

*Prepared for Voice of the Faithful by Ronald DuBois, Ph.D.*

### **1 Corinthians 11: 23-27:**

*For I received from the Lord what I also handed on to you, that the Lord Jesus, on the night he was handed over, took bread, and, after he had given thanks, broke it and said, “This is my body that is for you. Do this in remembrance of me.”*

*In the same way also the cup, 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 death of the Lord until he comes. Therefore whoever eats the bread or drinks the cup of the Lord unworthily will have to answer for the body and blood of the Lord.*

This passage from Paul’s epistle to the Corinthians, written about 55 AD, provides a good introduction to a discussion of the origins of the Eucharist as ritual and as sacrament. The synoptic Gospels have similar expressions, but Paul’s letter is the earliest mention of this clearly liturgical expression of the Lord’s words at the Last Supper. It appears that already, only 30 years after the death of Jesus, these words were in circulation and probably were used in some liturgical celebrations.

### **Acts 2: 42-46**

*They devoted themselves to the teaching of the apostles and to the communal life, to the breaking of the bread and to the prayers. Awe came upon everyone, and many wonders and signs were done through the apostles. All who believed were together and had all things in common; they would sell their property and possessions and divide them among all according to each one’s need. Every day they devoted themselves to meeting together in the temple area and to breaking bread in their homes. They ate their meals with exultation and sincerity of heart.*

In these early passages written by Luke around the year 85, he provides an idealized picture of the earliest followers of Jesus. These followers were Jews, not Christians, as is clear from Luke’s words that they went to “the temple area” every day... .” As Jews, they sacrificed in the temple, they worshipped in the synagogues, and they celebrated Shabbat on Friday nights.

So was this “breaking of bread” mentioned in Acts a Eucharistic celebration? Yes and No.

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“No,” if we think that the words of Jesus at the Last Supper, which in the Church we call the words of institution or the words of consecration, were involved. They were not.

“Yes,” in a profoundly liturgical sense, which we will consider in this paper.

### ***Berekoth, Shabbats, and Seders***

Before looking at the celebration of the “breaking of the bread,” we should understand the meaning of the Hebrew word *berekah* (the plural form is *berekoth*), the Shabbat meals that the disciples, as Jews, would commonly eat, and the special Shabbat meal called Seder.

*Berekah*, which was translated by the Greeks as *eucharistia*, is generally translated as “Blessed.” *Berekah* begins most Jewish prayers and usually is directed to JHWH. It has a connotation of thanksgiving and also of praise. However, although it can express gratitude for the gifts from JHWH, *berekah* is basically a proclamation or confession of the *mirabilia Dei*: the wonderful works of God.

The Jewish ritual of Shabbat invoked several of these *berekoth*. And it is with the ritual meal of Shabbat that we begin our understanding of the “breaking of the bread.”

### **An Outline of a Shabbat Meal**

This ritual meal, usually celebrated in families or in small groups of friends on Friday evenings, goes back at least 100 years before Christ. It is very likely that Jesus would have celebrated Shabbat with small groups of his disciples on occasion. The structure of the ritual, with some probable references to the saving acts of Christ, clearly formed the basis of the later “breaking of the bread” celebrated by the early followers of Jesus.

The description that follows is an abbreviated version from *Eucharist* by Louis Bouyer (pages 78-84). He describes three stages that preceded the ritual and then the “essential ritual” itself:

1. The meal opened with a ritual hand washing. Then, if this were a ceremonial meal, each person upon arriving drank a first cup of wine, repeating the following blessing: “Blessed by thou, JHWH, our God, King of the universe, who givest us this fruit of the vine.” (The priest recites a very similar prayer at the Offertory of the Mass.)
2. The meal itself began when the father of the family or the presiding member of the community had broken the bread that was to be given

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to the participants. When breaking the bread, the leader recited this blessing: “Blessed be thou, JHWH, our God, King of the universe, who bringest forth bread from the earth.” (Again, similar to the priest’s words at the Offertory of Mass.)

3. The diners then ate. During the meal, as courses and cups of wine were served, each person in turn pronounced a series of appropriate blessings.

The essential ritual, however, came at the end of the meal. The mother (usually) of the family brought in a lamp, which she had already prepared and lighted. The lamp was blessed, using words that recalled the creation of the luminaries to light up the night. Following the blessing of the lamp, they burned incense, with a proper blessing.

Next came a second general hand washing: The one who presided received the water first from the hands of a servant, or in the absence of a servant, from the youngest at the table. (Recall Jesus washing the feet of the apostles at the Last Supper.)

After these preliminaries, the presider, with the cup of wine mixed with water before him, solemnly invited those assisting to join in with his act of *thanksgiving*, using these words: “Let us give thanks to the Lord our God.” Those gathered for the meal responded: “*Blessed be he whose generosity has given us food and whose kindness has given us life.*”

The presider then chanted a series of three *berekoth*, which were likely used by Jesus and seem to be from a time long before the Christian era.

1. The first of these *berekoth* is a blessing for the nourishment received, and it grows into a cosmic blessing for all of creation, especially the continued creation of life.
2. The second is a blessing for the promised land. It opens out into a blessing for the covenant, sealed by circumcision, and the gift of the Torah. Thus it becomes a blessing for the whole history of salvation.
3. The third *berekah* is a supplication that the creative and redemptive action of God in olden times be continued and renewed today and that it find its ultimate fulfillment in the coming of the Messiah and the final establishment of the Kingdom of God.

Elements of the three *berekoth* prayers in the Shabbat ritual are found in all of our Eucharistic prayers throughout the centuries, although with a focus on the role of Christ in salvation rather than just on the saving acts of JHWH in the history of the Jews.

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First, there is a cosmic blessing (thanksgiving) for all of creation, especially the continued creation of life. Next, there is a blessing for the whole history of salvation (not just for the covenant and the gift of the Torah.) And finally, we pray that the saving action of God be continued and renewed in the present and find its ultimate fulfillment in the final establishment of the Kingdom of God.

Returning, then, to the question of what Luke calls the “breaking of the bread” in Acts, it was, for these Jewish followers of Jesus, a Shabbat service. But the second and third *berekah* probably included references to the saving acts of the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus.

The service undoubtedly did not include the words that Paul quotes in 1st Corinthians, however, at least at this early date in the Jewish community in Jerusalem.

So, was this service, this meal described in Acts, a Eucharist? Yes, in the sense that it was a *berekah*, a *eucharistia*, a prayer of praise and thanksgiving for God’s wonderful works.

But let us look also at another predecessor of the Christian Eucharist: the Synagogue service.

### The Synagogue Service

This description of an early synagogue worship service, possibly as it was conducted at the time of Jesus, is taken from the “Seder Amram Gaon,” as presented in *Eucharist* by Louis Bouyer.

The service is preceded by a prolonged period of silent prayer, which often involved the silent reading of the last six psalms, 145 to 150 (hymns to creation). A reading of the Qaddish prayer followed. (The Qaddish is a direct source of the “Our Father” Jesus taught to the disciples.)

Then began the *berekoth*, with the *hazan* (ancestor of the Christian deacon) proclaiming: “Blessed be JHWH, who is to be blessed.” All answered: “Blessed be JHWH, who is to be blessed, for ever and ever.” (There are three parts to this Eucharistic prayer, which are found throughout the history of the development of the Christian Eucharist.)

Then the cantor chanted the great *berekah* (*Yoder*), which is a praise of JHWH for all of creation, beginning with the light of the sun, moon, and stars, and especially the light of the knowledge of JHWH provided through the Torah, and on to human beings and the angels. It calls for the love of JHWH by creatures in response to the divine love from which it proceeds. The Kingdom of God is accomplished in this very act of adoring and loving

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acknowledgment of divine love. The prayer ends with the angels on high singing the praises of JHWH, and the people responding: “Holy, Holy, Holy is JHWH of hosts; the whole earth is full of his glory.” (Obviously a predecessor to the Sanctus of the Mass.)

The cantor would continue: “And the Ophanim and the holy Chayoth with a noise of great rushing, upraising themselves toward them praise and say,” and the people would respond: “Blessed be the glory of JHWH from his place.”

The cantor concluded this first *berekah* with a prayer of praise and thanks for salvation and for the daily renewal of creation.

He then proceeded to the second *berekah* (*Ahabah*). This is a prayer of supplication that the people might be faithful to the loving mercy of JHWH through obedience to the Torah. It is a call for JHWH to look on the people with mercy and to bring salvation. It is a prayer that JHWH may not abandon his chosen ones, but may bring peace to the land. It ends with a doxology: “Blessed be thou, JHWH, who hast chosen thy people Israel in love.”

This was followed by the collective recitation of the daily prayer of all Jews, the *Shemah*:

*Hear, O Israel: The Lord your God is the Lord alone: you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul and with all your thought, and him only shall you serve.*” (The *shemah* was later replaced in Christian liturgy by the Eucharistic banquet.)

Following the *shemah*, the people prayed the *Tefillah* (prayer par excellence) of the 18 blessings. The blessings begin with the verse: “JHWH, open my lips, and my mouth shall declare thy praise.” Each of the 18 *berekoth* is a short supplication for JHWH: send a redeemer in accord with the covenant made with the ancestors; quicken the dead (resurrection); anticipate the coming of the kingdom; provide the people with knowledge, repentance, and forgiveness; heal and save us; bless this year with crops and food; provide us with freedom; provide us with just leaders; reward the faithful; hear our prayers; grant peace, welfare, blessing loving-kindness, and mercy. (Our General Intercessions at Mass are a form of these prayers.)

Next in the ritual came readings from the Torah.

You would recognize this basic outline of the Shabbat meal, and the similarity to Christian liturgy, if you have ever attended a Seder service. The Seder is simply a special form of the Shabbat service, with special foods that recall the events of the Passover. As the Catholic

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Catechism explains, the recollection of the events of Passover in the Seder is *more than just a remembrance of past events* in the history of the Jews—*it makes the power of these past events present* in the service. (Catholic Catechism #1363)

### The "Breaking of the Bread"

How does all this help us better understand the Catholic Eucharist?

If we look at the earliest written descriptions of a Christian Eucharist, we see how the structure follows closely the Shabbat and Seder meals the disciples all practiced as Jews. If we understand the "remembrance" in a Seder meal, we see how early Christians applied that common understanding to the "remembrance" in their own rituals. If we turn to the Eucharist as we know it today, we can see how the "remembrance" is integral to our faith.

### The Early "Meals"

An early description of the ritual itself comes to us from St. Justin who, around the year 155, wrote to the pagan emperor Antoninus Pius (138-161):

*On the day we call the day of the sun, all who dwell in the city or country gather in the same place. The memoirs of the apostles and the writings of the prophets are read, as much as time permits. When the reader has finished, he who presides over those gathered admonishes and challenges them to imitate these beautiful things. Then we all rise together and offer prayers for ourselves ... and for all others, wherever they may be, so that we may be found righteous by our life and actions, and faithful to the commandments, so as to obtain eternal salvation. When the prayers are concluded, we exchange the kiss.*

*Then someone brings bread and a cup of water and wine mixed together to him who presides over the brethren. He takes them and offers praise and glory to the father of the universe, through the name of the Son and of the Holy Spirit and for a considerable time he gives thanks [in Greek: eucharistein] that we have been judged worthy of these gifts.*

*When he has concluded the prayers and thanksgiving, all present give voice to an acclamation by saying: "Amen." When he who presides has given thanks and the people have responded, those whom we call deacons give to those present the "eucharisted" bread, wine, and water and take them to those who are absent."*

—St. Justin, Apol. 1, 65-67, quoted in Catechism  
of the Catholic Church, pp. 374-375

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Clearly, the early disciples had adapted the Shabbat meal to a Christian celebration. But their “memorial” was not simply a recollection of past events. When Jesus said at the Last Supper, “Do this in memory of me,” the phrase had a profound meaning for him as a devout Jew and for his listeners among the disciples. For a Jew, this type of commemoration is not solely a remembrance of past events (like Memorial Day, for example). Instead, Jesus’s declaration evoked what in Greek is called *anamnesis*:

*The Eucharist is the memorial of Christ’s Passover, the making present and the sacramental offering of his unique sacrifice, in the liturgy of the Church which is his Body. In all the Eucharistic Prayers we find after the words of institution a prayer called the anamnesis or memorial.*

—Catechism of the Catholic Church, # 1362

*In the sense of Sacred Scripture the memorial is not merely the recollection of past events but the proclamation of the mighty works wrought by God for men. In the liturgical celebration of these events they become in a certain way present and real. This is how Israel understands its liberation from Egypt: every time Passover is celebrated, the Exodus events are made present to the memory of believers so that they may conform their lives to them.*

—Catechism of the Catholic Church, # 1363

Thus, when Jesus said “Do this in memory of me,” these were not words of ordination of the Twelve. These words were said to Jews who were being asked to remember Jesus just as they remembered the salvation history of the Jews.

Jesus gave a new meaning to the bread and wine used in the Seder service. It was a new meaning that was to make really present, in the renewal of this act, the presence of Christ in the midst of those celebrating. The very act of commemoration makes Christ truly present each time the commemoration takes place.

This understanding of the Eucharistic meal informs our liturgy today, and it is in the Eucharistic Prayer that we see how our Christian celebration emerged from its early Jewish origins to its central position in our faith.

## The Eucharistic Prayer

The Canon of the Roman Mass made its appearance with St. Gregory the Great in the 6th century. Although the elements of the Jewish Shabbat and Synagogue service are still clearly detected in its basic construction, the 6<sup>th</sup> century version is a truly Christian Eucharist—and the Eucharistic Prayer in this Mass is almost word for word the same that

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most of us knew both in Latin before Vatican Council II and in English shortly after. But this prayer, too, like the “meal,” evolved from earlier forms.

The earliest Christian Eucharistic prayer that we possess is the ***Didache*** (c. 60 to 120 AD). It is relatively short and clearly of Jewish origin. It does not contain the words of Jesus from the Last Supper, but it is definitely a prayer of thanksgiving (*eucharist*). Here is a translation taken from the Catholic Encyclopedia:

*Concerning the Eucharist, thus shall you give thanks: “We give Thee thanks, our Father, for the holy Vine of David Thy Child, which Thou hast made known to us through Jesus Thy Child; to Thee be the glory for ever.” And of the broken Bread: “We give Thee thanks, our Father, for the Life and knowledge which Thou hast made known to us through Jesus Thy Child; to Thee be glory for ever. For as this broken Bread was dispersed over the mountains, and being collected became one, so may Thy Church be gathered together from the ends of the earth into Thy kingdom, for Thine is the glory and the power through Jesus Christ for ever.” And let none eat or drink of your Eucharist but those who have been baptized in the Name of Christ; for of this the Lord said: “Give not the holy Thing to the dogs.”*

**St. Augustine** (354-430 AD) left us dozens of sermons and writings on the Eucharist, including thoughts on both the Eucharistic liturgy and the prayer. Although he seldom referred to the bread and wine in the Eucharistic service as the body and blood of Christ, he did have a profound sense that we who receive communion become the Body of Christ:

*If you are the body and members of Christ, then it is your sacrament that is placed on the table of the Lord; it is your sacrament that you receive. To that which you are, you responded “Amen” (“yes, it is true”) and by responding to it you assent to it. For you hear the words “the Body of Christ” and respond “Amen.” Be then a member of the Body of Christ that your Amen may be true.*

— Sermon 272, as quoted in the Catechism of the Catholic Church, p. 391

The **Apostolic Constitutions** date at least from the end of the 4th century. The seventh book contains a lengthy Eucharistic prayer. (If you were to read it aloud, it would take at least 20 minutes.) The essence and body of the text remain Jewish—following the model of the Synagogue *berekoth*—and only a few words, such as *through Jesus Christ our Lord*, were added to specify the Christian interpretation and transposition. But the 8<sup>th</sup> book contains a lengthy Eucharistic prayer that is undeniably of Christian composition—though it is still dominated by Jewish models and even incorporates fragments of Jewish prayers. Another distinction: The Eucharistic prayer in the 7th book does not mention the saving acts of Jesus, but the 8th book contains a lengthy description of the birth, life, death, and resurrection of Jesus. The second of these prayers also contains the words of Jesus from the Last Supper.

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Also, although both these two prayers are significantly longer than the prayers from the Jewish Synagogue, they still follow the three-fold model of the synagogue *berekoth*: the thanksgiving for creation; the thanksgiving for redemption; and a series of supplications for the needs of the people. The prayer includes an *anamnesis* (the special “remembrance”) and an *epiclesis*.

### The Epiclesis

There are other rituals and prayers (too many to list them all) from the early Church that help inform us today about the origins of the Eucharist and its meaning. But the one that speaks directly to the presence of Christ in the Eucharist is the *epiclesis*, yet one more Greek term for a prayer.

The *epiclesis*, which comes before the words of Jesus from the Last Supper, had entered into the Christian Eucharistic Prayers at least by the 3rd century, as an understanding of the role of the Holy Spirit in the Church became clarified. The *epiclesis* is a calling upon the Holy Spirit to transform those receiving communion or, later, to transform the bread and wine into the Body and Blood of Christ:

*And so, Father, we bring you these gifts. We ask you to make them holy by the power of your Spirit, that they may become the body and blood of your Son, our Lord, Jesus Christ, at whose command we celebrate this Eucharist.*

These words led to a great theological dispute between the East and the West, which persists to this day. In the Eastern Rites, the *epiclesis* is considered the moment when the bread and wine are consecrated, whereas in the Latin Rite, it is the words of Jesus at the Last Supper that are considered the consecratory moment.

Perhaps some of you can recall those words from the old Latin Mass. The priest, with his back to the people, bent over the bread and then the wine and reverently spoke the words “*Hoc est enim corpus meum*” and “*Hic est calix sanguinis mei*” (i.e., this is my body, this is the cup of my blood). Often he pronounced each word very slowly and very carefully, as if any word he mispronounced might prevent the transformation or transubstantiation.

In 2001, the Vatican Congregation on the Sacred Liturgy addressed this dispute between East and West by issuing a decree that the Eucharistic prayer (the *epiclesis*) of the Assyrian and Chaldean Catholic churches is, indeed, valid. (Note that the Chaldean church is the same church being persecuted in Iraq today.)

Why is this significant? Because these Eucharistic prayers are among the most ancient that we possess—and they have never included the words spoken by Jesus at the Last Supper

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“my body, my blood”). Thus, it is not these words that make Christ present; it is the entire Eucharistic Prayer. As the Vatican noted in the decree, Christ is present in this ancient Eucharistic Prayer because it is proclaimed “with the clear intention of celebrating the Eucharist ... in obedience to the command of Christ and according to the intentions of the church.”

### The Fourth Eucharistic Prayer

Today, the longest of the Eucharistic Prayers is the fourth one. It only takes a few minutes to read—many of the Eucharistic Prayers still used in some Eastern Rites today last a half hour or longer—but its length when compared to the other three Eucharistic prayers is significant because it follows the basic outline of the Jewish synagogue service. Here it is in the 1973 translation, including the Preface before the Eucharistic prayer:

*It is right that we should give you thanks and glory: you are the one God, living and true. Through all eternity you live in unapproachable light. Source of life and goodness, you have created all things, to fill your creatures with every blessing and lead all men to the joyful vision of your light. Countless hosts of angels stand before you to do your will; they look upon your splendor and praise you, night and day. United with them and in the name of every creature under heaven, we do praise your glory as we sing: “Holy, holy, holy Lord, God of power and might ... ”*

*Father, we acknowledge your greatness; all your actions show your wisdom and love. You formed us in your own likeness and set us over the whole world to serve you, our Creator, and to rule over all creatures.*

*Even when we disobeyed you and lost your friendship you did not abandon us to the power of death, but helped us seek and find you. Again and again you offered us a covenant, and through the prophets taught us to hope for salvation.*

*Father, you so loved the world that in the fullness of time you sent your only Son to be our Savior. He was conceived through the power of the Holy Spirit, and born of the Virgin Mary, like us in all things but sin.*

*To the poor he proclaimed the good news of salvation, to prisoners, freedom, and to those in sorrow, joy. In fulfillment of your will he gave himself up to death, he destroyed death and restored life.*

*And that we might live no longer for ourselves but for him, he sent the Holy Spirit from you, Father, as his first gift to those who believe, to complete his work on earth and bring us the fullness of grace.*

—International Committee on English in the Liturgy, 1973

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Note that the prayer has the same three themes we saw in the Shabbat and the Synagogue services: 1) thanksgiving for all of creation; 2) thanksgiving for the works of redemption, including the covenant and the prophets, but focusing especially on the redemptive works of Christ; 3) an *anamnesis* or a commemoration of the works of salvation. This is followed by some supplications for the pope, bishop, living and deceased Christians, and all who are called by God. Thus it follows the model of the *tefillah* (18 blessings) at the end of the Synagogue prayers.

### A Remaining Question

Shabbat meals and Eucharistic prayers, then, contributed to the shaping of a ritual, leading to liturgical celebrations central to our faith today. Despite these common elements, there remain some questions we cannot answer. Here is what the noted Scripture scholar Raymond Brown says when comparing the early Christian “breaking of the bread” with today’s Mass:

*The Eucharistic words of Jesus are reported in the New Testament in two very ancient independent liturgical formulas (Mark/Matthew and Luke/Paul); there is frequent mention, especially in Acts, of the breaking of the bread; but we are never clearly told who presided by breaking the bread or saying the words. Thus there is simply no compelling evidence for the classic thesis that the members of the Twelve always presided when they were present, and that there was a chain of ordination passing the power of presiding at the Eucharist from the Twelve to missionary apostles to presbyter-bishops. ...*

*The only thing of which we can be reasonably sure is that someone must have presided at the Eucharistic meals and that those who participated acknowledged his right to preside.*

*How one got the right to preside and whether it endured beyond a single instance we do not know; but a more plausible substitute for the chain theory is the thesis that sacramental “powers” were part of the mission of the Church and that there were diverse ways in which the Church (or the communities) designated individuals to exercise those powers—the **essential element always being church or community consent (which was tantamount to ordination, whether or not that consent was signified by a special ceremony such as the laying on of hands.)***

*—Priest and Bishop, pp. 41, 42*

## The Eucharist in Faith

How then do we understand today the presence of Christ in the Eucharist?

Let us count the ways.

- When we enter the chapel or church, we do not come as if we are individuals coming to a meeting or a crowd coming to the mall. We gather as baptized and confirmed members of the Body of Christ. Christ is already present in our gathering. As Jesus said: “Wherever two or three of you are gathered in my name, I am there in the midst of you.”
- As we listen to the proclamation of the readings and the gospels, Christ, who is the Word of God, the Word made flesh, is made present to us.

- When the gifts are brought forward and placed on the altar, we place ourselves on the altar as the Body of Christ. Let us repeat St. Augustine’s words on this:

*If you are the body and members of Christ, then it is your sacrament that is placed on the table of the Lord; it is your sacrament that you receive. To that which you are, you responded “Amen” (“yes, it is true”) and by responding to it you assent to it. For you hear the words “the Body of Christ” and respond “Amen.” Be then a member of the Body of Christ that your Amen may be true.”*

Sermon 272, as quoted in the Catechism of the Catholic Church, p. 391

- As in the *berekoth* of the Jewish prayers, the entire Eucharistic Prayer, beginning with the Preface and continuing through the *anamnesis* and supplications, is the commemoration that Jesus commanded at the Last Supper. In this commemoration Christ is made present in a profound “liturgical understanding.”
- Unquestionably, Christ becomes present in the consecratory prayer of Jesus at the Last Supper and in the *epiclesis*.
- And, of course, Christ becomes present once more in us, the Body of Christ, when we are united with Christ in communion.
- Finally, when we go out from the church, we go forth as members of the Body of Christ to bring Christ to our broken world.