

Spring 2015

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Marcus D. McCormick

Harding University, mmccormick@harding.edu

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Recommended Citation

McCormick, Marcus D. (Spring 2015) "Platonism and the Eucharist: Transubstantiation in the Second to Fourth Century," *Tenor of Our Times*: Vol. 4, Article 9.

Available at: <https://scholarworks.harding.edu/tenor/vol4/iss1/9>

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PLATONISM AND THE EUCHARIST: TRANSUBSTANTIATION IN THE SECOND TO FOURTH CENTURY

By Marcus McCormick

The Lord's Supper, commonly termed as the eucharist from the second century until the era of the reformers in the sixteenth century, is a central component of Christian liturgical and sacramental doctrine. Eucharistic practice dates its institution to the early first century, as found within the Gospels¹. The concept of communal remembrance of the Lord's death and sacrifice has been echoed throughout the writings early church fathers as well as the latter portion of the New Testament outside of the Gospels. Particularly in the writings of early church fathers, a sense of doctrinal evolution concerning the Lord's Supper can be distinguished from author to author. Eucharistic thought underwent a change that mirrored the progressively more Hellenized environment surrounding it; the institutional language and practice of the Lord's Supper would eventually give way to a Greek, more specifically Platonic, understanding that would powerfully shift understanding of the eucharist in the direction of transubstantiation during the second to fourth century.

In order to best understand the development discussed in this paper, it is beneficial to keep in view the form in which the practice of the Lord's Supper eventually assumes. The doctrine of transubstantiation remains the practice of the modern Catholic Church², and was coined as a term within Catholic theology in the early twelfth century³. Language involving transubstantiation will pre-exist its theological title, but the contention that follows will seek to bring to light the progression of the system through its institutional context into an increasingly Platonic direction in the second to fourth centuries.

The scriptural eucharist given to the disciples during the Last Supper ought to be understood within the context of Passover meal which Jesus and his disciples were participating in. The Jewish Passover was a celebration as well as a remembrance of the exodus of the Jews from Egypt, in which Jews

¹ i.e., Matthew 26: 26-29, English Standard Version.

² As understood by the Catholic Church today, "it is by the conversion of the bread and wine into Christ's body and blood that Christ becomes present in the sacrament."

³ William R. Crockett, *Eucharist: Symbol of Transformation* (New York: Pueblo Publishing Company, 1989), 118.

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would reflect on God's past redemptive work⁴. In this way, the redemptive power of God to the Jew was a reality. In the Mishnah⁵, a Jew remembering Passover was "to regard himself as if he came forth himself out of Egypt."⁶ When you compare this statement of the Hebraic text to Jesus's words "This is my body,"⁷ the Lord's Supper seems to be a reality to the early Christian Church in a similar way. While the presence of God is a reality in both, the statements are not necessarily literal. This thought is mirrored in the mention of the Lord's Supper in the Greek word *anamnesis* in Corinthians⁸, translated as "memorial."⁹ Though it is a memory that is invoked through this practice, it is more than a mental response that the eucharist ought to evoke. Instead, the real effects of Jesus' sacrifice on the cross would take place in the church, adding in aspects of fellowship and eschatological joy to their worship. In addition to this, the related term to *anamnesis* in the Hebraic tradition is *zkr*, meaning memory¹⁰. In Deuteronomy, the Israelites direct access to the redemptive events of God's liberation of Israel is a thing of the past. The memory of those events of a past and future sense: the memorial remembrance of God's past deeds points to God's supremacy over time. God's past actions were therefore actualized in the remembrance of a Passover meal, rather than literally reoccurring. Early Christians were able to actively participate in the celebration of God's grace and power through the celebration just as Jews did during the feast of Passover.

As time went on, the Christian worldview became increasingly tied to the Greek understanding of the world. Christian leaders began to have to defend their fledgling religion against developed natural theology, and began to amalgamate their beliefs with compatible intellectual cores to support them. Platonism visibly integrated itself through the school at Alexandria (established in the second century, flowering in the third), where many Church fathers would receive their educations, including Clement of

⁴ Exodus 12

⁵ The Hebraic Mishnah is a supplemental text to the Torah and the writings of the prophets. Its work is primarily for use in hermeneutics of the Hebraic text, and will in this paper provide the basis for understanding the relation of Hebraic Passover symbolism to eucharistic symbolism.

⁶ Pesahim 10:5, trans. Herbert Danby.

⁷ Mark 14:22.

⁸ 1 Corinthians 11:24-25.

⁹ Everett Ferguson, "The Lord's Supper in Church History; the Early Church through the Medieval Period" *The Lord's Supper; Believers' Church Perspectives* (1997), 22.

¹⁰ Crockett, 23.

Alexandria (c.150-c.215) and Origen (c.185-c.254)¹¹. Observing a symbolic memorial through Platonic lenses renders a reverse image of the nature of symbols and their respective realities. Within the later Platonic world, a symbol would partake in that which it represented and could very nearly be that same entity. Both Plato and the leaders of fourth century church viewed the world in a two tier system: the world of senses (our experiences), and the world beyond our senses and experiences¹². As these two realms are concretely separated in Platonic thought, the use of transubstantiative language becomes more viable; transubstantiation will claim that material that was once of the physical realm has made the jump to the world beyond human sense. This way, the physical elements of the eucharist can remain as bread and wine to the senses, but can metaphysically (as well as substantially) be the same entity. Consequentially, church fathers were able to synthesize the truth they perceived in platonic philosophy with that which they understood within Christian theology.

St. Ignatius of Antioch, believed to have been born around the time of the crucifixion (c. 33 A.D)¹³, Ignatius was believed to be the third bishop of Antioch also was put to death during the latter portion of the emperor Trajan's reign (98-117 A.D)¹⁴. Ignatius was responsible for the composition of many letters to the churches, especially those in Asia Minor. Those letters were primarily concerned with maintaining orthodoxy in Christian theology and practice. Concerning the Lord's Supper, consider this text in his letter to the Philadelphians:

Be zealous, then, in observance of the Eucharist. For there is one flesh of our Lord, Jesus Christ, and one chalice that brings union in his blood. There is one altar, as there is one bishop with the priests and the deacons, who are my fellow workers. And so, whatever you do, let it be done in the name of God.¹⁵

¹¹ David N. Bell, *A Cloud of Witnesses: An Introduction to the Development of Christian Doctrine to AD 500* (Michigan: Cistercian Publications, 1989), 51-52

¹² Crockett, 116-117.

¹³ John Bonaventure O'Connor, "St. Ignatius of Antioch," *The Catholic Encyclopedia*. vol. 7, (New York: Robert Appleton Company, 1910), 3-5.

¹⁴ Francis X. Glimm, Joseph M.F. Marique, S-J, Gerald G. Walsh, S-J, trans., *The Fathers of the Church: The Apostolic Fathers* (Washington, D.C: The Catholic University of America Press, 1962), 83.

¹⁵ Glimm, 114.

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At the outset the language Ignatius uses seems to favor platonic literalism, appearing contrary to the aforementioned idea actualization. On the other hand, a consideration of the context of this passage can further reveal the author's intentions. Ignatius' letters were written in response to the debate concerning prevalent heresies plaguing his correspondent congregations. Prefacing the quote above, Ignatius admonished the Philadelphians to "shun schisms and heresies," as well as to "keep away from the poisonous weeds... where Jesus Christ does not till the soil."¹⁶ The juxtaposition of this discourse on heresy and the mention of eucharistic practice implies something about the purpose for which St. Ignatius mentioned it. Ignatius seeks to combat precursors to the Gnostic movement that will eventually stem off from Christianity, which will be founded on a fundamental misunderstanding of the true divinity and humanity of Christ. The precursor Gnostic-Docetists¹⁷ will deny one of these parts of Christ's nature, therefore misunderstanding also the nature of what the eucharist is meant to be¹⁸. Denial of Christ's body would mean that the Lord's Supper was essentially without meaning, as Christ would not have a body to offer on our behalf. Similarly, the denial of the divinity of Christ would also render the offering of the eucharist (as well as his sacrifice) meaningless, as it would lack redemptive power over sin. This direction is also taken in Ignatius' letter to the Smyrneans during his conversation on Docetism (related to Gnosticism¹⁹). Ignatius condemned those in the Smyrnaean church who "speaks ill of [his] Lord by denying that he had a body," and again admonished the church to "let no man be deceived."²⁰ This language concerning Christ and his body informs this following statement:

They abstain from the Eucharist and from prayer because they do not admit that the Eucharist is the flesh of our Savior Jesus Christ, the flesh which suffered for our sins

¹⁶ Glim, 114.

¹⁷ Gnostics claimed that Christ, being divine, could not in fact manifest himself in human form because of the corrupt nature of the physical world. Similarly, Docetists stated that Christ (from the Greek word *doceo* – "seemed") only seemed to be physically present, but was in fact a phantom.

¹⁸ Karen L. King, *What is Gnosticism?* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2003), 175

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

²⁰ Glimm, 120.

and which the Father, in His graciousness, raised from the dead.²¹

Here the Lord's Supper is discussed in a way that seems even more Platonically literalist than before, speaking of the eucharist as his flesh to convey the reality of Christ's humanity rather than the transubstantiation of the table elements. Ignatius is not an early purveyor of eucharistic transformation or Platonic thought, but is overwhelmingly concerned with Christian orthodoxy and unity.

St. Justin Martyr, born in Samaria very near to the time of Ignatius' death (c. 100 -110 A.D), was thoroughly a Gentile²². His ancestry was Greco-Roman, and he was educated in the Greek schools of philosophy (particularly the Platonist school)²³. Despite this, Justin's familiarity with the ideals of his birthplace and the Hebraic scripture used within the early church cannot go understated in his apologetic dialogues, despite his penchant for Platonic thought. In Justin's first apologetic petition to the emperor Antonius Pius, he addressed specifically the topic of the Eucharist:

Not as ordinary bread or as ordinary drink do we partake of them, but just as, through the word of God, our Savior Jesus Christ became Incarnate and took upon Himself flesh and blood for our salvation, so, we have been taught, the food which has been made the Eucharist by the prayer of His word, and which nourishes our flesh and blood by assimilation, is both the flesh and blood of that Jesus who was made flesh.²⁴

Just as in the writings of Ignatius, a strong element of literalism seems to present itself in Justin's writing. Also it ought to be taken into account that this passage, unlike the references in Ignatius' letters, was set aside as a specific part of the apology to the emperor. The practice of the table must have become an aspect of Christian worship that was known to the public and had become a facet of worship that was inquired about, especially by pagan outsiders. In this passage, the following elements are significant: first, the bread and the wine are no longer "ordinary" food and drink; that is to say,

²¹ Glimm, 121.

²² Jules Lebreton, "St. Justin Martyr," *The Catholic Encyclopedia*. vol. 8,(New York: Robert Appleton Company, 1910), 4-5.

²³ Thomas B. Falls, trans., *The Fathers of the Church: St. Justin Martyr* (New York: Christian Heritage Inc., 1948), 9.

²⁴ *Ibid*, 105-106.

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they now serve a new purpose; second, the transition from ordinary food and drink to their purpose as eucharistical elements (regardless of either interpretation) is enacted by the word of Christ; third, the bread and the wine are still nourishing to our physical bodies. While this passage may seem to speak outright for literal interpretation, the possibility of Justin expressing the importance of the humanity of Christ, along with the idea of a repurposed style of memorial mentioned above, still remains. This position becomes stronger when Justin's responses to the Jews concerning the eucharist shed additional light on his standing regarding the nature of the Lord's supper. Pulling language from scripture to speak with his Jewish colleague Trypho, Justin remarked upon the Eucharist as a "remembrance [*anamnesis*] of the Body... [and] his Blood²⁵" and refers to the element of the wine as a "memorial [*anamnesis*] of his Blood." Justin has not simply contradicted himself, but rather, has put forth that the purpose of the table is this idea encapsulated by the word *anamnesis*. This is a concept that Justin, as well as his Jewish audience, understands well. Though when speaking to intellectual pagans, Justin adopts the lenses of Platonic philosophy (while not taking on a full Platonic understanding) so that they are better able to understand, as well as satiating their intellectual desires.

In 339, in the far reaches of the Western portion of the Roman Empire, St. Ambrose was born to a distinguished Roman family. Ambrose grew to become a renowned preacher after his selection as the new bishop of Milan in 373²⁶, and was a devoted student of theology; among Ambrose's favorite authors were Origen, Basil, and Philo, all of whom were students of Greek philosophy in addition to their Christian education²⁷. Also during his time as bishop, Ambrose found much time to create works of his own regarding Christian theology. In his work entitled *The Sacraments*, Ambrose wrote about the practice of the eucharist, and gave particular attention to the literalist language in John 6, stating that it is the "my flesh is true food... and my blood is true drink"²⁸ that Christians receive. Despite this, he remains true to his Platonic roots and shows that the eucharistic food has a primarily spiritual character. In part, this is because the literalism might be offensive,

²⁵ Falls, 262.

²⁶ Roy J. Deferrari, trans., *The Fathers of the Church: St. Ambrose* (Washington D.C.: The Catholic University of America, 1963), vi-xvii.

²⁷ James Loughlin, "St. Ambrose," *The Catholic Encyclopedia*. vol. 1, (New York: Robert Appleton Company, 1907), 2-4.

²⁸ John 6:55

just as it was in John 6: “This is a hard teaching. Who can accept it?”²⁹ Therefore, Ambrose is also keen to emphasize that “it is not bodily food, but spiritual.”³⁰ That being said, Ambrose wrote believing that this spiritual nourishment was delivered through physical means. Ambrose understands the spiritual and physical realms to be united by a ceremony of consecration, after being effected by the working words of Christ. He explains:

“Before consecration, it is bread, but when the words of Christ have been added, it is the body of Christ... And before the words of Christ, the cup is full of wine and water. When the words of Christ have operated, then it is the blood that redeems the people”³¹

This language seems similar to the above instances of eucharistic observance, but the primary difference lies in the overt recognition of the role of the priest. The body of Christ was not present before the consecration, but after the consecration it is. In his work *The Mysteries*, Ambrose makes this clearer by stating that “even nature itself is changed”³² by the blessing, and that the words of the Savior as so powerful that they “make out of nothing what was not”³³. A new reality is added to the elements. Consecration allows the figure (the element), to become the reality, ultimately reconciling it to the Platonic understanding: the element which comes from the world of our senses, “becomes the body,”³⁴ which, being divine, is beyond our world of sense. This explanation of how the act occurs in opposition to the earlier texts which attempt to explain what occurs strongly suggests what can be recognized as transubstantiative thought.

This final result of transubstantiation is not a product of Ambrose alone, but reflects a culmination of a gradual progression of the church fathers into a fully Greek understanding of the symbol and reality of the Lord’s Table. First was Ignatius’ understanding of the Table as signifying the humanity of Jesus, next was St. Justin’s apologetics to the educated pagan world, thereby adopting Platonic lenses to augment eucharistical understanding. Last was St. Ambrose, who took on the lenses as his primary

²⁹ John 6:60

³⁰ Deferrari, 27.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 305.

³² *Ibid.*, 24-25.

³³ *Ibid.*

³⁴ Deferrari, 304.

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understanding of Holy Communion; therefore, setting the precedent for medieval theologians who would coin the term *transubstantio* in the early twelfth century³⁵.

³⁵ Crockett, 118.