

The Eucharist Problem: John versus Paul

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In 1 Corinthians 11:23–26, Paul introduces a puzzling problem about the Eucharist ceremony. He begins by saying, “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 then describes what has become the traditional understanding of the Eucharist ceremony. Before drilling down into that teaching, let me explain the initial difficulty.

Paul is talking about a teaching Jesus supposedly handed down to the apostles during the Last Supper. Why is this teaching a “revelation from the Lord” to Paul? Had the apostles until then kept this episode secret from the movement? Was Paul just unaware that such a teaching had been circulating? Or, did Paul introduce this teaching for the first time? If the latter, how come the apostles, who were present at the Last Supper, didn't know about it?

In this essay, I am going to look at Paul's revelation, compare it the Synoptic versions of the text, and then examine John's very different, perhaps contradictory, version of the Eucharist teaching. It will be my suggestion that John, writing about a half-century after Paul, preserved a pre-Pauline form of the Eucharist teaching and that Paul's revelation is a radical reinterpretation

and explanation of what Jesus must have meant when he delivered the version preserved by John.

According to Paul, on the night he was betrayed, Jesus

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.¹

New Testament scholars generally agree that Paul wrote this during the fifties period of the first century, probably about 20 to 25 years after the death of Jesus. The earliest gospel version of the ceremony appears in Mark 14:22–26. The academic consensus is that Mark wrote sometime in the sixties or later and that Matthew and Luke used Mark’s gospel as a source. Mark’s version of the Eucharist teaching suggests a familiarity with Paul’s teaching but not a strict preservation. In his version,

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. Truly I tell you, I will never again drink of the fruit of the vine until that day when I drink it new

in the kingdom of God.” When they had sung the hymn, they went out to the Mount of Olives.²

Mark has a couple of variations from Paul. Where Paul says that the eating and drinking are done in remembrance of Jesus, Mark fails to explain the purpose of the ceremony. Mark says the ceremony constitutes a “covenant” but Paul says the actions constitute a “*new covenant* [emphasis added],” perhaps suggesting his expansive mission to include the gentiles and break from the Jerusalem church of the apostolic group. Additionally, Paul says Jesus said his body (the bread) and the wine (the cup) was “for you,” i.e., the apostles, while Mark says the blood was “poured for many,” a different beneficiary than Paul’s. Nevertheless, Mark’s version is reasonably close enough to Paul’s to suggest an oral influence on Mark.

Matthew closely follows Mark’s version but adds that the blood was poured out for many “for the forgiveness of sins.”³ The added phrase isn’t from Paul or Mark, but Matthew otherwise follows Mark closely, suggesting that his source for the Eucharist is more likely Mark than a familiar Pauline oral tradition. Luke on the other hand has a very different version of the Eucharist teaching. As I will argue in a moment, Luke’s version combines Mark and Paul, and it is almost certain that Luke must have had a written version of Paul’s Eucharist teaching in his possession. According to Luke,

Then he took a cup, and after giving thanks he said, “Take this and divide it among yourselves; for I tell you that from now on I will not drink of the fruit of the vine until the kingdom of God comes.” Then he took a loaf of bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it and gave it to them, saying, “This is my body,

which is given for you. Do this in *remembrance of me.*” And he did the same with the cup after supper, saying, “This cup that is poured out for you is the *new covenant* in my blood [emphasis added].⁴

Note here that Luke has two different cup incidents where everyone else has one. In the passage quoted, I emphasized the first cup of wine. For now, subtract out the first cup of wine in Luke’s version and concentrate on the remainder. In Table 1 below, I have placed the text from Luke and Paul side by side.

Table 1: Comparison of Eucharist Text in Luke and Paul

Luke 22:14–20	Paul 1 Corinthians 11:23–26
Then <i>he took a loaf of bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it</i> and gave it to them, saying,	the Lord Jesus... <i>took a loaf of bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it</i> and said,
“ <i>This is my body, which is given for you. Do this in remembrance of me.</i> ”	“ <i>This is my body that is for you. Do this in remembrance of me.</i> ”
And he did the same with the cup after supper, saying,	In the same way he took the cup also, after supper, saying,
“ <i>This cup that [is poured out] for you is the new covenant in my blood.</i> ”	“ <i>This cup is the new covenant in my blood. Do this, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of me.</i> ”

If we look at the parallel passages we can see that Luke’s version is almost word for identical to Paul’s version. I emphasized those portions of the texts that are most directly the same. Note here, that he follows Paul’s usages rather than Mark’s: He uses Paul’s “you” instead of Mark’s “for many;” Paul’s “*new*” covenant instead of Mark’s “covenant”; and includes Paul’s

explanation of the bread/body as a “remembrance” of Jesus. It’s difficult not to see that Luke very likely had a written copy of Paul’s text before him.

Still, he also integrated Mark’s version of the ceremony in the form of a second cup of wine being circulated among the apostles and incorporated Mark’s usage of the promise not to drink wine until the Kingdom arrives. He does take Mark’s “poured out” and insert it into his account of the second cup, but eliminates Mark’s “for many,” keeping it in line with Paul’s “you.” The very close agreement between Luke and Paul coupled with the enhancements from Mark suggest that the Eucharist ceremony was still in an evolutionary state of transmission decades after Paul handed down his “revelation.”

Now let’s look at the problems introduced by John, which may be the latest of the gospels and very possibly written in the early second century.

Jesus said to them, “*I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never be hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty [emphasis added].*”⁵

“*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 [emphasis added].*”⁶

So Jesus said to them, “*Very truly, I tell you, 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; for my*

flesh is true food and my blood is true drink. Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood abide in me, and I in them. Just as the living Father sent me, and I live because of the Father, so whoever eats me will live because of me. *This is the bread that came down from heaven, not like that which your ancestors ate, and they died. But the one who eats this bread will live forever [emphasis added].*⁷

John's version is very different from Paul's, radically so. The most important concept to grasp is that in Paul, the bread is Jesus's body, and, in John, Jesus' body is the bread. These two propositions are not the same thing. In John you eat the "flesh" of Jesus' body and drink the blood from Jesus' body in order to receive eternal life. There is nothing about remembrance, covenants and, most importantly, there is no handing out of symbolic bread or symbolic wine.

This last point is the key to understanding the differences. The crowd addressed by Jesus does not understand what eating Jesus means. "How can this man give us his flesh to eat?"⁸

Jesus responds,

So Jesus said to them, "Very truly, I tell you, *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; for my flesh is true food and my blood is true drink. Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood abide in me, and I in them [emphasis added]."⁹

No symbolic bread here. No symbolic wine. No act of remembrance. No covenants. What, therefore, does it mean to eat Jesus' "flesh" and drink his "blood"? What does it mean that

Jesus is the “bread” that has to be eaten? Is this supposed to be some sort of Meandic bacchanal where the god is ripped apart and eaten?

The answer is simple. Eating the bread and drinking the blood were metaphors for taking in the teachings of Jesus about how to obtain eternal life. Matthew notes a similar bread metaphor.

When the disciples reached the other side, they had forgotten to bring any bread. Jesus said to them, “Watch out, and beware of the yeast of the Pharisees and Sadducees.”...Then they understood that *he had not told them to beware of the yeast of bread, but of the teaching* of the Pharisees and Sadducees [emphasis added].¹⁰

Intriguingly, Matthew’s episode (based on his interpretation of Mark’s source story) and John’s Eucharist episode both follow after and explain the preceding miracle of the multiplication of the loaves.

If we accept that John has equated eating the Jesus-bread with taking in his teaching, I think we can begin to understand Paul’s revelation and why it is something new that the apostles didn’t know about.

It is my contention that the original formulation of the Eucharist teaching consisted of the instruction that the apostles should eat (take in the teachings of) Jesus because he was the “bread” (knowledge.) John enhanced this to make Jesus the “bread *of Life*” (knowledge *of eternal life*.) There is no handing over of bread and wine in the original Eucharist discourse.

There is no eating bread in remembrance of Jesus. The apostles are asked to “eat my flesh and drink my blood” in order to “have eternal life.”

At the Last Supper, Jesus would have told the apostles that he is the bread (knowledge) and that they should eat him. No doubt this would have been puzzling to them. A similar direction was given regarding Jesus’ blood and the granting of eternal life. The Eucharist ceremony, in its original form, was about handing over the teachings of Jesus to the apostles and granting them the authority to continue in his name. While “remembrance” wasn’t a specific part of the ceremony, the fact that they were to continue in his name would keep Jesus’ memory alive among the followers.

Paul appears to have taken over the original symbolism of eating the bread—taking in the knowledge of Jesus’ teachings—and concretized it into a physical ritual designed to remember Jesus through his teachings.

Mark’s version of the Eucharist appears to be adopted from a general knowledge of Paul’s account, but without having the specific wording before him. In the earlier version of the Eucharist, Jesus offered his flesh for the life of the world. Mark retained the idea that the covenant was for the masses (“many”) while Paul, reflecting the original teaching at the Last Supper, limited it to a commitment to the apostles (“for you.”) Luke appears to have accepted Paul’s exact written version of the Eucharist and integrated it with Mark’s.

Gary Greenberg is the author of several books on biblical topics, including *The Judas Brief* and *Who Wrote the Gospels?* His next book, due out later this year, is *The Case for a Proto-gospel: How differences between Mark and John prove independent reliance on an earlier*

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¹ 1 Corinthians 11:23–26.

² Mark 14:22–25.

³ Matthew 26:28.

⁴ Luke 2:17–20.

⁵ John 6:35.

⁶ John 6:50–51.

⁷ John 6:53–58.

⁸ John 6:52.

⁹ John 6:53–56.

¹⁰ Matthew 16:5–12.