



Pitre, Brant.

Jesus and the Jewish Roots of the Eucharist: Unlocking Secrets of the Last Supper

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Rightly Dividing the Word of Truth

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The Bible is full of types and antitypes, or, shadows of things to come and the very image of those things (see Heb. 10:1). The Passover is a type of Christ; the Apostle Paul says so explicitly (see 1 Cor. 5:7). John the Baptist called Jesus “the Lamb of God” twice in the Fourth Gospel (John 1:29, 36 cf. the many references to the Lamb in Revelation, esp. 5:6, 12; 13:8). My point is that most people who have read the NT are aware of this, yet they might not be aware of the fuller background to these references. They might have never connected the dots between the Passover type/antitype and the “new exodus” or “the bread of the presence.” Thankfully, Brant Pitre (Professor of Sacred Scripture at Notre Dame Seminary in New Orleans, LA) has done all the heavy lifting by mining a plethora of ancient literature and bringing it to bear on contemporary worship in our celebration of the Eucharist.

Pitre is a devout Catholic who shares that there has never been a time when he didn’t believe in the real presence of Jesus in the Eucharist. (5) As a former cradle Catholic I can relate somewhat to his experience. As a child I attended Mass regularly with my parents and I made my First Holy Communion at the age of 7 (to this day I still use the genuine leather pocket NT I received as a gift for the occasion). I remember my CCD classes with fondness as they are where I was first introduced to Jesus and the Gospel. Growing up I had never doubted the real presence of Christ in the Eucharist because I never had a reason to, but by the time I was confirmed my heart was far from Christ and even farther from the Church. There were a number of years where I

renounced any and all Christian beliefs that I once held, including the real presence, but I would eventually return to Christ in my early 20s at a Pentecostal church. I only mention this to say that when I returned to Christ (although not to the RCC) I rehabilitated my belief in the real presence of Christ in the Eucharist. In this regard I stand out from many Pentecostals since on average they tend to take a more memorial (Zwinglian) view of the Lord's Supper. So I've said this to say that this book, even though written by a Catholic who is no doubt writing to gird up his faith and the faith of fellow Catholics, can be appreciated by non-Catholics just as easily provided they don't have significant issues with the concept of Jesus' real presence in the bread and wine of the Eucharist.

Pitre admits that what he's saying in *Jesus and the Jewish Roots of the Eucharist* is not novel, in fact, he quips that "one of the tasks of a theologian is to be a good thief—that is, to 'steal' from the boundless treasures of Jewish and Christian tradition and use these riches to shed light on the meaning of the Scriptures." (172) He does a wonderful job of doing exactly that as he navigates his way effortlessly through the OT, NT, and large swaths of rabbinic literature in order to help the reader see Jesus' words through ancient Jewish lenses. Pitre shows that in the first century there were a variety of messianic expectations, as opposed to the common thought that Israel expected a conquering king and that alone. Aside from a military leader, Israel was awaiting a new exodus,¹ the fulfillment of which was found in Jesus (chapter 2). But the exodus is preceded by the Passover and once the Passover is complete the people need food (manna) to sustain them while on their journey to the promised land, but the entire purpose of their journey is freedom to worship God which they do in part through their devotion to the Bread of the Presence (= shewbread). Pitre examines all of these expectations according to the various ancient sources and explains how they all find their fulfillment in Christ.

Jesus is the Passover Lamb, and the Passover wasn't completed by the sacrifice of the lamb alone, the flesh had to be consumed (chapter 3). Jesus is the manna from heaven that provides eternal life in the age to come (chapter 4). The Bread of the Presence was by (a well documented although highly irregular) custom removed from the temple at the feasts of Passover, Pentecost, and Tabernacles where the priests would declare to all the travelers, "Behold, God's love for you!"

¹ This "new exodus" would manifest itself in four major ways: (1) the coming of a new Moses, (2) the making of a new covenant, (3) the building of a new temple, and (4) the journey to a new promised land. Jesus is the new Moses who makes a new covenant in his blood and who stands as one greater than the temple, being himself the very dwelling place of God, and who promises his disciples a place in the age to come.

Jesus' actions at the Last Supper parallel this practice in significant ways (chapter 5). And aside from all of this there is plenty to be gleaned from the parallels between the traditional Jewish Passover Seder, which involved the drinking of four cups (*kiddush* = sanctification; *haggadah* = proclamation; *berakah* = blessing; *hallel* = praise) and the Last Supper where Jesus drank the first three cups but reserved the fourth cup for his passion (chapter 6). And all of this: Passover, Manna, Presence, still has relevance for believers today. We join Christ in communion as we partake of his body and blood in the Eucharist (chapter 7). As for his real presence, well, on the road to Emmaus Jesus walked with the disciples and yet they didn't know it was him; he was with them yet appeared as something else. Once he gave them bread to eat their eyes were opened and they realized that he had been with them the entire time. Jesus reigns in heavenly glory in a supernatural resurrection body, and as such he can be really present in the bread and wine in the Eucharist even if we don't recognize any change in appearance (chapter 8).

Jesus and the Jewish Roots of the Eucharist is a page-turner. I finished the book in a day because I couldn't put it down and I fully admit that this review cannot adequately summarize all of Pitre's presentation. As noted above, Pitre's insights aren't anything new for the most part, and yet I was still able to glean plenty of things that I haven't come across previously. For example, the four cups of the Passover Seder in connection to the Last Supper is something that I've been exposed to for a number of years now, yet in all the teaching I've heard on the subject I've yet to encounter anyone who suggested that the fourth cup (the cup of praise) was fulfilled while Christ was on the cross (Pitre's handling of John 19:28-30 was extremely satisfying in its simplicity on this point). Also, the connection between the "bread of the presence" was nothing short of a revelation to me. This is due largely to my familiarity with the KJV and its translation of "shewbread." But what impressed me most was the way that Pitre was able to tie it all together in the end with his brief but poignant treatment of Luke 24. This is a fine showing of Biblical theology and I'd gladly recommend it to anyone for leisure reading or for teaching a Sunday school class/Bible study.

If I have to fault the book at all it's going to be in its referencing system. This book is written for a popular audience, so endnotes are no surprise, but they're not numbered in the main text. It's not inconceivable that one could read this book and never know that there are any notes at all. If the reader does discover the notes (205-28) then they'll find emboldened numbers and abbreviated sentences. The numbers correspond to page numbers while the abbreviated sentences correspond to the reference in the main text that matches the note. It's much more difficult than it has to be. The book also lacks subject and Scripture/ancient source indices. The references to

Scripture and other ancient writings are copious and an index seems necessary. For the most part it can survive without the subject index since the chapters are focused.

On matters of interpretation there's very little that I found disagreeable. But Pitre is a faithful Catholic and as a good Protestant (well, not that good since I agree with more in Catholic theology than any Protestant should) I would quibble with the idea that a "validly ordained priest" is the only one that "has the power to transform bread and wine into Jesus' body and blood." (193) But even here it's not so much a disagreement with the idea of validly ordained priests so much as it is with the identification of these priests. Ironically, I believe that the answer to this problem is found in something that Pitre notes when speaking about Melchizedek. He says:

Thus, for some ancient Jews, the Bread and wine of the Presence was not merely one of the sacrifices instituted at the time of the exodus. Instead, its origins went back to the early generations of mankind. At that time, *all* men were priests, not according to the order of Levi—whose priestly order was instituted after Israel worshiped the Golden Calf (Exodus 32)—but according to the priestly "order of Melchizedek" (Psalm 110:4). (127-28)

I would suggest that just as "all men were priests" before Israel's idolatry we have been restored to such a status in Christ. Peter can speak of believers as a "holy" or "royal priesthood" who can offer up "spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God by Christ Jesus" (1 Pet. 2:5, 9). In any event, if you're in the market for an easy-to-read yet satisfying book on the Eucharist then this is the one to get, you won't regret it.