

Eucharistic Sacrifice in the N.T.

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It does not seem necessary to argue that the N.T. applies sacrificial terminology to Jesus' death and to the Lord's Supper ('blood of the covenant', 'poured out'). But though it is not as immediately evident that the NT thinks of the Christian eucharist as a sacrifice, there are several passages in which the sacrificial interpretation is possible and even probable; taken together, they present an argument from convergence of considerable weight.

1. Christ instructed the Church to repeat the sacrificial symbolism of the Last Supper. He is received in sacrificial symbols.

'Body....blood' 'Each of the two nouns presupposes a slaying that has separated flesh and blood. In other words: Jesus speaks of himself as a sacrifice' (Jeremias E. J. p. 222). If so, the Eucharist is also sacrificial, in the sense that we receive Jesus in the form of one sacrificed.

The breaking of the bread, which Jeremias sees as a 'simile of the fate of his body' (ibid. p. 224), can furnish a similar argument.

Jesus gave his disciples to eat and drink so as to give them a share in the atoning power of his death. (Jeremias p. 233)

2. The words 'do this in remembrance of me' according to the same exegetes, have sacrificial associations. The word 'remembrance' occurs in connection with offerings in Lev. 24.7. and Num. 10.10, where it means a 'presentation before God intended to induce God to act' (Jeremias p. 248-9). Jeremias sees the same idea in Paul's words: 'you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes' (I Cor 11.26). He paraphrases Paul's thought thus: 'by coming together daily for table fellowship in the short period of time before the parousia and by confessing in this way Jesus as their Lord, the disciples represent the initiated salvation work before God and they pray for its consummation'. (ibid. pp. 253 - 5)

3. In I Cor 10. 16-22, St Paul urges his readers to avoid idolatry on the grounds that it makes the worshippers 'partners with demons'. He argues from the analogous case of Jewish and Christian worship; the Israelites who 'eat the sacrifices' became 'partners in the altar'; through the Eucharist, the Christian enjoys a participation in the body and blood of Christ. It seems, therefore, for two reasons that Paul is thinking of the Eucharist in sacrificial terms:-

(a) He compares it with the ritual eating that takes place at pagan and Jewish sacrifices;

(b) In the context to participate in the body and blood of Christ must mean to receive Christ as sacrificed

4. Although it is inconceivable that the author of Hebrews would regard the Eucharist as a sacrifice which adds to Christ's definitive sacrifice there is a passage in which the sacrificial language could hardly fail to be interpreted by the original readers as a reference to the Eucharist: 'we have an altar from which those who serve the tent have no right to eat' (Heb. 13.10)

The concept of the meal-sacrifice occurs in the OT. (e.g. Lev.2), though the circumstances are very different from those of the Last Supper or the Eucharist. In the OT, flour, mixed with oil is burned (not at a meal) and only the priests eat. The word 'remembrance' is used of this offering in Lev. and elsewhere (Thurian, The Eucharistic Memorial) (Part I pp 46ff). It is therefore possible that the Twelve at the Supper saw themselves as priests, consuming a meal-offering, but this interpretation does not impose itself.

To sum up, there are several passages where the NT writers use language of the Eucharist which is capable of a sacrificial interpretation. This is clearly not to say that they regard the Eucharist as a sacrifice additional to that of Calvary; rather we receive 'the lamb who was slain' and 'set forthbefore the Father the Sacrifice of the Cross' (Reply of the Anglican Bishops to Leo XIII). Would it help to clarify this point if we spoke of the Eucharist not as a sacrifice but as the sacrifice of Christ).

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