the meal from human sources, but the interpretation of those facts was revealed directly to Paul by the risen Jesus; and (4) the risen Jesus’ authority lies through and within human transmission of the account. Contrary to a consensus among scholars, Maccoby (115; cf. 99-128) and Francis Watson (“I received from the Lord,” 123; cf. 103-124) argue that we must take Paul at his word: he received his eucharistic tradition from the risen Jesus. I interpret that to mean Paul *created* the last supper Eucharist *de novo*—with the help of the Greco-Roman martyrological paradigm—claiming he received his Eucharist *from the Lord*. It is but one among several such revelations Paul claims to have received (Watson, 115): on one occasion he was granted a mystical revelation (2 Cor. 12:1-4); on another the receipt of his own unique gospel (Gal. 1:11f.), and on yet another, counsel on how to deal with a “thorn” in his flesh (2 Cor. 12:7-9).

Why would Paul invent Christianity’s Eucharist? Here is what I surmise. Having broken with Antioch after losing the battle over table inclusiveness, Paul turned his attention to the expansion of his Gentile mission, preaching a gospel focused upon “Christ crucified” (1 Cor. 1:23), “the message of the cross,” by whom and by which alone one is saved (1 Cor. 1:18). As he declares to the Corinthians, “When I came to you, brothers and sisters, . . . I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ, and him crucified” (1 Cor. 2:1f.). The appeal of this gospel message to Gentiles, however, was seriously diminished by the fact that crucifixion was the disgraceful, shameful death penalty paid by enemies of the Roman Empire. As Paul puts it, his preaching of “Christ crucified” was “foolishness to Gentiles” (1 Cor. 1:23). So Paul turned a Gentile negative into a Gentile positive by adopting the Greco-Roman paradigm of the martyred hero and depicted the crucified Jesus as dying to save others. In fact, his own experience of adversity due to his preaching a crucified Christ (1 Cor. 4:9-13; 2 Cor. 4:8f.; 11:24-27, 32f.) led him to claim himself martyr for Christ (2 Cor. 4:11f.): “We [Paul] are afflicted in every way, . . . always *carrying in the body the death of Jesus*. . . . For while we live, *we are always being given up to death for Jesus’ sake*, so that the life of Jesus may be made visible in our mortal flesh” (emphasis added).

But Paul’s attempt to persuade others to accept his martyrological cross-theology was hampered by a lack of incontrovertible evidence that Jesus saw himself as a martyr, proclaimed himself as such to his disciples, and portrayed his impending death as a martyrdom to them. While the creed Paul had received (1 Cor. 15:3-5) proclaimed that Jesus died a martyr—“Christ died for our sins” (15:3)—Jesus himself never spoke of his death. Mark’s profiling of Jesus predicting his suffering and death (8:31; 9:31; 10:33) is nothing but Markan fabrication.<sup>8</sup> So Paul invented the “Lord’s Supper” to serve as an unequivocal representation of Jesus offering himself up as a martyr by interpreting the bread distributed at the meal as his martyred body and

the cup of wine he shared as his blood spilled in martyrdom for the sake of others. By creating this mythic meal to validate his martyrological cross-theology, and by having Jesus describe its ritual observance as a memorial to him (1 Cor. 11:24f.), Paul assured that all future eucharistic celebrations would replicate that meal and reinforce its martyrological meaning.

As concerns the symbolic drinking of blood in his eucharistic rite, Paul, as a former devout Jew, could easily finesse the issue. Inspired by the Hellenistic ideal of universal oneness, which minimized the ethnic distinctions between people, Paul envisioned being "in Christ" through baptism as the actualizing of that oneness (Gal. 3:27f.). Consequently, he was able to reject anything in the Torah that prescribed demonstrative signs of distinctive Jewish ethnicity, such as circumcision and dietary laws, the latter prohibiting the consumption of blood.<sup>9</sup> In the spirit of universal oneness in Christ, Paul proclaimed Torah's prohibition against ingesting blood inapplicable to persons in Christ. Thus, any presumed problem with Jesus people symbolically drinking Jesus' blood was obviated.

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<sup>1</sup>This essay represents a revision and synopsis of "Christianity's Death Tradition: Its Antioch Origin, Its Pauline Adoption, Its Eucharistic Accretion," a paper I presented at the March 19, 2010 meeting of the Westar Seminar on Christian origins. Biblical quotations in this essay are from the NRSV, unless otherwise indicated.

<sup>2</sup> See Hyam Maccoby, *Paul and the Hellenists*, Philadelphia: Trinity Press International (1991), 90-122; Francis Watson, "I received from the Lord . . .": Paul, Jesus, and the Last Supper," in *Jesus and Paul Reconnected*, ed. Todd D. Still, Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co. (2007), 107f., 116-122; and Robert W. Funk and the Jesus Seminar, *The Acts of Jesus: The Search for the Authentic Deeds of Jesus*, San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco (1998), 139f., 250f., 347f..

<sup>3</sup> *From Symposium to Eucharist: The Banquet in the Early Christian World*, Minneapolis: Fortress Press (2003).

<sup>4</sup> *A Myth of Innocence: Mark and Christian Origins*, Philadelphia: Fortress Press (1991).

<sup>5</sup> See, e.g., John Dominic Crossan, *The Birth of Christianity: Discovering What Happened in the Years after the Execution of Jesus*, San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco (1989), 467f.

<sup>6</sup> Didache 10:1-5 (trans. Aaron Milavec, *The Didache*, 33f.): "After being filled [by the meal], eucharistize thus:

We give you thanks, holy Father, for your holy name, which you tabernacle in our hearts, and for the knowledge and faith and immortality which you revealed to us through our servant Jesus. To you [is] the glory forever.

You, almighty Master, created all things for the sake of your name, both food and drink you have given to people for enjoyment in order that they might give thanks; to us, on the other hand, you have graciously bestowed Spirit-sent food and drink for life forever through your servant [Jesus]. Before all [these] things, we give you thanks. Because you are powerful [on our behalf]. To you [is] the glory forever."

<sup>7</sup> See *The Eucharistic Words of Jesus*, trans. Norman Perrin, New York: Charles Scribner's Sons (1966), 188.

<sup>8</sup> See Robert W. Funk, Roy W. Hoover, and the Jesus Seminar, *The Five Gospel: The Search for the Authentic Words of Jesus*, New York: Macmillan Publishing Co. (1993), 75-78.

<sup>9</sup> See Daniel Boyarin, *Paul the Radical Jew: Paul and the Politics of Identity*, Berkeley: University of California Press (1994), 7f., 22-24, 27, 53-56, 106).