

The 'Eucharistic Words of Jesus': An Un-noticed Silence in our Earliest Sources

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Our general familiarity with the institution narrative in our Eucharistic Prayers, combined with centuries of fascination and dispute over the meaning of those words placed in the mouth of Jesus, has produced a paradoxical situation. We both reflect lyrically upon those 'eucharistic' words of Jesus – as famously done by Dix (1945, 744) – and examine them in minute detail like, for example, Jeremias (1966), without noticing a fundamental irony in our very notion of 'the eucharistic words of Jesus': we do not have them. It is this irony, and its implications for our understanding of liturgical action that is the focus of this paper.

All would agree that our earliest textual sources providing descriptions of the eucharist are five in number – Paul in 1 Corinthians, the Synoptic Gospels, and the *Didache* – and indeed that the earliest of these texts which we can date is 1

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Corinthians from some time in the 50s of the first century (the traditions they embody are far more problematic). Likewise, it is agreed that the material in the three Gospels represent the triple tradition, Matthew and Luke being independent variations on Mark, and that Mark was written sometime before the mid-seventies. The *Didache* is the text whose date is most commonly disputed – particularly by liturgists (see O'Loughlin 2013a) – but we can leave it aside in this discussion because while it alone contains eucharistic words *per se*, it does not attribute these to Jesus.

Paul's Account

Here is the key section from 1 Corinthians:

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 (*eucharistēsas*), 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.
(11:23-6)

Paul is explicit that, as he understands the memory of that final meal in Jerusalem, Jesus' first action was that of *giving thanks* – these would have been his 'eucharistic words' – but he does not recall any such words as being part of the tradition he 'received from the Lord.' 'Eucharistic words' are, obviously, words of thanksgiving that are addressed to God – or in the context of the disciples of Jesus, to the Father (for the appropriateness of this usage by Paul, see Galatians 4:6 or Romans 8:15) – in praise of his goodness as encapsulated in the foodstuffs of the meal

(Bokser 1981). The importance of such blessings or acts of thanksgiving is that they were part of the world of both Jesus and Paul, as we see in Sirach 31:12-32:13 which Smit has described as a 'cultural encyclopedia' for the meal practice of the early followers of Jesus (2011). Moreover, since the work of Finkelstein (1929) we know that there is a very close relationship between the *Birkat Ha-mazon* and the actual table prayers used eucharistically by Jesus' followers (Mazza 1995, 12-40).

Nevertheless, the fact remains that while Paul tells us that Jesus spoke eucharistically to God, he does not tell us what he said. To make this point is not a re-run of the old debate about the *ipsissima verba Christi* because we do not have any words attributed to Jesus in this case: Paul passes over Jesus' eucharistic words in silence.

The Synoptic Accounts

That one of our sources, Paul, omits an attempt to recall the actual eucharistic words of Jesus might appear to be simply a variation until we notice that the first-century tradition is unanimous in its silence. Thus, some time later than Paul, we have Mark:

While they were eating, he took a loaf of bread, and after blessing (*eulogēsas*), he broke it, gave it to them, and said, 'Take; this is my body.'

Then he took a cup, and after giving thanks (*eucharistēsas*) 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.' (14:22-4)

Mark's balancing of the verb-forms *eulogēsas* and *eucharistēsas* indicate that these were for him functionally equivalent (see O'Loughlin 2012). Therefore, we have two references to Jesus' eucharistic utterances, but no memory is announced of what

Jesus said.

Nor is this silence supplied by Matthew who has: 'after blessing, he broke it, gave it to the disciples, and said he took a cup, and after giving thanks he gave it to them ... ' (26:26-7). In Luke we have both the Last Supper and the supper in Emmaus as occasions on which we might have been told what Jesus said in his act of prayer to the Father, but instead we have silence. For the Last Supper we have references to *three* acts of blessing (using the longer text – see Metzger 1975, 173-7), but no words are given:

Then he took a cup, and after giving thanks
(*eucharistēsas*) he said

Then he took a loaf of bread, and when he had given
thanks (*eucharistēsas*), he broke it and gave it to them,
saying,

And he did the same with the cup after supper,
saying, (22:17-20)

This is paralleled closely in the Emmaus story:

When he was at the table with them, he took bread,
blessed (*eulogēsen*) and broke it, and gave it to them ...
(24:30)

While we are told many other things that Jesus said on the way to Emmaus, we are not told what he said in blessing the Father (see O'Loughlin 2013b).

What was Recalled and Remembered?

While there was no attempt to give prominence to the eucharistic words of Jesus, that is, to create out of them a memory in the form of a dominical saying, we do have other words placed in the mouth of Jesus and thereby given a prestigious place within the ecclesial memory. These words fall into two kinds of speech acts.

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Firstly, we have a series of instructions directed to those at table. In Mark this is just one word: 'Take [referring to the pieces of the broken loaf] at 14:22. However, an instruction can also be implied by the description of what happened with the cup: 'he gave it to them, and all of them drank from it' (14:23). These instructions become more explicit in Matthew: 'Take, eat' (26:26) and 'Drink from it all of you' (26:27). In Luke we have: 'Take this and divide it among yourselves' [referring to the first cup] (22:17) and a description of his giving the pieces of the broken loaf to them to eat (22:19). We should note that these instructions do not occur in the Pauline account. Moreover, in both Paul and Luke we also have another instruction directed to those at table, that they should repeat the action in remembrance of him: 'Do this, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of me' (1 Cor. 11:25) and there is a variant of this instruction in Luke 22:19.

Secondly, we have comments placed in the mouth of Jesus giving an interpretation of the actions. Paul gives us, 'This is my body that is for you' and 'This cup is the new covenant in my blood' (1 Cor. 11:24-5). In Mark we have: 'This is my body' and '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' (14:22-5). In Matthew, 'This is my body' and 'For this is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins. I tell you, I will never again drink of this fruit of the vine until that day when I drink it new with you in my Father's kingdom' (26:26-9); and in Luke: 'For I tell you that from now on I will not drink of the fruit of the vine until the kingdom of God comes' followed by 'This is my body, which is given for you' and then 'This cup that is poured out for you is the new covenant in my blood' (22:18-20).

What is most noticeable is the complete agreement that there were the eucharistic words, then specific actions of eating and drinking, and while this activity was in progress statements making clear what happened (the instructions) and then offering to those present a significance for the action that has taken place. Moreover, all the words of Jesus are addressed to his companions.

While our sources are silent on Jesus' eucharistic words, they do show a remarkable interest in his table ritual. There is a curious parallel to this in Philo, roughly contemporary with our first-century Christian sources, who gives great detail about the manner in which the leader (*proedros*) of the Therapeutae / Therapeutrides sang a eucharistic prayer, while giving no hint of the content of his prayers: 'He stands up and sings a hymn which is addressed to God, either one newly composed by himself or an older one from the poets of earlier times in a variety of meters and tunes ...' (*De vita contemplativa* 80) – but there is no specimen text. Similarly, a century later, Justin's leader (*proestōs*) stands and makes thanksgiving (*eucharistias*) according to his ability (*Apologia [prima]* 67) – but we get no hint as to what such a prayer's content might have been.

Actions, Words and Memories

The silence over our range of sources cannot be simply an omission but must be seen as indicative of a widespread attitude to the words of thanksgiving prayer in early Christianity. Recent scholarship has rightly emphasised the variety, indeed almost complete lack of system, that characterised the early Jesus movement (Bradshaw 2002). Moreover, it has stressed this in opposition to the older tendency to seek out original unities whereby variation is tantamount to confusion – a position first exposed as a doctrinal illusion by Bauer in 1934 (see Bauer 1971).

There were, however, some commonalities that were characteristic of the Jesus movement across its first decades, and one of these was the two table actions of sharing a broken loaf and drinking from a shared cup. It was this action that was perceived as distinctly related to Jesus (Meier 1995) and it was this distinctiveness that is the common stress and concern of our sources. Words could come and go, and interpretations would be as various as the interpreters, but in this action was something distinctive – and could become an idealised memory for Luke: 'And they devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of the loaf and the prayers' (Acts 2:42).

The words that would have been used in blessing the Father were, in any case, just a variant on the prayers of blessing that all who were leaders at a table were supposed to know. Sirach is anxious to remind the young leader to remember the importance of thanking God (32:13), but does not think it necessary to provide a model. This would accord with what we know about the similarities between Jewish table prayers and our earliest eucharistic prayers: prayers well known in memory were adapted and continued in use, and, as with all such oral compositions, varied in that usage (Finkelstein 1929).

Surely, however, there is a counter-indicator to this pattern in that the *Didache* provides just such prayers in a work intended for memorisation? In fact, this is the exception that proves the above interpretation in that the *Didache* was, in all probability, intended to present material for recollection among Gentile followers of Jesus which they could not be expected to have already as part of the cultural inheritance. The *Didache* does not give any ritual directions for the eucharistic actions at the Christian meal – these the converts would have seen – but it does give them texts so that they too know how to bless the

Father. Hence it introduced the blessing over the cup with the words: 'give thanks in this manner' (9,1) and repeats this for the final act of thanksgiving (10,1).

In short, the words were not that important for formal presentation in the narratives his followers told each other about who they were and what made them a distinct group within Israel. Everyone, at least those from a Jewish background, knew how to bless God and the range of forms that such a thanksgiving could take (Bahr 1970) . This did not need to be imagined as a formal dominical saying: it was assumed – and perhaps recalled – that Jesus, too, used that range of familiar forms. What needed formal recollection, in a formed memory, were his distinctive actions with food and drink at table.

Implications for Liturgy Today

Has this investigation in liturgical archaeology any significance for our actual practice of liturgy today? I suspect that it has several. Clearly, it provides a confirmation, from a differing starting point, for the position taken by McGowan when he pointed out that there is no liturgical practice underlying the gospel accounts of the final meal: those narratives have to be seen as explanations of the significance of the Christian meal rather than verbal echoes of early gatherings (1999). We should have recognised that from the work of Ligier (1973) – if not from reading Justin – and have been reminded of it in the work of Taft (2003), but since there is still a firm belief among many systematic theologians, not to mention clergy, that a 'eucharistic prayer' is merely an elaborated 'formula of consecration,' it is always valuable to look at the famous formulae in context.

However, this silence regarding the eucharistic words of Jesus has two other, more important lessons for all involved in liturgy today. First, Christian ritual has had such a long

tradition of concentration on words – in some traditions almost to the exclusion of everything else – that actions have been left lagging far behind. The actions, human doings, are often relegated to being supporters or occasions for words. Indeed, in relation to the eucharist there has been a further concentration on 'the right words' – seen most recently in the Roman Catholic concerns over translating 'pro multis' – such that words are perceived as constitutive of the eucharist, while concern over the distinctly Christian actions is seen as but the dilettantism of liturgists. The silence of the early churches, coupled with the concern that their specific actions be linked to those of Jesus, offers an instructive counterbalance to our fascination with words and verbal definition.

Second, the so-called 'eucharistic words' have been the source of divisions in western Christianity since the sixteenth century, yet most recent attempts to overcome these problems – for example *BEM* (WCC 1982) – have focussed on yet more words in their attempts to solve the problems arising from these early catecheses, assuming that they are what is central in our liturgy. However, what have not received attention are the failures – in virtually every tradition in one way or another – to maintain continuity in the common actions with which our early sources, Paul and the Synoptics, were so concerned. Perhaps a greater interest in the Christian common actions will counterbalance the disputes over words, whose definition, by the nature of religious language, will always be incomplete and thus unsatisfactory as a basis for real communion.

This second point allows us to note that if we focus on actions, then it is clear that no one tradition can claim unique continuity either of belief or in terms of validity: it is a matter of observable fact that they have all failed in terms of sharing pieces of a broken loaf and drinking from a common cup. In such a recognition of common failure there may be a more

fruitful path to ecumenical progress than when one or other group feels duty bound to claim that it has never faltered in its doctrine. Likewise, the eucharist has been used as a boundary-ritual in some traditions for ecclesial belonging: assent to the interpretation of those so-called 'eucharistic words' becomes necessary if one is to be allowed take part fully in the eucharistic meal. However, these words are ancillary to the action of table-sharing in the Christian manner, both in that they were narrative to remind audiences of what was distinctive about their actions, and in that even in narrative time those words came as subsequent comments to the actions being remembered.

The challenge facing communities today as they celebrate eucharistically is not what those famous phrases mean, but whether they are willing to share in the Christian loaf, and can face the common cup of shared covenant discipleship. This priority with regard to action, rather than assent to words, is already found in Paul: 'Examine yourselves, and only then eat of the loaf and drink of the cup' (1 Cor. 11:28).

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