

A new economy: the eucharist

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The Eucharist, a thanksgiving, is the most important rite or sacrament of early Christianity, together with baptism. This lecture is taking a different approach from that of McGowan, “[Food, ritual, and power](#)”, whose concern is to locate the eucharist in its culturally rich Greco-Roman environment. The second important point he makes is that there were a number of ways to conduct the sacred meals called “agape” and “eucharist”, as well as a number of interpretations.¹ The evidence, however, could be read to indicate that there was considerable agreement about the ritual and its meaning.

BREAD, WINE, AND OTHER FOODS

Why are these elements chosen? Is it because they were staple foods? Bread indeed is a staple food, but wine can hardly be considered so, no matter its economic and cultural importance in antiquity, including biblical antiquity.

1. Bread is indeed ordinary and ubiquitous, as McGowan writes, and I would add, absolutely crucial.

The first thing to bear in mind is that bread was often lacking either because of general shortages and famines, and more pointedly because of the uneven distribution.

A simple list of the tasks entailed in growing wheat and barley (as well as other cereals such as millet or sorghum) gives one an idea of its centrality:

¹This interpretation of the evidence could itself be interpreted as a modern need to suppose a multiplicity of views even about central tenets and rites from the beginning of Christianity.

growing (repeated plowing, hoeing, sowing).
 weeding
 harvesting and transporting
 threshing
 winnowing
 storing
 milling
 dough preparation
 baking

The work needed for each of the tasks above was considerable. If one could add the number of days and hours needed for a year's food supply, one would find that it represented a disproportional amount of total productive labor. This work was done mostly in groups (families, villages). Injustice in access to means of survival, in the distribution of land, labor, and food, and in the payment of labor, was an integral part of the production of grain and bread. It was incorporated in the product.

The use of military force to conquer productive areas, maintain control, and often repress local movements (often through religious mediations, as we saw in the case of the Jerusalem temple and Jewish society in Roman Palestine), was part of this reproduction of one's means of life.

How did one know that access to bread as paradigmatic food involved injustice? Judaism taught this in the Torah, especially the Deuteronomy, and the Prophetic writings.

Given claims of injustice, and appeal to a divinity of justice, there was possibility of correction: *forgiveness*, by animal sacrifice at the altars (presented as substitutes). Is forgiveness at a distance possible, or only face to face? This is a complex question for antiquity, as for our times (and near impossible for historians).

2. Wine: also the focus of great concern, yet less fundamental than olive oil. Viticulture was agriculture at its best, technically speaking as well as in its outlook on time (long-term investment, long and demanding process, importance of timeliness, duration of product).
3. *Fermentation* and *leavening*: very important aspects of bread- and wine-making. A mysterious process is at work, that occurs naturally, but as part or rather the continuation of the transformation by human labor (grinding and crushing).

4. Other foods: vegetables, etc. not often mentioned, though in universal use (“they don’t fill”).
 - a) Milk and honey: uncooked, or mysteriously “supercooked” (naturally sweet, without human intervention—different in this respect from dates). Cf. *manna* in Exodus, miraculous food in the desert, not made by human hands. It falls from heavens in the desert (the “unsown land”) and cannot be stored.
 - b) Meat and fish:
 - i. meat was part of the sacrifices and was extremely desirable. Sacrifices were bitterly criticized by Porphyry, *De usu animalium* (Porphyry (234–305?) was a neoplatonist philosopher from Tyre in Phoenicia).
 - ii. why was meat not used in the Eucharist? The answer is that it is, see John 6.
Animal meat made social differentiation even more sharply drawn. The concern was such that accommodations were accepted for the Passover sacrifice in Judaism (obviously many people couldn’t afford the necessary lamb).

AGAPÈ AND EUCHARIST

1. Agapè: See article “Agape” in *Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church*.
Agape indicates a religious meal which seems to have been practiced in the early church “in close relation to the Eucharist”. Sources for its existence are:
 - a) 1 Corinthians 11.17–34, in which abuses accompanying these common meals are denounced (Date, ca. 52-6 CE).
 - b) (ca 105 CE?) Letter to the Smyrnans 8, by Ignatius of Antioch.
 - c) In 112 CE: Pliny’s letter 96 to Trajan. Two different kinds of meetings are described: one in the early morning (with prayer, and a Eucharistic meal?); the other an ordinary meal.
 - d) Hippolytus of Rome (c. 170–c. 236), in the *Apostolic tradition* 26. Later text.
 - e) Tertullian (c. 160–c. 225) in *Apology* 39.

Evolution: the connection Agape/Eucharist seems to be over by the mid-3d c. CE (according to Cyprian of Carthage): the Eucharist, involving a fast, occurs in the morning; the Agapè in the evening.

The Agape became a charity supper, as one can see in Augustine's *Contra Faustum* 20.20 (end 4th c. CE). It fell into disuse. There have been some revival of it in modern times. Compare *antidoron* and *blessed bread*.

2. Eucharist: Εὐχαριστία, thanksgiving. This name originates in the thanking by Jesus (1 Cor 11.24; or Mt 26.27), or by early Christians? Other names: "Holy communion", "Lord's supper", "Mass", "divine liturgy" (Eastern orthodox view).

a) Origins:

- i. Paul in 1 Cor 10.16–17:

The cup of blessing that we bless, is it not a sharing in the blood of Christ? The bread that we break, is it not a sharing in the body of Christ? Because there is *one bread, we who are many are one body, for we all partake of the one bread.*

And 11.23–25:

For I received from the Lord what I also handed on to you, that the Lord Jesus on the night when he was betrayed took a loaf of bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it and said, "this is my body that is for you. Do this **in remembrance of me.**" In the same way he took the cup also, after supper, saying, "this cup is the **new covenant** in my blood. Do this, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of me." for *as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes.*

- ii. Synoptic gospels: Mt 26.26–28; Mk 14.22–24; Lk 22.17–20; Here is Mark 14.22–24:

While they were eating, he took a loaf of bread, and after blessing it he broke it, gave it to them, and said, "Take; this is my body." Then he took a cup, and after **giving thanks** he gave it to them, and all of them drank from it. He said to them, "This is my blood of the **covenant**, which is **poured out for many.**"

- iii. celebrated by early Christian community: Acts 2.42, 46; or Paul in Troas, Acts 20.7. Regular part of early worship.
- iv. absence in John's gospel; but see Jn 6.32–58:

...whoever believes has eternal life. I am the bread of life. Your ancestors ate the manna in the wilderness, and they died. This is the bread that comes down from heaven, so that one may eat of it and not die. I am the living bread that came down from heaven. Whoever eats of this bread will live forever; and the bread that I will give for the life of the world is my flesh. [...] unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you have no life in you. Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood have eternal life, and I will raise them up on the last day;

- v. Jewish background:
 - A. Lev 2, 23.13: fine flour and wine offerings;
 - B. Passover seder: lamb; bread and matzot (*lahma' de'onyya'*)
 - C. Kiddush: blessing over bread and wine (at sabbath)
 - vi. Pagan sacramental rites?
 - vii. Pagan banquets and symposia? formally speaking, yes, especially for agapes: eulogies, drinking, eating, singing.
- b) Meaning:
- i. little dispute or controversy among early writers:
 - A. the Eucharist centers on the body and blood of Jesus as Christ: it is interpreted as a sacrifice, and the Passover connection means Christ is seen as a sacrificial lamb. Martyrdom is perceived as part of this: see Ignatius of Antioch, in his letter to the Romans (107 CE): “I am God’s wheat and I shall be ground by the teeth of beasts.”
 - B. symbolic language? In antiquity, little difference is made between symbols and reality. This will become a problem eventually in following centuries: is Jesus Christ present (real presence) on the altar, in the two species, or are these symbols (as we understand symbols today, i.e. as pointing to a reality separate from them)?
 - C. in the 4th c. CE, a language is adopted concerning the transformation of elements (bread and wine): transubstantiation (leading to Medieval controversies).
 - ii. The sacrificial interpretation, —signified in the texts by the use of: diathèkè (covenant), anamnèsis (remembrance), enchynomenon (poured out)—and its abuses will pose a problem for some of the Reformers. Anamnèsis (remembrance) is a leading idea nowadays for Catholics, Church of England, etc.

IMAGES

eucharist and agapè

REFERENCES

McGowan, Andrew. "Food, ritual, and power". In: *Late ancient Christianity*. Ed. by Virginia Burrus. A people's history of Christianity 2. Fortress Press, 2005. Chap. 6, pp. 145–64.