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The Lord's Supper: Exegesis of Mark 14:22-26

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While they were eating, he, after taking bread [and] blessing [it], he broke [it] and gave [it] to them and said, “Take, this is my body.” And after taking a cup [and] giving thanks [over it] he gave [it] to them, and they all drank from it. And he said to them, “This is my blood of the covenant which is poured out in behalf of many. Amen, I say to you that I will no more drink from the fruit of the vine until that day when I drink [it] new in the kingdom of God.” And, after singing a hymn, they went out into the Mount of Olives. Mark 14:22–26, author’s translation

While this pericope is a part of Mark’s biographical narrative on Jesus; the words Mark records as being uttered by Jesus carry the weight of a sermon. Today Christians would call this pericope the institution of “the Lord’s Supper,” “the Eucharist,” or “the Sacrament.” At face value, Mark depicts this passage as part of a Passover meal with Jesus identifying the bread and wine with himself (see Mark 14:12). Those two identifications divide the periscope into two segments. The bread segment consists of four actions: taking, blessing, breaking, and giving to the twelve; followed by two sayings: a command to take, and an identification of what the bread is. The wine segment consists of four actions: taking, giving thanks, giving to the twelve, and the twelve drinking; followed by two sayings: an identification of what the wine is and a promise. The pericope is then closed by the singing of a hymn and a trip to the Mount of Olives. Throughout, Mark is heavily influenced by Old Testament motifs, lacing this pericope with covenant and Messianic prophecy language.  

It is also of significance that, in this pericope, Jesus seems to know that his death is imminent and that it will have an expiatory value.

Setting the Scene

Mark mentions this meal as having taken place after Jesus and the twelve entered into the room in which two of Jesus’ disciples “prepared the Passover” (Mark 14:16). As such, despite some scholarly debate, Mark obviously considers this to be a Passover meal. As C. S. Mann phrases it, “attempts to find in the Last Supper an occasion other than Passover must accommodate some very awkward realities.” Even though Mark claims this is a Passover meal, he does not mention the presence of the requisite lamb, nor does he identify at what point during the meal this pericope occurs. Since the earliest recording of the Passover ritual dates to 200 c.e., approximately 170 years after Jesus’ death, it is not known exactly what would have taken place with a Passover meal in Jesus’ day. Assuming that the earliest account is accurate, it would have been tradition for the head of house to have explained the significance of and what each part of the meal represented. What prompted Jesus to take this role may have been his acting as head of the little family of the twelve, and thus he would have been fulfilling the responsibility of the head of house.

Peter may very well have been Mark’s primary source for these sayings, as he was for much of Mark’s Gospel. However, Donahue points out that “clear evidence for a tradition of the Lord’s Supper some twenty years prior to Mark is found in 1 Cor 11:23–26.” Since this Pauline material is considerably different in textual form, many scholars debate as to how much Mark may have redacted his source in light of early Christian traditions. As part of this debate, it has been argued whether Mark’s account could even be translated back into Aramaic. Thus, Mark likely edited the early Christian tradition in light of

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3. The scholarly debate concerns when the meal was actually held and what kind of meal it was. “The Synoptic tradition and Paul place the meal on the eve of Passover (that is, the evening before the death of Jesus) and so present it as an actual Passover meal. But John places it on the day of preparation when the Paschal lambs were slain.” See Donahue, *The Gospel of Mark*, 398–99. See also Ben Witherington, *The Gospel of Mark: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 2001), 371–72.
8. See Mann, *Mark*, 572. It may also be possible that Jesus was responding to questions from the twelve as to why there was no lamb. Also if this was not the official Jewish day to celebrate the Passover meal, Jesus may have been answering questions as to why they were celebrating it this night.
who he understood Jesus to be as well as what he gathered from Peter, his personal source.

In viewing Mark as a three-act play, this pericope falls within the third act, that of the Passion. As such, it should be read and identified in such a way that it points to the suffering, death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus. This is accomplished in that this pericope occurs during a Passover meal in which no lamb is mentioned, but the body and blood of Jesus are identified. The placement of this pericope, as being “sandwiched” between a prediction of betrayal and one of denial highlights the impending death of Jesus. Donahue adds that it “rounds off the pattern begun in 8:31 and repeated in 9:31 and 10:33–34, that Jesus will be handed over while the disciples will fail to comprehend his suffering.” However, this pericope should also be seen in light of the fact that appears at the center of a type of short chiasm, the betrayal and denial being in parallel to one another.

The Gospel of Mark focuses on Jesus. Though, at times, there seems to be a polemic against Jesus’ disciples, this may be more a literary method of Mark to instill hope and courage within his audience. Since the original disciples so struggled and yet became the great men of Christian history they were known as, it is possible for all to accomplish the same. This pericope adds to the climax of that theme. One of the twelve is about to betray Jesus into the hands that will play a key role in condemning him to death, while another is about to thrice deny knowing him. In the midst of both, Jesus is sharing a Passover meal with the twelve; which commemorates God’s deliverance with Israel.

The Institution

In v. 22, Mark begins with a genitive absolute acting as a temporal identifier. Thus it is “while they were eating” that vv. 22–26a take place. It is interesting that the betrayal prediction in Mark 14:18 also begins with a genitive absolute and includes the same form of the verb ἐσθίοντο (eating). Despite saying that it was “while they were eating,” Mark does not make it known at what point during the meal either of these pericopes take place.

In the context of “during the meal,” Mark records Jesus’ bread action and saying. “After taking the bread and blessing it, Jesus broke it and gave it to them [the twelve].” The participles and verbs used here by Mark echo back to his account of Jesus’ miraculous feedings of the five thousand and four thou-


sand (Mark 6:41 [31–44] and Mark 8:6 [1–9], respectively). In each instance, labōn is used for “taking” and a form of klaō is used for “breaking.” A form of eulogeō (to bless) is used here in the bread action as well as in the feeding of the five thousand, while a form of eucharisteō (to give thanks) is used in the feeding of the four thousand. A form of didōmi (to give) is also used for Jesus’ giving to the disciples in all three occasions—though in this pericope it is in the aorist while it is in the imperfect in the feedings. Even if these occurrences were simply because Mark needed the definition which the word conveyed, it is nevertheless an interesting connection. Should this connection have been intentional, it quite possibly may have been designed to cause Mark’s audience to connect this breaking of bread with the feedings of the multitude. Since the pattern of “take, bless, break, give” is the same in all three, it could be that Mark’s Jesus was implying that in the future the twelve would likewise be commanded to give a similar sacramental meal to other believers. This becomes all the more plausible when the earlier account of the Lord’s Supper, found in 1 Cor 11:20–26, is taken into consideration. There it is already mentioned as having been established as an early Christian ritual in which the believers would partake. Mark would have likely already been aware of this.

The saying of Jesus in v. 22, in reference to the bread being his body, is a much debated and often confused point. Jesus’ statement “this [bread] is my body” comes after he had taken the bread, blessed it, broke it, distributed it, and commanded the twelve to take it. At face value, this saying of Jesus would seem to promote cannibalism. However, Evans points out that estin here can have a translational value of “signifies” or “represents,” which then leads to the bread as a symbol of the body of Jesus rather than the literal thing. Even without Evans’s help, this saying should be held in the context of the highly symbolic and figurative teachings of Jesus. Also, despite touto (this) being neuter and arton (bread) being masculine, both Mann and Hiebert see touto as being connected with the bread.

Mann mentions that some lesser manuscripts of Mark have added the command “eat” to the command “take.” Thus where Mark’s Jesus originally commanded to take, Matthean assimilation commands the twelve to “take, eat.”

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17. See Donahue, *The Gospel of Mark*, 395. Mann believes the “primitive Eucharistic pattern” to have “left its mark on the accounts of the feedings” (see Mann, *Mark*, 573). Either way, the feedings of the multitudes seem to echo back to Moses and the feeding of the Israelites in their wilderness wanderings.

18. Despite this difference, it should be noted that (a) eucharisteō is used in Mark 14:23 in reference to the cup, and (b) eulogeō is used with the fish in the feeding of the four thousand.

19. This possibly would then link Mark’s account with how the early Christian tradition was formed, the twelve (eleven because of Judas Iscariot) went out and shared this experience with other disciples.


Though this Matthean command seems to be implied in the Markan command, Evans mentions an interesting proposition by Daube that the bread Jesus gives could be the *afikoman*, which symbolizes the Messiah. If this were the case, then the twelve would not have eaten the bread until after it was identified, at which point their partaking would have been to “demonstrate their faith in Jesus as the Messiah.”

An interesting point is that Mark makes much more of the wine than he does of the bread. His entire account of Jesus’ teaching on the bread encompasses a solitary verse, whereas the teaching on, and about, the wine encompasses three verses. This brings up an interesting question as to why. The wine is not only identified as the blood of Jesus, its purpose is also identified as being “poured out in behalf of many” (Mark 14:24). However, the bread receives no other signification than identification with Jesus’ body. Scholars have a wide array of opinions on this. Hiebert, Cranfield, and Lane all claim that the bread was broken for the purpose of distribution; Cranfield and Lane go on to suggest that it was part of a promise by Jesus to be with his followers. Perkins says that “the association between wine and the blood of a covenant sacrifice shed for the people makes the symbolism of the cup more significant than that of the bread.” Carrington would agree in that “the cup, rather than the bread, is the outward and visible sign of the new covenant, and the symbol of fellowship in the Kingdom of God.”

Mark 14:23 begins the cup saying of Jesus. “And after taking the cup [and] giving thanks [over it], he gave [it] to them, and they all drank from it” (Mark 14:23). The “all drank from it” presumably indicates a single cup. This mention of the cup should recall to the reader’s mind the conversation between James (Jacob) and John with Jesus in Mark 10:38–39 in which Jesus promises that they will indeed drink of the cup which he drinks.

The cup of this pericope has often been associated with the third cup of Passover, the “cup of blessing.” Mann emphasizes that this connection is not certain, pointing out that Mark only mentions one cup. Despite that, Cranfield, Hiebert, and Lane all connect this cup with the third cup of Passover. Donahue does not specify which of the four cups this would have been, but does mention that this cup would have been taken after eating the lamb. If this was the third cup, Lane’s identification of its interpretation as “I will

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27. See Mann, *Mark*, 578.
"redefine you" is very significant, especially in light of Jesus’ own identification of the cup.\(^{31}\) However, it should be remembered that since the earliest extant record of the Passover ritual dates to 200 c.e., the notion of multiple cups may not have any pertinence to this meal of Jesus.\(^{32}\)

It can be presumed that the cup is referring to a cup of wine for a couple reasons. One is that wine was integral to Passover meals. Another is that in v. 25 Jesus says that he will not drink from the “fruit of the vine” for a period of time. “Fruit of the vine” is a Semiticism for wine.\(^{33}\) Another is that in the Old Testament, wine was a symbol of blood (see Gen 49:11; Deut 32:14; Isa 49:26). Donahue says that “though ‘wine’ is not explicitly mentioned, by metonymy the cup represents what it contains (here, wine).”\(^{34}\)

Metzger says “it is much more likely that kainēs is a scribal addition, derived from the parallel accounts in Luke 22.20 and 1 Cor 11.25, than that, being present originally, it was omitted” from numerous authoritative manuscripts.\(^{35}\) France acknowledges the “theologically suggestive echo of Jer 31:31 in the Adjective kainēs” and goes on to say that it “would be a natural insertion” and that there “would be no good reason for its exclusion once in the text.”\(^{36}\)

The phrase to haima mou tēs [kainēs] diathēkēs (my blood of the [new] covenant) is very intriguing. With touto estin (this is) the cup of wine is obviously identified with the blood of Jesus. However, it does so in a covenant fashion.\(^{37}\) This is evidenced in that the phrase is identical, with the exception of mou (my), with that found in Exod 24:8. Thus Mark portrays Jesus as summoning the memory of this passage to the minds of the twelve. The reason for this becomes obvious as one reads Exod 19–24. To paraphrase, as the children of Israel were encamped round about Sinai, the law of God was given to Moses. Moses in turn told the words of the LORD to the people of Israel. Upon hearing these words, all the people of Israel announced: “all which the LORD said we will do and we will obey” (LXX Exod 24:3). Moses prepared a sacrifice, then read the law of the LORD to the people, to which they replied the same as before (see Exod 24:7). At this point Moses took the blood of the prepared sacrifice and sprinkled/threw it upon the people, saying: “behold the blood of the covenant which the LORD made with you concerning all these words” (LXX Exod 24:8). In light of this Old Testament passage, Mark is apparently identifying the blood of Jesus with the blood of Israel’s covenant to obedience.\(^{38}\) Since the


\(^{34}\) Donahue, *The Gospel of Mark*, 395.


law was predicated on obedience and Israel was not always obedient, the law of sacrifice was given in which the blood would make the atonement (Lev 17:11). Thus Mark’s Jesus goes on to further identify his blood as that “which is poured out in behalf of many” (Mark 14:24).

While Mark does not explicitly state what “poured out in behalf of many” means, it can be deduced from the imagery of the Passover as well as the numerous other sacrifices known to the Jews. Since it is Jesus’ “blood of the [new] covenant which is poured out in behalf of many,” one can see the imagery as one remembers that it was traditionally a lamb, or other sacrificial animal, which would have its blood poured out for another. A stronger imagery becomes apparent as one realizes that often at least part of the sacrificial animal would be eaten and Jesus has already identified his body as the bread. In the apparent absence of a lamb at this Passover meal, Jesus is identifying himself as the bread and commanding it to be eaten. He is also identifying himself as the blood, and thus Mark has Jesus identifying himself as the paschal lamb.

Besides the significant allusion to Exod 24:6–8, Mark 14:24 has several other strong references to the Old Testament. Continuing in the covenant motif, both Jer 31:31–34 and Zech 9:11 are echoed here. In Jer 31:31–34, God has promised Israel that he would establish a new covenant. Since the blood of the covenant referred to here in Jeremiah is alluding back to the Sinai covenant, this v. would easily have come into the minds of the twelve. Thus, it appears that Mark may like us to see here that in Jesus this promise will be fulfilled. Perkins states that “In Zech 9:11, Yahweh speaks to the daughter of Zion/Jerusalem, promising to liberate her captives ‘by the blood of your covenant.’” This liberation fits right in with this pericope being a part of a Passover meal. Therefore, Mark may here desire Jesus’ cup pronouncement to indicate the fulfillment of another Messianic promise. Also, some have seen the phrase “poured out in behalf of many” as being an allusion to the suffering servant of Isa 53. If that is the case, then it would be possible that Mark would like us to see Jesus as the servant throughout the entire servant song.

The participle to ekchunomenon (which is poured out) is neuter nominative and, since it is in apposition to to haima mou (my blood), specifies that it is Jesus’ blood that is being poured out. Hiebert also points out that the

39. See Mann, Mark, 575.
41. The fact that the oldest manuscripts of Mark do not include kainēs may be problematic. However, the earlier account of Paul in 1 Cor 11 does include kainēs; therefore it is still possible that Mark here is alluding to this passage, especially when we look at everything else he appears to be desiring to accomplish.
43. See Evans, Mark 8:27–16:20, 392–94; Lane, The Gospel According to Mark, 507; Cranfield, Saint Mark, 427; and Hiebert, Mark, 353.
44. See Donahue, The Gospel of Mark, 396 and Hiebert, Mark, 352.
present tense of this participle “views the pouring out as a certainty.” In the passive voice, which ekbínnomenon is, it can have a meaning of “to give oneself totally in commitment, give oneself up to, dedicate oneself” (original emphasis). This alternate definition grants further enlightenment as to how Jesus views his blood. His blood is not just poured out in a sacrificial sense, but has been willfully committed and dedicated by him for many.

Verse 25 begins with Jesus saying, amēn. Mark then moves into Jesus uttering an emphatic triple negation, emphasizing that he will not drink the “fruit of the vine (wine) until that day when I will drink [it] new in the kingdom of God.” Here, Lane suggests that Jesus actually abstained from drinking what would have been the fourth cup of Passover; which would have concluded the Passover fellowship. Lane suggests that the significance can be found in the interpretations of what the cup meant: “I will take you for my people and I will be your God.” Thus this cup will be the one which Jesus will drink at the messianic banquet. Lane concludes his remarks stating that v. 25 “constitutes the solemn pledge that the fourth cup will be extended and the unfinished meal completed in the consummation, when Messiah eats with redeemed sinners in the Kingdom of God.” If Lane’s understanding is correct, then the Markan Jesus is identifying himself as the redeeming Messiah.

Only the first part of v. 26 is pertinent to the passage concerning the institution of the Lord’s Supper. The reference to singing a hymn, in the context of this being a Passover meal, would signify that this hymn would be part of the Hallel. The Hallel, Ps 113–18, were divided and sung both before and after the Passover meal. The singing of the second half, 115–18, signified the conclusion of the table-fellowship. The importance of this verse is described by Witherington: “This reference supports the view that Jesus partook of no ordinary meal on the last night of his earthly life, but rather of a celebratory and sacred one.” In reading Ps 118, the imagery of what Jesus is about to do becomes strikingly apparent. It is with this verse on his lips that he heads for the Mount of Olives.

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47. See Evans, *Mark 8:27–16:20*, 386, 88, 94.
Jesus Is the Sacrifice

As recorded by Mark, Jesus equates himself with the paschal lamb. Mark’s use of Old Testament events and history portrays Jesus’ actions as deliberate and premeditated. Jesus was going to introduce a new covenant of which the twelve were to be major advocates. Though Mark portrays, through the pericopes sandwiching this one, that the twelve seemingly failed to acknowledge exactly what was going on at the time, Mark likely did know the twelve had soon after felt the impact and weight of each word Jesus spoke. With all of the Old Testament allusions together with the biographical nature of this gospel, Mark uses the institution of the Last Supper to further explain who Jesus is and what he came to do.

57. This is evidenced in that Mark likely knew of the early Christian Last Supper tradition that appears in 1 Corinthians as well as in that he seems to have been writing in such a way that his audience would see the early disciples and subsequently will go and do better.