

Jeremiah 3:31-34
1 Cor 11: 23-26
Mk 14:12-26

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Covenant, Blood, Wine, Passover, Body and Bread: The Eucharist

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The religious history and evolution of the Israelites, and their descendants the Judeans and the Jewish people, is a long, complex, and revolutionary one. Jesus participated in the revolutionary evolution of his ancestors' theologies and religious practices. Their history is our history.

In ancient religious practice, sacrifice was the core ritual which mediated the human relationship with the sacred. Its importance is reflected in the books of Exodus and Leviticus, the first seven chapters of which are devoted to the rules about sacrifice. In very ancient times, individuals offered sacrifices. (Lv 17:5) Later, priests controlled the offering of sacrifice by regulating where sacrifice could be performed, first at the Tent of Meeting, and later at the Temple. (Lv 17:5) There were various types of sacrifice: human, animal and grain offerings (Lv chs. 1-7). By the time Leviticus was compiled, human sacrifice in Israel had been abandoned.¹ Blood, released during a sacrificial offering, was revered as the life of a living being (Gn 9:4; Dt. 12:23). The blood of an animal, if eaten away from the sanctuary, was poured on the ground. (Dt. 12:24). In the Passover narrative, the blood of the lamb was smeared on the doorposts to protect the Israelites from

¹ McKenzie, S.J., John. Dictionary of the Bible. Milwaukee: The Bruce Publishing Company, 1965, "Sacrifice", p. 757. According to McKenzie, "[t]here are occasional references to the practice of human sacrifice both by Israelites and by other peoples. The story of Abraham and Isaac (Genesis 22) is a theological statement of Yahweh's rejection of this sacrifice in the form of a story." See also 2 Kgs 3:37.

the angel of death. (Ex 12:7, 13)² In a covenant ritual, the altar represented God. The blood of the victim was dashed on the altar. The terms of the covenant were read to the assembly. (Ex 24:7) Then the victim's blood was sprinkled on the people to signify that the covenant partners shared a common life. (Ex 24:8) From this history emerged the phrase "blood of the covenant". (Ex 24:8)

Animals offered in sacrifice had to be perfect, without blemish. (Lv 1:3, 3:1) In addition to the communal covenant sacrifice, sacrifices were offered after the fulfillment of a vow; after confession of sin in atonement for sin; for removal of guilt, and in thanksgiving. (Lv, Chs. 3-6.) Fatty parts of the animal, were burned on the altar, over a wood fire, as a sweet smelling offering to God (Lv 3:5, 16) or as God's share of food, the balance of which was eaten by the priests (Lv 3:11; 6:11, 22). Only "holy" people, priests, could consume the consecrated food. (See also Dt 18.1; Jos 13:14; Ezk 44:29)³ The fire on the altar was never to go out (Lv 6:6). As a result, animals were sacrificed daily at the Temple (Lv 6) The blood of a sacrificed animal was dashed at the base or sides of the altar (LV 1:5), sprinkled in front of the sanctuary (Lv 4:25ff), sprinkled seven times toward the veil of the sanctuary (Lv 4:6), splashed on the altar (LV 17:6), poured out at the base of the altar (Lv 4:7) or smeared on the horns of the altar (Lv 4:25). Priests put their fingers into the blood to sprinkle it on the altar or the people, or to smear blood on the horns of the altar. (Lv 4:5-7; 15b-17; 25) *Drinking blood or eating meat with blood in it was strictly forbidden (LV 3:17; 17:10ff.)*⁴

After the first Temple was destroyed, there was no legally acceptable place to offer sacrifice to maintain the covenant relationship. Jeremiah foretold the

² ibid. Note, however, that McKenzie thinks it unlikely that the lamb slaughtered for Passover was a "sacrifice" in Israelite religion.

³ Id. at p. 755.

⁴ McKenzie, S.J., John. Dictionary of the Bible. Milwaukee: the Bruce Publishing Company, 1965, "Blood", pp. 99-100.

destruction of the first Temple, lived through the destruction of the first Temple and Jerusalem, and spoke of a new covenant, written on human hearts, one of belonging, one which results in a spontaneous recognition of God by those with whom God covenants.

In Mark, Jesus' last supper with his disciples and apostles occurs within days, if not hours, of his Temple protest. (Mk 14.1) His last supper with them is a Passover meal (Mk 14:1, 12), during which Jesus speaks of a new covenant in his blood. (Mk 14.24) Passover and covenant, separate strands in Israel's religious history, come together in Jesus last supper with his friends. In this experience, however, there is no designated sacred space. There is no altar. No blood is sprinkled, smeared or poured. Jesus knows he is about to die, knows his blood will be shed; but wine takes the place of blood at this meal. The offerings *can* be consumed. Instead, there is a table at which Jesus' community shares a meal. Jesus asks his disciples to drink the wine, symbolizing his blood, even though a thousand years of Israelite-Judean tradition forbade the consumption of blood.⁵ The suggestion is that Jesus' blood transfers life to the disciples through the drinking of the wine just as life was transferred to those offering a sacrifice by the blood of the victim. Jesus, who believed the Temple would be destroyed, reinterprets both covenant and sacrifice in light of the Passover meal. When he breaks bread and drinks wine with his community (Mk 14:24-25),

In the supper narrative, and throughout Mark's gospel, bread is also a symbol. The word bread appears more than 20 times. In the pre-Christian world, bread was a common symbol for teaching or doctrine. In later New Testament writings, bread became a symbol for Christian doctrine.⁶ In Mark's gospel, bread

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Quesnell, Quentin. *The Mind of Mark*. Rome: Pontifical Biblical Institute, 1969, pp. 191-195.

symbolizes more than teaching or doctrine. For Mark, bread is a symbol of the disciples' misunderstanding of Jesus. In Mark, bread is a symbol for what we call the Eucharist some version of which Mark's faith community practiced. Jesus tells those present at the Passover meal that is his last supper that the bread is his body, the broken bread his broken body.

In Mark, Jesus introduces a table ritual, a common meal, like Passover was and is, with bread and wine as the ritual elements of nourishment for all. That the reenactment of Jesus' last supper became the ritual of the earliest Church, is attested by Paul some fifteen years before Mark's gospel was written. (1 Cor 11:23-26)

The disciples, according to Mark, don't understand Jesus' teaching *because* they don't understand about the bread (Mk 6:52). They don't understand that in and through the sharing of a ritual meal they can "recognize", know, the meaning and identity of Jesus. They don't understand that, gathering as a community for a ritual meal, opens the portal to the sacred. They don't understand that "[T]he full meaning of the Eucharist is the full meaning of Christianity."⁷ The Eucharist means death and resurrection, the union of human beings in one body, the abiding presence of Jesus and of God, the completion of all wants in faith.⁸ In the Eucharist, according to Mark, bread becomes a symbol of the kerygma, the gospel itself.⁹

Jesus brought Passover, bread and body together with covenant, wine and blood. In doing so, he provided a way other than sacrifice to relate to God. He provided a ritual that would survive the Temple. He shifted meaning from

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Id. at p. 276.

⁸ Quesnell, Id., p. 276.

⁹ Quesnell, Quentin. *The Mind of Mark*. Rome: Pontifical Biblical Institute, 1969, pp. 191-195

sacrifice to nurture for the sake of the liberation of all. In so doing, he reinterpreted the identity of God himself. He reinterpreted the nature of the relationship between God and human beings.

Eventually, the disciples did understand. They developed what evolved into the ritual we call the Eucharist. And in the Eucharist, Mark passionately argues, is “...the full meaning of Christianity.”¹⁰

¹⁰ Id., p. 276.