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Liturgical History I

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The Breaking of the Loaf and the Body and Blood of the Lord:

Variation and Connection in First-Century Eucharists

Introduction

Scholarly opinions on eucharistic origins have changed greatly in the past century. The eighteenth- and nineteenth-century search for apostolic textual sources and the assumption of a direct line from the Last Supper was shaken in 1926 by Hans Lietzmann's thesis postulating a binary origin.¹ Yet Lietzmann's theory failed to gain traction, and Gregory Dix was successful in rehabilitating the single-origin view by abandoning the search for a common text and instead privileging a common four-action ritual shape.² Dix's model held sway until the closing decades of the twentieth century, when an increasing questioning of the linear-origins narrative and an increased appreciation for diversity led to the dawn of what Gerard Rouwhorst calls a new scholarly paradigm.³ This paradigm, which is predominant among liturgists today, draws heavily from social-science methods in order to better understand the first-century Mediterranean context in which early Christian ritual

¹ Hans Lietzmann, *Messe Und Herrenmahl: Eine Studie zur Geschichte der Liturgie*, Arbeiten zur Kirchengeschichte 8 (Bonn: A. Marcus und E. Weber's Verlag, 1926); ET: Hans Lietzmann, *Mass and Lord's Supper: A Study in the History of the Liturgy*, trans. Dorothea H. G. Reeve (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1979).

² Gregory Dix, *The Shape of the Liturgy*, 2nd ed. (Westminster: Dacre Press, 1945).

³ Gerard Rouwhorst, "The Roots of the Early Christian Eucharist: Jewish Blessings or Hellenistic Symposia?," in *Jewish and Christian Liturgy and Worship: New Insights into Its History and Interaction*, ed. Albert Gerhards and Clemens Leonhard, Jewish and Christian Perspectives Series v. 15 (Leiden: Brill, 2007), 295–308.

meals were practiced.⁴ In this new paradigm distinctions such as those once made by Dix between “eucharist” as a “sacramental” rite and “agape” as a “non-sacramental” dinner can no longer be presumed. This paradigm refuses to privilege liturgical examples that resemble later fourth-century norms, casting a wider methodological net to avoid eliminating important data. Above all, it advocates an epistemological modesty that refuses to draw connections where connections are not obviously found.

In this essay I seek to trace the development of what would later be seen as the mainstream eucharistic rite from its earliest origins in the first century. While grateful for and influenced by the social-science approach, I take an approach that is more oriented toward ritual, symbol, and meaning-making. I presume that early Christians employed the meal models of their society, but I also seek to identify ritual and metaphorical ways in which they expressed specific religious and theological convictions within those models.⁵ I assume diversity: with new-paradigm scholars like Andrew McGowan and Paul Bradshaw, I see Lietzmann’s thesis as an important step that fell short by presuming not too much variation in the early eucharist but too little.⁶ In particular, where Lietzmann sought to identify two

⁴ Most influential in this social-science approach have been Matthias Klinghardt (*Gemeinschaftsmahl Und Mahlgemeinschaft: Soziologie Und Liturgie Frühchristlicher Mahlfeiern*, Texte Und Arbeiten Zum Neutestamentlichen Zeitalter 13 [Tübingen: Francke Verlag, 1996]) and Dennis E. Smith (*From Symposium to Eucharist: The Banquet in the Early Christian World* [Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2003]), whose work brought the banquet-and-symposium format of Greco-Roman meals to new centrality; Andrew McGowan (*Ascetic Eucharists: Food and Drink in Early Christian Ritual Meals*, Oxford Early Christian Studies [Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1999]), who has illustrated the diversity of Christian eucharistic meal practices in the second and third century, particularly ascetic bread-and-water meals; and Paul F. Bradshaw, perhaps the doyen of early-21st-century liturgical historians (many works, but on this topic see chiefly *Eucharistic Origins*, 2nd ed. [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004]), who draws on and extends McGowan’s work to present a picture of extraordinary diversity in the early eucharist.

⁵ Here I am indebted to Rouwhorst, who calls specifically for such attention to ritual and religious meaning within the symposium model and mentions the breaking of bread as one example. This essay is in large part a response to these concerns: “The Roots of the Early Christian Eucharist: Jewish Blessings or Hellenistic Symposia?,” 303–06.

⁶ McGowan, *Ascetic Eucharists*, 27; Bradshaw, *Eucharistic Origins*, 60; Bruce Chilton made the same observation in 1994: *A Feast of Meanings: Eucharistic Theologies from Jesus through Johannine Circles*, Supplements to Novum Testamentum v. 72 (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1994), 4–5.

pristine and unconnected types, I presume that different practices and understandings interacted with one another from the beginning in an early Christian movement where geographic separation was a reality but was also mitigated by considerable mobility. But in taking this approach I also begin to differ from Bradshaw and McGowan in that I assume a higher level of mutual acquaintance than they do among first-century Christians with different eucharistic understandings. Rather than positing many almost-unrelated eucharistic practices and meanings, I assume relationships among the various understandings demonstrated in such first-century sources as Paul, the Didache, Mark and Matthew, Luke/Acts, the Johannine literature, and Revelation.⁷ I also assume that significant second-century figures like Ignatius and Justin are acquainted with various forms of these understandings and that they tend to synthesize rather than reflecting only a single model.

This study traces the development of the eucharist in the first century by focusing on two major elements: a practice and a motif. The practice is the breaking of bread at the regular common meal—a meal I do not assume was practiced everywhere, or with identical frequency everywhere, but whose weekly celebration eventually became the widespread norm. Within this meal in many communities I propose that an identifiable, ritually significant breaking and sharing of bread from a single loaf—and, perhaps less frequently, the blessing and sharing of a single cup—was practiced: again, not everywhere, but early and

⁷ Martin D. Stringer, *Rethinking the Origins of the Eucharist*, SCM Studies in Worship and Liturgy (London: SCM Press, 2011) takes a similar approach. While I disagree with Stringer's view that the meal gathering of 1 Corinthians is an annual Passover event, I find several aspects of his work convincing and most of the rest illuminating. My debt to his approach will be clear in what follows. Stringer draws attention to Bradshaw's image of the data as dots scattered across a blank page (in Bradshaw, *The Search for the Origins of Christian Worship: Sources and Methods for the Study of Early Liturgy*, 2nd ed. [New York: Oxford University Press, 2002], 20) and suggests that some attempts to connect the dots, even provisionally, can and should be made. A predecessor who should be mentioned is Chilton, *A Feast of Meanings*. While Chilton's approach is much too speculative for my taste (he attributes several rapid shifts to the first decade after Jesus and presumes the disciples misunderstood Jesus' own highly anti-sacrificial intention from the beginning), he does both recognize diversity and attempt to draw connections.

widely. This practice, while in no way separate from the meal of which it was a part, would nonetheless tend to take on particular significance within it. It would involve the sharing of small portions as a ritual expression of unity. It would also tend to become a particular locus for theological reflection, as can already be seen in 1 Cor. 10:16-17.

The motif is the identification of the food and drink of the meal with the body and blood of the Lord. Like the breaking of the loaf, this motif emerged at least as early as the earliest sources we have; and while it was not known everywhere, it spread widely from its Palestinian origins to become widespread in the first century. Yet its metaphorical associations were received in a variety of ways ranging from enthusiastic acceptance through partial adoption to outright rejection—and even to subversive reappropriation. In places where the single loaf and/or common cup formed part of the meal, this motif might tend to be associated particularly with that stylized ritual sharing, although it might continue to be associated with the full meal as well. The combination of this stylized sharing with the body-and-blood motif is, in my view, the best way to understand the origins of what would later come to be seen as the normative model for eucharist.

In presenting a history of the first-century eucharist that focuses to a considerable extent on what would later become seen as the orthodox or mainstream model I do not seek to turn the clock back to a less critical age nor to privilege a metanarrative of uniformity. I hope instead to acknowledge the full scope of diversity while also telling a coherent story—one for which I believe there is in fact enough evidence to try to do so. As Robert F. Taft writes, “History means perceiving relationships, pointing out connections and causes,

hazarding hypotheses, drawing conclusions—in a word, *explaining*.”⁸ Thus I seek to tell a story that accounts for variation while also recognizing the thread of connection.

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[Please contact me if you’d like to read the remainder of this paper.]

⁸ “Comparative Liturgy Fifty Years after Anton Baumstark (d. 1948): A Reply to Recent Critics,” *Worship* 73, no. 6 (November 1999): 523.