

NEW TESTAMENT AND JUDAISM OF THE NEW TESTAMENT PERIOD

AN ORIGINAL CONTRIBUTION

THE LAST SUPPER AND THE ESSENES

by

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The discovery of the Essene Dead Sea Scrolls caused a revolution in research both of early Christianity and of Judaism. Many scholars thought that even the Sacrament of the Eucharist is Essene in origin. Is it not written in Josephus (*Wars* II, 129) that before their meal the Essenes purify themselves in cold water and "after this purification, they assemble in a private apartment which none of the uninitiated is permitted to enter; being now pure themselves, they repair to the refectory as to some sacred shrine"? But even if an Essene influence on the Christian sacrament should be accepted, a new question arises: if Christian sacred meals are influenced by the Essenes, does it mean that already Jesus's last supper in Jerusalem was an Essene ceremony?

In order to answer these questions, it is necessary to forget for a while that Jesus's last supper was probably a Jewish *Seder* of Passover and to contemplate normal Jewish benedictions of feasts, the so-called *Kiddush*. The feast day benediction is said over a cup of wine, and meanwhile the bread is kept covered. After this benediction the cover over the bread is lifted and a benediction over the bread follows. Why is the bread covered before the benediction is said over it? In the Jewish view, there is, so to say, a rivalry between the wine and the bread. A cup of wine is naturally far better fitted for the purpose of the benediction of the feast, but bread, not wine, is the basis of a meal. So to resolve this problem, the bread is covered while the *Kiddush* over the cup is said: it is simply formally not present. In antiquity the situation was easier, as the banquets were held on small movable tables and it was simple to bring in the table with the bread after the *Kiddush* has been said.

The Essenes has a simpler solution for the rivalry between the wine and the bread: they always began with the benediction over the bread, and the one over the wine followed. "When they arrange the table for eating or the wine for drinking, the priest shall first stretch out his hand in order to

bless the bread and wine" (*Manual of Discipline* VI, 4-6)¹. The same will also happen at the messianic banquet in the last days: it will be forbidden that "a man should stretch out his hand on the bread and the wine first before the priest, because he will bless the bread and the wine first and he will stretch out his hand on the bread at the beginning" (*The Rule for all the Congregation* II, 18-20). So the order of the Essene meal is firmly established: bread and wine, in contrast to the common Jewish custom when wine comes before the bread. As we have seen, both arrangements are different solutions of the same halakhic problem. The Essenes order is also the one of the Sacrament of the Eucharist.

Did Jesus also follow the Essene order in his festival meals, and especially the Last Supper, or did he follow the non-sectarian order: wine and bread? According to Matthew and Mark, Jesus first blessed the cup and then the bread, but the situation in Luke is different. "And when the hour came, he sat at table, and the apostles with him. And he said to them: I have earnestly desired to eat this Passover with you before I suffer; for I tell you I shall not eat it until a new one will be eaten² in the kingdom of God. And he took a cup, and when he had given thanks he said: Take this and divide it among yourselves; for I tell you that from now on I shall not drink of the fruit of the vine until the kingdom of God comes. And he took bread, and when he had given thanks he broke it and gave it to them, saying: This is my body" (Lk. 22:14-19). There ends the Lucan text, according to the famous Codex Bezae, the old Latin translation, and two old Syriac manuscripts. All attentive readers will easily recognise that what follows in *Luke* in the other witnesses is taken from I. Cor. 11:23-26, so that we have here the strange situation that in the accepted text there appear two cups, one at the beginning and the other at the end. Both the Revised Standard Version and the New English Bible have adopted the right view, that Lk. 22:19b-20 was not a part of the original Lucan text. After Jesus had said of the broken bread, "This is my body", hinting at his imminent violent death, he continued and became more explicit, saying, "Yet look, the hand of him who betrays me is³ on the table" (Lk. 22:21).

Luke's original words about the Last Supper are consistent and clear enough. The question of whether both Luke and Mark (on the latter of whom Matthew depends) based themselves upon two different "oral traditions", or whether the Marcan (and Matthean) version is a rewritten text, based on an earlier source which was very similar to the Lucan version,

¹ There is a dithography in the manuscript which we do not bring in here: so it is written both "bread or wine" and - in the dithography - "bread and wine". We decided for the second reading because it is confirmed by the following quotation.

² So the *lectio difficilior* according to Codex Bezae.

³ The words "with me" are lacking in Codex Bezae and in another Greek manuscript. Their origin is either in Mark 14:20 or in Matthew 26:23.

can only be answered in the framework of the whole synoptic question. My experience, chiefly based on the research of R. L. Lindsey⁴, has shown me that Luke mostly preserves, in comparison to Mark (and to Matthew, when depending on Mark), the original tradition, and that Mark has rewritten his source (or sources) and so unfavourably influenced Matthew. In another treatise⁵, I tried to show that not only the record of the Last Supper but the whole description in *Luke* of the last evening before Jesus's arrest is preferable to the Marcan and Matthean narrative. If we accept this hypothesis also in connection with the Last Supper, the development can easily be traced. What happened at the Last Supper is more or less accurately described in *Luke*: Jesus followed the common Jewish practice and blessed the wine before the bread. It is interesting to know that some Christian communities celebrated their communal meal in the same order as Jesus and non-sectarian Jews did, with wine preceding the bread. This was the order of the Christian community in which the famous *Didache* was written (Did. 9). Meanwhile the influence of Essene institutions was felt in many (or most) Christian communities, even in the Mother Church of Jerusalem, where baptism became obligatory and community of goods was introduced. It is impossible to know how communal meals were observed in the Palestinian communities. We know from the Acts of the Apostles (2:46) only that in Jerusalem "day by day, attending the Temple together and breaking bread in their homes, they partook of food with glad and generous hearts". It is possible that this means that, the breaking of bread being essential, wine was not there compulsory.⁶

While we do not know about the form of Eucharist in the Mother Church in Palestine, both the form and the meaning of the Holy Communion in Hellenistic Churches in Paul's time are known. These Churches underwent an important influence of Essenism, not only in the field of their institutions, but also in their doctrines⁷. From I Cor. 11:23-26 we see that already Paul found in these Churches both the Essene order "bread - wine" and the form of Jesus's words at the Last Supper as also reflected in Mark and Matthew. Paul evidently, in his pre-Christian life, used to celebrate the Kiddush as the Pharisees did, when the cup was followed by the breaking of bread, and so he had to explain to himself the reversed order of the Last Supper. He deemed that the eucharistic cup was the wine which Jews often drink, having finished the meal, after the Graces. Also this "cup af-

⁴ R. L. Lindsey, *A Hebrew Translation of the Gospel of Mark*, Jerusalem, 1969; id: A Modified Two-Document Theory of the Synoptic Dependence and Interdependence, in *Novum Testamentum*, Vol. VII, Fasc. 4, 1963, pp. 252-257.

⁵ which will shortly be published in German by the *Herder Verlag*.

⁶ Lindsey's suggestion, in private conversation.

⁷ See D. Flusser, *The Dead Sea Sect and Pre-Pauline Christianity*, *Scripta Hierosolymitana*, Vol. IV, Jerusalem, 1958, pp. 215-266.

ter the meal" is preceded by a benediction. These considerations are reflected in Paul's words about the Last Supper in I Cor. 11:23-26: Paul found it necessary to stress that Jesus said the words, "This cup is the new covenant in my blood" *after supper* (v. 25). This solution of the alleged difficulty is Paul's idea, as can be seen *inter alia* from the fact that the words "after supper" are lacking in Mark and Matthew. They occur in the accepted text of *Luke*, an additional proof that the whole passage is an interpolation from Paul.

In the early Hellenistic Churches not only was the Essene order "bread - wine" introduced, but also an Essene *theologoumenon* was then fruitfully linked with the concept of Christ's expiatory death, namely the idea of a special covenant with the community, or, in other words, the concept of the new covenant. The importance of this idea in the Dead Sea Scrolls is well known⁸. The word "covenant" never occurs in the mouth of Jesus in the Gospels - with the exception of the passage about the Last Supper in Mark 14:24 ("This is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many"), in Matt. 26:28 and in the common interpolated text of Luke 22:20. The sublime idea of the expiatory power of Christ's blood which is the blood of the covenant is concretised in the Eucharist, in which the wine is Christ's blood. This concept became, according to this new tradition, a part of Jesus's words in the Last Supper, as reflected in Mark (and Matthew) and I Cor. 11:23-26.

We have seen that in the original, non-interpolated, text of *Luke*, wine precedes the bread. This is the common Jewish order of benedictions and this was also probably Jesus's practice. Later, in many Christian communities, the order was reversed, under the influence of Essene communal meals, and it is clear that the reversed order stressed the sacramental character of the Eucharist, because it seems that already Essene common meals had anyhow a sacred connotation. It is impossible to know how the "breaking of bread" in the Mother Church took place, but in the Churches which Paul visited the order according to the Essenes (bread - wine) was already firmly established when he came in contact with them.⁹ In these Hellenistic Churches also the Essene concept of covenant of the new community was linked with the idea of Christ's expiatory death and was put in the mouth of Jesus himself. This new order and this new meaning of the Eucharist were introduced by Mark in his Gospel (and accepted by Matthew) and were accepted by most of the Churches. But it is significant that in *Didache* 9-10

⁸ See, e.g. Flusser, *op.c.*, pp. 236-243.

⁹ Lindsey's suggestion, in private conversation, is that the Marcan description of the Last Supper depends on I Cor. 11:23-26, but even if Lindsey is right, Paul's wording ("For I received from the Lord what I also deliver to you") makes it clear enough that Paul's words are based on a tradition. The order "bread - wine" is also reflected in John 6:53-57.

not only is the normal Jewish order of benedictions (wine – bread – Graces after the meal) preserved, but also the concept of the covenant is lacking. Thus the question about Essene influence on the Last Supper can be answered with the help of knowledge of both normative and Essene Judaism. We learn from the non-interpolated text of *Luke* that also in his meals Jesus behaved as a non-sectarian Jew. In his Last Supper he both expressed his eschatological hopes and hinted at his imminent tragic death. Later the Christian communal meal became, under Essene influence, the Eucharist.

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