Eucharistic Origins as Evidence for Jesus' Resurrection

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Abstract:
The earliest and most pertinent evidences concerning the church's celebration of the Eucharist are shown to be relevant to the apologists' arguments in support of Jesus' resurrection: the antiquity and rapid rise of Eucharistic praxis, the change that took place from various ceremonial meals in Judaism to the specifically Christian understanding of the Eucharist, the fact that the Eucharist was celebrated on a weekly basis on Sundays, and the symbolic liturgical actions that accompanied the earliest Christian assemblies will all serve as examples. Jewish and Greco-Roman religious influences seem incapable of accounting for these relatively undisputed practices. By contrast, I argue that Jesus' resurrection best resonates with them.

In recent years Christian theologians and apologists have focused almost exclusively on establishing the historicity of the empty tomb and the post-mortem appearances of Jesus at the expense of considering the early church's celebration of the Eucharist as a legitimate source of evidence for Jesus' resurrection. Relevant are Larry Hurtado's comments on N. T. Wright's latest argument: "the most remarkable innovation in first-century Christian circles was the inclusion of the risen/exalted Jesus as recipient of cultic devotion. For historical analysis, this is perhaps the most puzzling and most notable feature of the earliest Christian treatment of the figure of Jesus. Yet Wright has scarcely anything to say about this, and I find that curious."[1]

Because of the scarcity of works dedicated to early Christian worship and how it relates to the resurrection, I will describe and explain the origins of Eucharistic praxis to supplement the apologists' traditional arguments in support of Jesus' resurrection.[2] These unprecedented practices can only be accounted for by taking the resurrection appearances seriously as historical events. The appearances produced such powerful transformative experiences in the earliest disciples that

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the first Christians saw it as an act of disobedience to not worship the Risen Christ within the Eucharistic context with other believers.

The Antiquity of the Eucharist

One of the most significant difficulties scholars face as they discuss the origins of the Lord's Supper is determining how much of the Last Supper narratives in the Gospels are historical rather than legendary. Following Joachim Jeremias's major study, *The Eucharistic Words of Jesus*, many scholars today who have studied the subject affirm that although the Gospel narratives were influenced by various liturgical practices, they are nevertheless historically reliable at their core. According to Jeremias: "the common core of the tradition of the account of the Lord's Supper—what Jesus said at the Last Supper—is preserved to us in an essentially reliable form."[3] Stylistic and verbal characteristics within the Gospels do not prevent historians from making inferences that describe and explain the central events under consideration. It is generally recognized among Evangelical scholars that the various theological emphases within the Gospels do not provide sufficient reason to question the events reported and described therein.

Now this line of argument undeniably takes as its assumption that the New Testament writings draw from independent sources. I submit that there are at least *three* sources underlying the Gospel material. While we cannot delve into the intricacies of source criticism here, we can outline what commentators have said about the topic.[4] First, Mark's material is commonly thought to have an early Palestinian origin. Matthew, in turn, closely followed Mark; Luke draws from Paul's source material and another source that is different from Mark. That source is the second source. Luke's account is shaped by material that is not exclusively Pauline. While John's Gospel does not contain a Last Supper scene, it presents us with a different sacrament of the Lord's supper—the washing of feet in chapter thirteen. John's material comes from another source of unidentified origin.

Let us turn our attention from the Gospels to Paul's writings which would count as a *fourth* source. Using the technical standard terms for "received" and "passed on" in ancient Judaism, Paul

indicates in passages such as 1 Corinthians 11:23-25 that he is handing down sacred tradition about the Eucharist.[5] Critics almost unanimously recognize that this tradition reaches back to within a few months or years after Jesus' death. According to New Testament historian John Meier:

> Naturally, we begin with the earliest written document, Paul's first letter to the Corinthians, written around the year A.D. 55, some 25 years after the Last Supper took place. But, when it comes to Paul's narrative of the Eucharist, we are not even 25 years removed. Paul introduces this narrative with a solemn formula stressing that the tradition of which he is now reminding the Corinthians is a tradition he first taught them when they were converted to Christianity, around A.D. 50 or 51. But even at that time the Eucharistic tradition was nothing new. What Paul taught his converts was what he himself learned when he became a Christian, somewhere between A.D. 30 and 34. The narrative Paul repeats thus has its roots in the cradle of Christianity; the basic shape of the Eucharistic narrative that Paul recounts in the year 55 had already crystallized soon after the year 30. All this is intimated by the deceptively simple declaration: 'For I received from the Lord what I also handed down to you . . .' (v 23). We find similar formulas among the rabbis and the philosophers of the ancient world when they want to stress that a particular teaching has been carefully preserved and handed down.[6]

It is noteworthy that Paul uses the same terminology (i.e., "received" and "passed on") in the ancient creed of 1 Cor. 15:3b-5 which lists in chronological order the original percipients of the Risen Jesus.[7] Like 1 Cor. 11:23-25, the information contained relayed in these passages is also thought to go back to the earliest days of the Christian movement. As N.T. Wright states, it "was probably formulated within the first two or three years after Easter itself" and is "the earliest Christian tradition."[8] James D.G. Dunn dates it to "within months of Jesus' death."[9] Thus the clear and programmatic inclusion of Jesus within the context of Eucharistic praxis was easily identifiable from

within and outside the earliest Christian communities and began as a well-established worship pattern almost immediately after Jesus was executed and buried.

Thus there are least *four* independent sources that need to be considered in any serious analysis of the origins of the Eucharist. By employing the traditional criteria of multiple attestation, we have good reason to think we can know about the general aspects of the Last Supper meal that Jesus had with his disciples which later formed the basis of the Christian Eucharist. According to Xavier Léon-Dufour: "Another fact that argues for an attribution of Eucharistic institution to Jesus is that when the gospels report other meals taken by Jesus during his ministry or by the risen lord during the appearances, they never date these events. In the case of the Supper, however, Paul specifically says that the action attributed to Jesus took place 'on the night he was betrayed,' and all the synoptic accounts say the same thing in their own way."[10] Thus scholars are generally agreed that the Eucharist was celebrated at an exceptionally early date; the practice reaches back to Jesus himself.

Considering that most facts within ancient history are deduced from only one source of information, two or three sources generally renders the event probable. For ancient historians rarely have more than one or two sources to substantiate their claims. While historians generally do not speak in terms of *proving* anything about the past (for historical conclusions are generally tentative and capable of revision), the most reasonable explanation that we have is that Jesus shared meals with his disciples during his earthly ministry and that Jesus and his disciples celebrated the culminating meal of the Last Supper which was later repeated by his followers when they met together, celebrating the victory of the Lord's death and Exaltation.

The Transition from Jewish Ceremonial Meals to Christian Eucharist

Unlike the Jewish understandings of their various ritual meals, the earliest Christians believed that the Risen Jesus presided over the

celebration of the Eucharistic meal.[11] Receiving the Eucharist was the means by which the Risen Jesus renewed the members of the church, taking her sufferings upon himself. Redemption was not found by obeying the written commands of the Torah; but rather all people, regardless of their race, gender, class, or ethnicity, could find salvation through Jesus, expressed in the communal participation in the sacred meal.[12]

Perhaps the most distinctive historical mutation that took place from Second Temple Jewish meals to the Christian understanding and practice of the Eucharist had to do with the Christians' belief that the Eucharist was the culminating expression of the new covenant in the person of Christ. The conviction of the New Testament writers is that Jesus inaugurated a new covenant by providing his disciples with a radical reinterpretation of common Jewish rituals. IN part, the Eucharist was seen as a celebration of the *Messiah's death*. All the New Testament accounts of the Last Supper regard the Lord's Supper as a new covenant. Therefore, the first major mutation surrounding the paradigmatic shift from the Jewish ritual meals to the Christian Eucharist had to do with *the change of meaning* that the earliest believers poured into their new ritual meal.

During the Second Temple Jewish period there were many common family, social, and religious meals in Judaism. Indeed, the meals of the context of Christian origins were already complex cultural symbols. Determined in pattern by Jewish culture, these meals were also seen as events in which Jewish identity was constituted by bread, prayer, ritual purity, and teaching and narrative memory. Among these were the *Kiddush*, the *Haburah*, and the *Essene* meal. Also included are the Passover meal, and other common Jewish festive meals. Recent investigation has also uncovered the *todah* meal and the *todah* theme prayer after other meals as well.[13] Even though scholars are uncertain about which of these meals Jesus actually modified for at the Last Supper, it is noteworthy that the early Christians excluded all other ritual celebrations of Judaism when celebrating the Eucharist.

Although the New Testament authors do not employ the term "Eucharist," the verb form "to give thanks" is clearly embedded in their writings (Mark 14:23; Matt. 26:27; Luke 22:17, 19; 1 Cor. 11:24). Other expressions, such as "Holy Communion" (which comes from

the Greek word *koinōnia* in 1 Cor. 10:16), "The Lord's Supper" (1 Cor. 11:30), and "The Breaking of the Bread" (Luke 24:35; Acts 2:42) were instrumental for the theology of the Eucharist in the early church. By the time of Ignatius of Antioch (110 A.D.) and Justin the Martyr (150 A.D.), the term "Eucharist" was regularly being used by Christian believers.

Although the Christians remained within the Jewish spectrum of understanding the symbolic meals, their views about participating in these rites of passage had transformed in a way that had no parallel in Jewish religion. Not only did the meaning of the ritual meal drastically change from Judaism to early Christianity, but it also congealed from the many different meals taken by Jews to a singular celebration which excluded all other meals.

From the Jewish Sabbath to the Christian Sunday

One of the earliest customs in Christianity was the meeting that the believers held on every Sunday (Matt. 28:1; Mark 16:2,9; John 20:1,19; Acts 20:7; 1 Cor. 16:2; Rev 1:10). Despite the variation of the liturgical celebration, the basics of Eucharistic praxis were generally agreed upon by these early believers. All of the earliest evidence that we have—as seen in the Acts of the Apostles, Paul's first letter to the Corinthians, and the Didache—refers to the weekly *Sunday* celebration (and not any other day). Since Sunday was the day in which the disciples found the tomb empty (and possibly saw what they believed was the Risen Jesus), it was viewed as a sacred day by the earliest community of believers.

It would have been just as easy for the disciples to celebrate the Eucharist on Thursday (the day the Lord supposedly celebrated the Passover meal with them) or Saturday (the Sabbath). Willy Rordorff asks the same kinds of questions in his analysis of the origins of Sunday worship: "Why did they not, like the Jews, also meet on the Sabbath for their own worship either in the morning or in the afternoon or, if some of them still went to the synagogue, towards evening? That

would certainly have been the simplest solution, for the Sabbath was in any case a work-free day."[14]

The Christians, who were scattered throughout the countryside (cf. Acts 8:1), left the mother church in Jerusalem to establish local churches not only with a set of doctrines to be believed, but also with a set of practices for all persons to participate in (and this included, of course, the practice of the Eucharist). Throughout this process of inculturation, it would have been easy for the early believers to accommodate the practice of the Eucharist to non-Christian religious practices.[15] But there is simply no such accommodation; Eucharistic praxis remained constant as the surrounding cultures were increasingly converted to Christ.

The Symbolic Liturgical Actions that Accompanied the Earliest Eucharistic Celebration

Early Christian devotion did not take place in decorative temples; nor did it consist of sacrifices made to the God of Israel through the intercessions of a hereditary priesthood. "Along with the lack of temples or cult images," says Larry Hurtado, "the earliest Christians offered no sacrifices to their God, and in this as well seemed to their pagan neighbors an odd sort of religious group." Elsewhere, he adds that "Their lack of these important 'normal' components of religion is part of the reason why some outsiders regarded Christian groups as more like philosophical associations than religious groups."[16] Worship within the context of the Eucharistic celebration was so unique in the beginning of the church that it "transcended the lines of differentiation and marginalization operative in their life outside of the worship setting."[17]

Early Christianity was also accompanied by the belief that God was active in the midst of the ritual action. For these Christians, worship was not seen as "merely a religious exercise by its participants, an opportunity to re-affirm their beliefs and to engage in ritualized behaviour; it was an occasion for the manifestation and experience of

divine power."[18] The attitude in worship was not passive, but was one in which the believer could expect to be changed by the Spirit. Judaism in first century Palestine forbade the apotheosis or the divinization of human persons. This makes Christian devotion to Jesus all the more remarkable, especially considering that Christianity was seen as another sect of Second Temple Judaism.

Further, the early Christians took their novel form of worship one step further by giving Jesus cultic devotion—which is the best indication that they saw Jesus as divine. These mutations are, in the words of Hurtado, "a direct outgrowth from, and indeed a variety of, the ancient Jewish tradition. But an earlier stage it exhibited a sudden and significant difference in character from Jewish devotion."[19]

The Christians were strict monotheists. But what made them different from the Jews was that they introduced a binitarian devotional pattern of worship directed to God *and* Christ exclusively. This was heretical in Second Temple Judaism because it contravened the prayers, hymns, and devotion reserved for the God of the biblical tradition alone. There is simply no analogy in the Second-Temple period to accommodate this binitarian pattern of worship that was expressed in the Eucharistic celebration (worship to a human being who once walked and talked on earth!). According to many scholars, this was the single most innovative feature in early Christianity.

The Rapid Rise of Eucharistic Practice

Despite the varied expression of Christian devotion in the earliest decades of the church, it is generally recognized that the Church attracted unbelievers to embrace Jesus as Lord at an alarmingly rapid pace (cf. Acts 2:41, 47, 4:4, 6:1). The early conversion of Jewish priests (Acts 6:7) and other enemies of the "Way" (e.g., Paul: Phil. 3:4-6) corroborates the boldness of this testimony.

One of the reasons why Christianity spread at such a quick rate has to do with its adversarial encounter it had with respect to the practices of other religions (which served to drive and shape the growth of the Christian faith). For Gentile Christians, "it represented a *replacement cultus*. It was at one and the same time both a religious

commitment and a renunciation, a stark and demanding devotional stance with profound repercussions."[20] Despite the opposition that the early Christians faced, the religious power of the message--coupled with experience of worship and the relational bonding it provided them with—kept Eucharistic praxis alive and ongoing for many centuries within the Christian communities. This exclusivist approach to worship, as expressed in the Eucharist, obligated converts to abandon certain aspects of common life, and in some cases this created tensions in families and in other relationships. The sustenance of Christian worship as expressed in the Eucharist in the face of the Roman religion was a striking feature in early Christianity. So what made the rapid growth of Christian practice so astonishing was not merely that it grew quickly, but that it grew quickly in the face of *opposition.*

As mentioned earlier, the first Christians did not just bring their cognitive beliefs to the unevangelized; they also brought a specific pattern of liturgical practices with them (including the celebration of the Eucharist). Moreover, the first believers were willing to die for these practices.[21] Martyrdom indicated to the public on a large scale that some Christians were willing to go to any length of penalty to remain faithful followers of Jesus. Passages such as 1 Cor. 10:16, 11:27, John 6:51, and Luke 24:30, 31 reflect the earliest community's understanding of Jesus' words at the Last Supper in a certain way: they were supposed to be construed realistically with prophetic symbolism.

Explaining the Evidence

Perhaps the most important factor to consider when analyzing the origins of the Eucharist is to pinpoint the cause (or causes) of what brought the practice into being. The real challenge in historical understanding is to discover not only what happened, but also why (and how) the events occurred. For all of the historical mutations that have been discussed are significant and beg for some sort of explanation. There are a few causes that are able to account for it.

The first causal theory that may account for the origins of the Eucharist has to do with pagan influences. The uniqueness of Eucharistic practice may have borrowed from pagan thought in its utility

to articulate specific theological concepts surrounding the practice, but the essence of the Christians' devotion was fundamentally different from paganism or the mystery religions inhabiting the Mediterranean world. As I. Howard Marshall concludes, "It emerges that the pagan background has nothing to do with the origins of the Lord's supper. The one point where a parallel can be seen is in the pagan meals after sacrifices to which Paul explicitly refers in 1 Corinthians 10, but these meals were the ones which had parallels in Judaism, including above all the Passover meal itself. But we cannot use the mystery religions to throw light on the Lord's supper since we have no reliable information about any aspects of them which would provide parallels to the Christian meal."[22]

Marshall's point is exhibited by the earliest historical evidence within the Pauline corpus itself. Paul emphatically rejects pagan religion along with endorsing an exclusive worship of the one true God. "Both in theology and in practice," Hurtado claims, "Greco-Roman Jews demonstrate concern for God's supremacy and uniqueness with an intensity and a solidarity that seem to go far beyond anything else previously known in the Greco-Roman world."[23] Even for those Jews who were living in the diaspora at the time, they cannot be attributed with bringing their religious ideas back into Palestine to create and sustain the new Christian heresy. For the earliest tradition of the Christian Eucharist can be traced back to within weeks or months after Jesus' execution. Thus *the antiquity of Eucharistic practices* and the *consistency of the practice from Jerusalem outward* precludes the idea that worship evolved under the direct influence of the mystery religions.

Second, these historical mutations cannot be attributed to mere Jewish explanations either. The most significant distinction in earliest Christianity was its insistence on worshipping a person who at one time walked the earth, expressed in the memory invoking meals of the Eucharist. This in itself was a huge mutation and also has neither a praxis nor a linguistic parallel in Judaism. Worship of Jesus was not in competition for the devotion given to God. Rather, Jesus was seen as divine, or, at the very least, as participating in the divine nature of the God of Israel. Judaism, moreover, forbade the apotheosis or the divinization of any person. This makes devotion to Christ all the more

remarkable given that Christianity was seen as an early sect of Judaism which viewed Messiah Jesus as a divine figure to be worshipped.

In contrast to these two causal theories, the best explanation seems to be that offered by the church. Jesus offered communion with his disciples in the symbols of bread and wine; he was soon crucified and buried, and later seen by his earthly followers at different times and places and under different circumstances. Soon afterwards these experiences provided them with the necessary ingredient to keep up the feast, re-presenting the living Lord as he taught them before he departed from them. It does not seem likely that the Christians would have celebrated the *death of Israel's Messiah* unless he had indeed appeared to them.

Conclusion

Christian apologists have focused almost exclusively on establishing the empty tomb and the appearances of Jesus when arguing for the resurrection of Jesus. I hope to have shown how the church's earliest celebration of the Eucharist should at the least complement the apologists' traditional arguments. The church's beliefs coincided with her practices, and her practices were expressed by what she believed (*Lex orandi, Lex credendi*). It is unfortunate that so many apologists have never considered the rich resource of the Christian Eucharist in defense of the faith.

This is precisely the reason why the evidences for the origins of the Eucharist have been presented. Various aspects of the evidence were outlined and discussed: the antiquity of Eucharistic practices, the rapid rise of celebrating the Eucharist, the change that took place from various ceremonial meals in Judaism to the specifically Christian understanding of Eucharist, the fact that the meal was celebrated on Sundays, and the symbolic liturgical actions that accompanied the Christian meal were all exposited and discussed.

These practices cannot be explained by either pagan or Jewish influences, but must be accounted for by taking Jesus' earthly ministry, the resurrection appearances, and the charismatic character of the early

community's worship seriously. Because evidence is qualitative in scope, those Christian apologists who have already utilized the empty tomb and the historicity of the post-resurrection appearances now seem to have an even more persuasive case for Easter faith.

Notes

1. Larry W. Hurtado, "Jesus' Resurrection in the Early Christian Texts: An Engagement with N.T. Wright," *Journal for the Study of the Historical Jesus*, vol. 3, no. 2, (2005): 205.
2. In this essay I understand Eucharistic praxis as one of many elements that constitute the early church's liturgical form of worship.
3. Joachim Jeremias, *The Eucharistic Words of Jesus*, (New York: Scribners Publishers, 1966), 203.
4. John Meier, "The Eucharist at the Last Supper: Did it Happen?," *Theology Digest*, Vol. 42, No. 4 (Winter 1995): 340, 341.
5. Joachim Jeremias, *The Eucharistic Words of Jesus*, 101-103.
6. John Meier, "The Eucharist at the Last Supper: Did it Happen?," 339, 340.
7. Joachim Jeremias, *The Eucharistic Words of Jesus*, 101.
8. N.T. Wright, *The Resurrection of the Son of God*, (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2003), 319.
9. James D.G. Dunn, *Jesus Remembered*, (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2003), 855.
10. Xavier Léon-Dufour, *Sharing the Eucharistic Bread: The Witness of the New Testament*, trans. Matthew J. O'Connell, (New York: Paulist Press, 1981), 162.
11. Jerome Kodell, *The Eucharist in the New Testament*, (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 1988), 63, 64.
12. Larry W. Hurtado, *Lord Jesus Christ: Devotion to Jesus in Earliest Christianity*, (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2003), 128, 132, 133. Cf. 165.
13. For a history of Judaism conceived as a history of various ritual meals, see Jacob Neusner, *A Short History of Judaism: Three Meals, Three Epochs*, (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1992).
14. Willy Rordorff, *Sunday: The History of the Day of Rest and Worship in the Earliest Centuries of the Christian Church*, (London: TCM Press, 1968), 179.
15. Richard Bauckham, "The Lord's Day," from *From Sabbath to Lord's Day: A Biblical, Historical, and Theological Investigation*, ed. D.A. Carson, (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing Company, 1982), 236-240.
16. Larry W. Hurtado, *At the Origins of Christian Worship: The Context and Character of Earliest Christian Devotion* (Grand Rapids: William B Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2000), 25.
17. Larry W. Hurtado, *At the Origins of Christian Worship*, 46.
18. Larry W. Hurtado, *At the Origins of Christian Worship*, 56, 57.

19. Larry W. Hurtado, *One God, One Lord: Earliest Christian Devotion and Ancient Jewish Monotheism*, 2d ed. (Edinburgh: T & T Clark Publishing Company, 1998), 99.
20. Larry W. Hurtado, *At the Origins of Christian Worship*, 4.
21. Pinchas Lapide, *The Resurrection of Jesus: A Jewish Perspective*, (Eugene: Wipf and Stock Publishing, 2002), 26; E.P. Sanders, *The Historical Figure of Jesus*, (New York: Penguin Books, 1993), 280.
22. I. Howard Marshall, *Last Supper and Lord's Supper*, (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1981), 29.
23. Larry W. Hurtado, *How on Earth Did Jesus Become a God?: Historical Questions About Earliest Devotion to Jesus*, (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2005), 130.