
THE BREAD OF THE PRESENCE

Now that we've looked at the Last Supper through the lenses of the Passover and the manna, more questions arise. If Jesus intended to inaugurate the new exodus through his death and resurrection, then *how did he think God would be worshiped once the new exodus had begun?* In particular, how would God be present to his people, as he had been in the past, in the Tabernacle of Moses?

Although many scholars agree that Jesus was looking forward to the new exodus, they have tended to ignore the question of what he thought worship would be like after it had begun. From an ancient Jewish perspective, however, this would have been a very important question. Would there be a new Tabernacle, as in the first exodus? If so, what kind of sacrifice would be offered in it? Would worship consist of animal sacrifices, such as those described

in the Book of Leviticus? Or would it be focused on some other kind of offering? For example, in the second century A.D., Rabbi Menahem of Galilee taught that "In the World to Come all sacrifices will be annulled, but the thanksgiving sacrifice will never be annulled" (*Leviticus Rabbah* 9:7). This is a remarkable vision. We have a Jewish rabbi, not long after the time of Jesus, foreseeing a future age in which all of the many sacrifices described in the Torah would cease, and just one would remain: the "sacrifice of thanksgiving" (see Leviticus 7). That's what Rabbi Menahem expected; what did Jesus expect?

In this chapter, I will try to answer these questions by exploring our third key to understanding the Last Supper: the mysterious Bread of the Presence. Curiously, many modern readers have never even heard of this holy bread that was kept in the Jewish Tabernacle, much less explored how it might shed light on the Jewish roots of the Eucharist.

Perhaps this is because references to the Bread of the Presence are buried in some of the most difficult parts of the Old Testament, such as the detailed description of the Tabernacle (Exodus 25) or the priestly rules and regulations of the Levites (Leviticus 24). Or perhaps it is because older English Bibles tended to translate the Hebrew references to this bread with the rather obscure expression "Showbread" (or "Shewbread"). As we will see below, this has created some problems for properly understanding the significance of this bread.

Whatever the reason for its being little known, in this chapter I will try to show that the Old Testament Bread of the Presence is an extremely important piece of the Eucharistic puzzle. Indeed, an exploration of the Jewish context of the Gospels suggests that Jesus not only saw the

Last Supper as the new Passover and the new manna from heaven; he also saw it as the messianic fulfillment of the Bread of the Presence.

In order to see these links between the Last Supper and the Bread of the Presence, we will once again have to go back to the Old Testament and Jewish tradition and the practices and beliefs that surrounded this mysterious bread.

THE BREAD OF THE FACE

Despite most readers' unfamiliarity with the Bread of the Presence, it is actually mentioned many times in the Jewish Scriptures. For our purposes, it is the two most detailed descriptions that stand out. The first comes from the Book of Exodus, the second from the Book of Leviticus. We'll take a moment to look at each in its turn.

The Bread of the Face of God

The Bread of the Presence first appears in the Old Testament during the exodus from Egypt. As soon as God is finished giving the Ten Commandments to Israel and sealing the covenant with them with a heavenly banquet (Exodus 20-24), he immediately begins to give them instructions for how they are to worship him. All these instructions revolve around the central place of worship, "the tent of meeting," also known as the Tabernacle (Exodus 26).

The first thing we need to remember about the Tabernacle is that God commanded Moses to make three sacred objects to be kept inside of it:

1. The Ark of the Covenant;
2. The golden Lampstand, known as the Menorah;
3. The golden table of the Bread of the Presence.

Intriguingly, even before God describes the Tabernacle itself, he focuses Moses' attention on the three sacred objects that will be kept in the Holy Place, the inner sanctuary. It's obvious that these three objects are especially important. In fact, the Bible says that Moses saw the pattern for making them in a vision that was "shown" to him on top of Mount Sinai (Exodus 25:9, 40). In other words, the Ark, the Lampstand, and the Bread of the Presence are patterned on *heavenly* realities.

The first of these, the famous Ark of the Covenant, was a golden box in which the Israelites would later place the tablets of the Ten Commandments, the manna, and Aaron's staff (Exodus 25:10-22). On top of the Ark was the "mercy seat," a large golden cover where two "cherubim of gold"—that is, statues of angels—were to be placed. (Notice here that God evidently does not consider these golden *statues* of angels to be a violation of the Ten Commandments. Despite what some readers of the Bible have thought, the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob is apparently not antigold or antistatue!)

The second object, the golden Lampstand, is more commonly known by the Hebrew word *menorah* (Exodus 25:31-40). This candelabra had seven branches and was decorated like a tree or bush covered with flowers. The priests were to keep it burning continually, since it was the only source of light inside the Holy Place.

Finally, and most importantly for us, there was the golden table on which the Israelites placed the Bread of the Presence. Here are the details of its description:

And you shall make a table of acacia wood . . . You shall overlay it with *pure gold*, and make a molding of gold around it. And you shall make its plates and dishes for incense, and *its flagons and bowls with which to pour libations*; of pure gold you shall make them. *And you shall set the Bread of the Presence on the table before me always.* (EXODUS 25:23-24, 29-30)

This passage contains three important clues to the meaning of this strange bread.

First, upon careful examination, you'll notice that the bread was not the only item on the golden table. Next to it were "flagons and bowls" for pouring "libations"—that is, sacrificial drink offerings of wine (compare Numbers 15:5-7; 28:7). So, when it comes to the Tabernacle of Moses, we can rightly refer to it as the *bread and wine of the Presence*. Intriguingly, as the Jewish scholar Menahem Haran argues, this wine was different from all other wine offerings, since it was not poured out by the priests. Instead, this wine seems to have been *drunk* in a sacred meal of bread and wine.

Second, as I mentioned above, most older English translations, like the King James Version, speak about the Showbread. However, the actual Hebrew expression is *lehem ha panim*, which in most modern English Bibles is "Bread of the Presence." The question is, how exactly should we translate this expression? And what does it mean?

On one hand, some scholars translate the Hebrew as "Bread of Display" or "Bread of Offering." From this perspective, the Hebrew expression refers to the bread being placed *before God's "presence,"* that is, in front of the Holy of Holies, where the glory cloud of the divine presence

would descend above the Ark of the Covenant. The main problem with this interpretation is that it fails to communicate what the Hebrew says. It tells us what should be done to the bread, but does not actually translate the Hebrew word *panim*.

On the other hand, some scholars argue that the expression should be translated as literally as possible. They point out that the word commonly rendered as *presence* is actually the Hebrew word for *face (panim)*. Therefore, the most literal translation of the Hebrew is *the Bread of the Face*. From this perspective the meaning of the expression is clear, but the implications are enormous: the Bread of the Presence is nothing less than the Bread of the Face of God. In this view, somehow, the bread itself is a visible sign of the face of God.

In support of this second interpretation, we should remember exactly when the Bread of the Presence was first given to the people of Israel. In the Book of Exodus, God commands Moses to build the golden table of the Bread of the Presence (Exodus 25) *immediately after* the heavenly banquet that he and the elders participated in on Mount Sinai (Exodus 24). The reason this proximity is significant is that the account of the heavenly meal emphasizes that when they ate and drank, they also saw God:

Then Moses and Aaron, Nadab and Abihu, and seventy of the elders of Israel went up, and *they saw the God of Israel*. . . . And he did not lay his hand on the chief men of the people of Israel; *they beheld God, and ate and drank.* (EXODUS 24:9-11)

In a word, when we put the giving of the Bread of the Presence in its biblical context, it seems that the earthly

"Bread of the Face" was meant to be a kind of memorial of the heavenly banquet in which Moses and the elders "saw" the God of Israel while they "ate and drank." That is also why God commands Moses to construct the table for the Bread of the Presence (along with the Ark and the Menorah) according to the heavenly "pattern" that he was shown "on the mountain" (Exodus 25:9, 40). The earthly Tabernacle is a visible sign of the invisible heavenly place of God, and the earthly Bread of the Presence is a visible sign of the invisible heavenly face of God.

As one Old Testament scholar puts it, in the bread of the Tabernacle, it is God "himself" who acts as "the host who presents himself to his believers, giving divine strength, divine life."

The Bread of the "Everlasting Covenant"

But there is more. In addition to the brief description of the Bread of the Presence found in the Book of Exodus, there is also a more detailed account in Leviticus. In this book of laws for the Levitical priests, we learn that the bread and wine were signs not just of God's presence, but of the covenant. In other words, this bread represented the sacred bond between God and the twelve tribes of Israel:

And you shall take fine flour, and bake *twelve cakes* of it; two tenths of an ephah shall be in each cake. And you shall set them in two rows, six in a row, upon the table of pure gold. And you shall put pure frankincense with each row, that it may go with the bread as a memorial portion to be offered by fire to the LORD. *Every Sabbath day Aaron shall set it in order before the LORD continually on behalf of*

the sons of Israel as an everlasting covenant. And it shall be for Aaron and his sons, and they shall eat it in a Holy Place, since it is for him a most holy portion out of the offerings by fire to the LORD, a perpetual due. (LEVITICUS 24:5-7)

Several things are worth noting here.

First and foremost, the Bread of the Presence is explicitly identified as the sign of the "everlasting covenant" between God and Israel. As we saw above, this covenant relationship had been established through the events that took place on Mount Sinai, when Moses and the elders of Israel offered sacrifice at the foot of Mount Sinai (Exodus 24:8-11). It seems that the Bread of the Presence—which, again, was patterned on the heavenly vision "shown" to Moses on top of Sinai (Exodus 25:9)—was meant to be a memorial and *sign* of the same "covenant" that had been sealed with Israel at Sinai. That's why there are twelve cakes of unleavened bread—one for each of the twelve tribes.

Second, according to Leviticus, the Bread of the Presence was a "perpetual" offering, to be continually present before the Lord in the Tabernacle. It was to be a perpetual sign of the fact that although the Israelites were no longer at Mount Sinai, God was still with them. Intriguingly, Leviticus also implies that as long as the Bread of the Presence was inside the Tabernacle, the flames of the Menorah were to be kept burning "continually" alongside it (Leviticus 24:1-4). (In modern times, Catholic churches maintain a similar practice with their own Tabernacles in the form of the sanctuary lamp, which always burns when the Eucharist is present.) Whenever the golden table was taken out of the Tabernacle, the Levitical priests were to cover it with a veil (Numbers 4:1-5).

Third—and this is important—the Bread of the Presence was not just a symbol; it was also a *sacrifice*. Although many readers of the Bible are familiar only with animal sacrifice, there were in fact two kinds of sacrifice in the Old Testament: (1) “bloody” sacrifice, involving the slaughter of bulls, goats, and sheep, and (2) “unbloody” sacrifice, which often consisted of bread and wine. The Bread of the Presence was a kind of unbloody sacrifice, known in Hebrew as the *minhah* (compare Leviticus 2). Lest there be any doubt about this, notice that incense was also kept on the golden table. In the Old Testament, incense always accompanies sacrifices in order to symbolize their rising to heaven. Moreover, the prophet Ezekiel actually refers to the golden table of the Bread of the Presence as an “altar” (Ezekiel 41:21–22). In other words, this bread was both a meal and a sacrifice. It was both a gift from God to his priests (in the form of a meal) and an offering of the priests to their God (in the form of a sacrifice).

Fourth and finally, the Bread of the Presence was not just any sacrifice. It was a “most holy” sacrifice, which Leviticus says was to be offered up “every Sabbath day” by Aaron the High Priest. This link between the Bread of the Presence and the Sabbath is important to stress, since modern readers sometimes tend to think of the Sabbath primarily as a day of rest, not necessarily as a day of sacrifice. To be sure, after the development of the synagogue in Jewish cities outside Jerusalem (probably in the third century B.C.), weekly Sabbath worship consisted primarily of attending the local synagogue to pray, to study the Torah, and to sing hymns of praise to God. However, according to the Bible, there was also a *cultic* aspect to Sabbath worship. In the Tabernacle (and, later, the Jerusalem

Temple), the Sabbath was distinctively marked by priestly sacrifices, both bloody and unbloody. Significantly, the unbloody sacrifice offered each week was nothing other than the Bread and wine of the Presence. It was only after the Romans destroyed the Temple in A.D. 70—that is, after the time of Jesus—that the offering of all sacrifices ceased. Before that tragic event, every week, Sabbath worship revolved around the offering of the fresh Bread of the Presence and of the eating of the bread by the priests in the Holy Place.

In sum, when we look at the pages of the Old Testament, it should be quite clear that the Bread of the Presence stood at the very center of Israelite worship. Alongside the famous Ark of the Covenant and the golden Menorah, it was one of the three most sacred objects in the Holy Place, the inner sanctum of the ancient Tabernacle. No one doubts how important the Sabbath was in ancient Israel; the Bread of the Presence was *the* Sabbath sacrifice, the “most holy” offering. Finally, it was both the sign of the “everlasting covenant” with Israel and the Bread of the Lord’s perpetual presence in the Tabernacle—the “Bread of the Face” of Almighty God. Clearly, according to Jewish Scripture, the mysterious Bread of the Presence was no ordinary bread.

“BEHOLD, GOD’S LOVE FOR YOU”

When we turn to ancient Jewish tradition to see what it has to say about the Bread of the Presence, we find ourselves in very much the same situation as with Passover and the manna. Several remarkable traditions, not found in the

Bible, bear witness to a developing reverence for the mysterious, even miraculous, nature of this bread.

The Bread of the Presence and the Priest Melchizedek

Anyone familiar with the Book of Genesis or the letter to the Hebrews will have to admit that one of the most enigmatic people in the Bible is the man called Melchizedek. This shadowy figure, who is mentioned only twice in the entire Old Testament, first appears in the biblical account of Abraham's victory over the pagan kings in the promised land. After rescuing his nephew Lot from captivity, Abraham (here called Abram) is joined by Melchizedek, who is both priest and king, and who offers a very special sacrifice to God:

After [Abram's] return from the defeat of Chedor-laomer and the kings who were with him . . . *Melchizedek King of Salem brought out bread and wine; he was priest of God Most High.* And he blessed him and said: "Blessed be Abram by God Most High, maker of heaven and earth; and blessed be God Most High, who has delivered your enemies into your hand!" And Abram gave him a tenth of everything. (GENESIS 14:17-20)

Who is this mysterious king? Why is he the first man to be called "priest" in the Bible (in Hebrew, *kohen*)? And why does he offer a sacrifice of "bread and wine" to God, rather than, say, a bull, or a goat, or a lamb?

Let's try to answer these questions as simply as possible. For one thing, in ancient Jewish tradition, Melchizedek was

widely believed to be none other than Shem, the righteous firstborn son of Noah. According to these traditions, Shem was the birth name of Noah's son, while Melchizedek, meaning "king of righteousness," was his royal title. Moreover, as the first-century Jewish historian Josephus attests, it was also believed that the city of "Salem" over which Melchizedek was king was none other than Jeru-salem, which later became the city of David and the place of the Temple (compare Psalm 76:1-3).

In any case, what matters for us is that Melchizedek's sacrifice of bread and wine was connected by Jewish tradition with the Bread and wine of the Presence. In one ancient commentary on Genesis 14, we find the following:

"And Melchizedek king of Salem brought forth bread and wine" [Gen 14:18]. . . . Rabbi Samuel ben Nahman said: *He instructed him in the laws of the priesthood, "bread" alluding to the Bread of the Presence, and "wine" to libations.* The Rabbis said: He revealed Torah to him, as it is written, "Come, eat of my bread, and drink of the wine I have mingled" [Prov 9:5]. (GENESIS RABBAH 43:6)

In this interpretation, Melchizedek is not only marked out as the first priest-king in Jerusalem. His offering of bread and wine is also explicitly identified as the Bread and wine of the Presence, which he, as a priest, taught Abraham how to offer. 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). And the sacrificial offering of this primordial priestly order was nothing other than bread and wine.

The Miraculous Bread of the Golden Table

In addition to traditions about biblical figures like Melchizedek, we also find a number of traditions about how the Bread of the Presence was offered in the Jewish Temple at the time of Jesus. For example, in the Mishnah, the rabbis tell us that the loaves of the Bread of the Presence had “horns” on their corners, consisting of small pieces of dough that were rounded upward like the horns of a bull (Mishnah, *Menahoth* 11:4). These horns made the bread look like the bronze altar of sacrifice that was in the outer court of the Temple, thereby supporting the Bible’s description of the bread as both sign and sacrifice.

Moreover, we learn that certain rabbis believed that something special happened to the Bread of the Presence when it was offered by the priests as a sacrifice to God. *Before* the bread was brought into the Holy Place to be offered in sacrifice, it could be laid on a marble table. But *after* the bread had been consecrated to God by the priests, it had to be laid on a golden table:

In the Porch at the entering in of the House [=the Temple] were two tables, the one of marble and the other of gold. *On the table of marble they laid the Bread of the Presence when it was brought in and on the table of gold they laid the Bread of the Presence when it*

was brought out, since what is holy must be raised [in honor] and not brought down. And within was a table of gold whereon the Bread of the Presence lay continually. (MISHNAH, *MENAHOTH* 11:7)

This ritual clearly shows that, for the ancient Jewish rabbis, the Bread of the Presence was extremely sacred—but only after it had been offered as a sacrifice to God in the Holy Place. Before being offered in sacrifice, it was just ordinary bread, and could be set on an ordinary marble table. But once it had been offered in sacrifice, it was now “holy”—in Hebrew, *qadosh*, meaning “set apart” or “consecrated.” As such, it had to be placed on a table of gold, just as all of the vessels and furniture in the Holy Place were made of gold (see Exodus 25).

One other tradition even goes so far as to suggest that the Bread of the Presence, after it had been consecrated, actually displayed *supernatural properties*. After the priests took the bread out of the Holy Place, they would lay it on the “table of gold,” so that they might eat it among themselves (Mishnah, *Menahoth* 11:7). According to the Jewish Talmud, during the reign of one particularly holy High Priest, even a small piece of the Bread of the Presence could provide miraculous sustenance:

[During the whole period that Simon the Righteous ministered as High Priest], a blessing was bestowed upon the *‘omer*, the two breads, and the Bread of the Presence, so that every priest, who obtained a piece thereof as big as an olive, ate it and became satisfied with some eating thereof and even leaving something over. (BABYLONIAN TALMUD, *YOMA* 39A)

Can anyone familiar with the Gospels fail to think here of the famous feeding of the five thousand? On that occasion, Jesus multiplied five loaves of bread, such that "all ate and were satisfied," and there was even some "left over" (Matthew 14:20). From an ancient Jewish perspective, the Bread of the Presence, like the manna before it, was no ordinary bread. It was believed by at least some rabbis to have been miraculous.

The Bread in the Temple

Perhaps the most striking tradition of all is the last one we will examine. It, too, has to do with the Bread of the Presence in the Temple at the time of Jesus.

In Jesus' day, it was customary for Jewish men living in the land of Israel to go up to Jerusalem and the Temple three times a year in order to keep the feasts of Passover, Pentecost, and Tabernacles. ("Pentecost" is the Greek name for the Jewish festival of Weeks, which took place seven weeks after the Sunday during Passover week.) This custom was rooted in the binding law of God, given to Moses: "Three times in the year shall all your males appear before the LORD God, the God of Israel" (Exodus 34:23; 23:17). According to both the Jerusalem Talmud and Babylonian Talmud, at each of these feasts, the priests in the Temple would do something remarkable. They would remove the Golden Table of the Bread of the Presence from within the Holy Place so that the Jewish pilgrims could see it. When they removed the holy bread, the priests would elevate it and say the following words:

They [the priests] used to lift it [the Golden Table] up and exhibit the Bread of the Presence

on it to those who came up for the festivals, saying to them, "Behold, God's love for you!" (BABYLONIAN TALMUD, *MENAHOTH* 29A)

If this tradition weren't so well documented, it would be almost unbelievable. For one thing, it seems to be an unheard-of breach of Temple etiquette. Aside from the priests, no one was allowed to enter the sanctuary and look upon the sacred objects contained inside the Holy Place. But during the pilgrim feasts, the Jewish people were allowed to see *one* of the sacred objects hidden behind the outer veil: the Bread of the Presence. Even more stunning is the declaration of the priests while elevating this holy bread. How could the Bread of the Presence be so closely tied to the "love" of God? From an ancient Jewish perspective, what could these words mean?

Although we can only speculate, it seems safe to suggest that the Bread of the Presence was a sign of God's love because it was a sign of the covenant. In the Old Testament, the covenant between God and Israel is frequently described in terms of a "marriage" bond, a *covenant of love* between the divine Bridegroom (God) and his earthly Bride (Israel) (see Ezekiel 16; Isaiah 54; Hosea 1-2). As we saw earlier, the Torah explicitly states that the Bread of the Presence was not just the "most holy" sacrifice of the Sabbath; it was also the sign of the "everlasting covenant" (Leviticus 24:7). As the visible sign of this everlasting covenant, the Bread of the Presence was also the visible sign of the divine Bridegroom's love for his Bride. Perhaps that is why the priests could say to the people when they held up the bread, "Behold, God's love for you!"

To See the "Face" of the Lord

One last question remains. Why is it that the priests would bring out only the Bread of the Presence? Why not the golden Menorah, or even the Ark of the Covenant?

Again, while we cannot be certain, the reason may ultimately stem from the Old Testament. Recall that above I mentioned how the Book of Exodus commands that all Israelite men take part in the three feasts of Passover, Pentecost, and Tabernacles. As several recent scholars have pointed out, most English translations say that the men should "appear before God." But the literal Hebrew reads, "Three times a year shall all your males *see the face of the Lord, the LORD God of Israel*" (Exodus 34:23; 23:17). In this line, the Hebrew word for the "face" of God is *panim*, the same word used for the "Bread of the Presence" or "Bread of the Face" (Exodus 25:30). In other words, by showing the pilgrims the Bread of the *panim*, the priests in the Temple were fulfilling the Law that commanded that they "see the Face" of the Lord. As the Jewish scholar Israel Knohl writes:

It seems to me that the sages departed from convention and permitted the display of the Temple furniture before the pilgrims so as to allow them to fulfill their obligation "to see the face." Or, to put it another way, the presentation of these holy items before the large assembly created the experience of a public theophany. The Israelites who had longed for the Temple courts and asked "when may I come to see the face of God," went up to the Temple at the pilgrimage feast and gazed upon the vessels of the Temple-service that were

brought out of hiding. In this way their spiritual thirst was slaked and they fulfilled the commandment of the Torah that "three times a year each male must see the face of the Sovereign, the LORD, the God of Israel" (EXODUS 34:23).

These words are right on target, although I would clarify one point. It seems reasonable to conclude that for ancient Jews, the Bread of the Presence was not the *actual* face of God but an earthly sign of his face. The Old Testament is quite clear that no one could see the unveiled face of God and live (Exodus 33:20). However, it is also quite clear that when Moses and the elders of Israel went up Mount Sinai, they saw something divine. As the Torah states, they "beheld God, and ate and drank" (Exodus 24:11).

However we interpret these words, one thing is clear: to a first-century Jew like Jesus, who certainly kept the feasts in Jerusalem and probably witnessed the elevation of the golden table, the Bread of the Presence was no ordinary bread! It was not just some ancient relic of bygone days, sealed forever in the inner sanctuary. Instead, according to ancient Jewish tradition, this holy bread was the primordial sacrifice of Melchizedek, the miraculous food of the Holy Place, the Bread of the Face of Almighty God. Last but not least, this holy bread was a living, visible sign of God's love for his people, the way his earthly people could catch a fleeting glimpse of the ultimate desire of their hearts: to see the face of God and live, and to know that he loved them.

Or, one should say, it should have been all these things. Tragically, like the sacrifice of the Passover lamb in the Temple, the weekly offering of the Bread of the Presence came to a bitter end in A.D. 70, when the Roman armies

destroyed the Jerusalem Temple. From that day to this, the offering of the Bread of the Presence has ceased. To this day, you can travel to Rome and see the famous Arch of Titus, commissioned by the Emperor Domitian to memorialize the overthrow of Jerusalem. There, carved into the stone, are images of the Roman soldiers carrying off from the Temple both the golden Menorah and the golden table of the Bread of the Presence.

JESUS AND THE NEW BREAD OF THE PRESENCE

With these biblical backgrounds and Jewish traditions in mind, we can ask the question, did Jesus himself ever refer to the Bread of the Presence? And, if so, how might this mysterious bread and wine shed light on his actions at the Last Supper? If Jesus saw himself as inaugurating the new exodus, did he think there would be a new sanctuary? What did he think it would be like? Would the bread and wine of the Presence have a place in it?

On at least one occasion during his public ministry, Jesus did indeed refer to the Bread of the Presence. He did so in the midst of a debate over his disciples' act of plucking grain on the Sabbath, which was seen by some Pharisees as breaking the Sabbath rest. Even though the Old Testament itself has no explicit command against plucking grain on the Sabbath, the oral tradition of the Pharisees prohibited it. This prohibition led to the following incident:

At that time Jesus went through the grainfields on the Sabbath; his disciples were hungry, and

they began to pluck heads of grain and to eat. But when the Pharisees saw it, they said to him, "Look, your disciples are doing what is not lawful to do on the Sabbath." He said to them, "Have you not read what David did, when he was hungry, and those who were with him: *how he entered the house of God and ate the Bread of the Presence*, which it was not lawful for him to eat nor for those who were with him, but only for the priests? Or have you not read how on the Sabbath the priests in the Temple profane the Sabbath, and are guiltless? I tell you, something greater than the Temple is here." (MATTHEW 12:1-6)

In order to understand what's going on in this (admittedly dense) exchange of arguments, it's important to highlight and explain the three ways in which Jesus justified the actions of his disciples.

King David and the Priestly Bread of the Presence

First, Jesus defended his disciples by appealing to a story of how King David and his followers once ate the Bread of the Presence in the Tabernacle of Moses, even though they were not Levitical priests.

This story can be found in the first Book of Samuel. Once, when David was on the run from King Saul, he came to the Tabernacle of Moses (which was at that time located in the town of Nob) and asked the priest there for food. And this is what happened:

Then came David to Nob to Ahimelech the priest. . . . "Now then what have you at hand? Give

me five loaves of bread, or whatever is here." And the priest answered David, "I have no common bread at hand, but there is holy bread; if only the young men have kept themselves from women." And David answered the priest, "Of a truth women have been kept from us as always when I go on an expedition; the vessels of the young men are holy, even when it is a common journey; how much more today will their vessels be holy?" *So the priest gave him the holy bread; for there was no bread there but the Bread of the Presence, which is removed from before the LORD, to be replaced by hot bread on the day it is taken away.* (1 SAMUEL 21:1, 3-6)

As any ancient Jew would have known, this is a peculiar story. For the Torah makes it pretty clear that the Bread of the Presence could only be eaten by "Aaron and his sons," that is, by the Levitical priests (Leviticus 24:9). But David and his men were not from the tribe of Levi. To the contrary, David was descended from a different tribe—the tribe of Judah. So how could David and his men eat the priestly Bread of the Presence without breaking the Law?

For one thing, they happened to be in a state of sexual ritual purity. Although it is a little-known fact, the regular practice of sexual abstinence was not something that began with the New Testament. Already in the Old Testament, Israelite men practiced a kind of temporary "celibacy" on two occasions: (1) whenever they were on a military expedition, or (2) whenever they served as priests in the Sanctuary. That is why the priest Ahimelech makes the rather strange statement "There is holy bread, if only the young men have kept themselves from women." He could give the Bread of the Presence to them only if they

were in the required state of priestly purity. Luckily for David and his men, they happened to be in just such a state, since they were prepared for doing battle.

Even more important, David himself had not only been anointed king by the prophet Samuel (see 1 Samuel 16). According to the Bible, David was also a *priest*. For whatever reason, even scholars frequently forget this. But it is still true. That is why David could wear the "linen ephod," a priestly garment, and offer priestly sacrifices at the altar, "burnt offerings and peace offerings" (2 Samuel 6:14-17). That is also why the Bible says "David's sons were priests" (2 Samuel 8:18). Like father, like sons. But—and this is important—David was not just *any* kind of priest. He was not a priest according to the order of Levi, which had been instituted after the worship of the golden calf in the Sinai desert (Exodus 32). David was a priest according to the order of Melchizedek, the ancient priest-king of Salem. As David himself says in the Psalms to his royal successor:

A Psalm of David

The LORD says to my Lord,
 "Sit at my right hand, till I make your enemies your
 footstool."
 The LORD sends forth from Zion your mighty scepter.
 Rule in the midst of your foes.
 The LORD has sworn and will not change his mind,
 "You are a priest forever after the order of Melchizedek."
 (PSALM 110:1-4)

As this Psalm makes crystal clear, King David and all his successors were not merely kings; they were also priests

of the order of Melchizedek, the first man to be called "priest" in the Bible (Genesis 14:18). And as such, as long as David was in a state of purity, he could eat the Bread of the Presence. So what appears to be a case of lawbreaking on his part is in truth nothing of the sort.

With this in mind, let's go back to the Gospels. In Jesus' response to the Pharisees' criticism of his disciples, he is saying in effect, "I am like King David, and my disciples are like his followers, and we can act like priests, because David was a priest, according to the order of Melchizedek." And remember, what was it that Melchizedek offered to God? Bread and wine.

The Priests in the Temple and the Bread of the Presence

The second way Jesus defended his disciples was by appealing to the fact that the priests in the Temple work on the Sabbath yet do so without breaking the law: "Have you not read in the Law how on the Sabbath the priests in the Temple profane the Sabbath, and are guiltless?" (Matthew 12:5). When he spoke of "the Law," he was alluding to the priestly codes of conduct in the Book of Leviticus. In Leviticus, it expressly states that the priests in the Temple *did* work on the Sabbath, by preparing and offering the Bread of the Presence:

And you shall take fine flour, and bake twelve cakes of it. . . . And you shall set them in two rows, upon the table of pure gold. . . . Every Sabbath day Aaron shall set it in order before the LORD continually on behalf of the sons of Israel as an everlasting covenant. (LEVITICUS 24:5-7, 8)

When you think about it, this is remarkable. While all of the Jewish laity were resting from work on the Sabbath—even from baking and cooking—the priests were in the Temple offering the Sabbath sacrifices, which included the Bread of the Presence. They were, in effect, "breaking" the Sabbath and doing so right in the Temple itself!

Nevertheless, as Jesus points out, even though, at first glance, the priests are "profaning" the Sabbath, they remain "guiltless." Why? An exception is made for them *because they are priests*, because they are in the Temple, and because they are offering the Bread of the Presence. Yet again, the message to the Pharisees is, "My disciples can 'work' on the Sabbath, because they have the same privileges and prerogatives as the priests in the Temple."

Something Greater Than the Temple

But how can Jesus draw such an analogy? How can he say this when the incident with the Pharisees took place not in the Temple but in a Galilean grain field?

This question leads us to his third and final point, which is perhaps the most important of all: Jesus justified his disciples' actions by identifying *himself* with the Temple. Notice that his final response to the Pharisees was not an appeal to Scripture but to his own authority, his own mysterious identity. Stunningly, in defense of himself and his disciples, he said to them: "*Something greater than the Temple is here*" (Matthew 12:8).

As the context makes clear, these words were a veiled reference to himself. Indeed, he has said things like this on other occasions: "Something greater than Solomon is here," and "Something greater than Jonah is here" (Matthew 12:41-42; Luke 11:31-32). But "something greater

than the Temple"? It is almost impossible to overestimate just how staggering such a claim would have been to Jesus' original Jewish audience. As any of the Pharisees would have known, the Temple was nothing less than *the dwelling place of God's presence on earth*. That is what made it so special. That is what made it holy. That is what made it different from all other buildings. It was the dwelling place of God. As Jesus himself says elsewhere, "He who swears by the Temple, swears by it and by him who dwells in it" (Matthew 23:21).

But this begs a very important question. If, to an ancient Jew, the Temple was the dwelling place of God on earth, then what on earth—who on earth—could possibly be greater than it? Although we can try to avoid the obvious, the only adequate answer is God himself, present in person, "tabernacling" in the flesh. Once again, we brush up against the mystery of Jesus' divine identity. Who is he claiming to be? What is he claiming to be? In a word, Jesus is saying that *he himself is the true Temple*. He himself is where God dwells on earth. He is the very presence of God.

Should there be any doubt about the divine nature of Jesus' claims, notice that he quickly followed it up by also referring to himself as Son of Man as the "Lord of the Sabbath" (Matthew 12:8). Again, as I said earlier, and as any ancient Jew would have known, there was only one "Lord of the Sabbath"—the one who had made the Sabbath when he made the world (Genesis 1). In light of these two claims by Jesus, it is not surprising that the Gospels record no response from his Pharisaic opponents. They probably went away in stunned silence at what appeared to be blasphemy.

Once we understand these three lines of defense, Jesus' otherwise baffling responses to the Pharisees not only make sense, they are also very revealing. For they show us that Jesus saw himself as a new David, and thus as a Melchizedekian king and priest. They also show us that he identified his disciples as priestly followers who could work on the Sabbath, like the priests who offered the Bread of the Presence. Finally, they make absolutely clear that he saw himself—indeed, his own body—as the new Temple of God. And remember, it was in the Temple that the sacrificial Bread of the Presence was both offered and eaten.

The Bread and Wine of Jesus' Presence

In books about the Last Supper, scholars are often puzzled by a peculiar feature of the meal. If it was in fact a new Passover, then why didn't Jesus take the roasted flesh of the Passover lamb and identify *it* as his body? Why did he focus instead on the bread and wine? Moreover, why would he choose to identify the bread and wine so intimately with himself? Where could he have gotten the (admittedly strange) idea that bread and wine could somehow represent a *person*?

To be sure, one can see how the breaking of the bread and the pouring out of the wine could be visible signs of his imminent death. The broken bread symbolizes his broken body, and the outpoured wine symbolizes the shedding of his blood. But you have to admit that when you think of common symbols of a person's presence, bread and wine are not the first things that spring to mind. That is, unless you are a first-century Jew, and you are talking

not just about the presence of a human being but about the presence of God.

However, as we have seen, the notion that bread and wine could be signs of the divine presence was something that would have been driven home at least three times a year, at the feasts of Passover, Pentecost, and Tabernacles. As we just learned, at each of these festivals, the golden table of the Bread of the Presence would be brought out for the pilgrims to see, and the priests would declare: "Behold, God's love for you!"

In light of everything we've seen so far in this chapter, I think the case can be made that from Jesus' perspective, the Last Supper was not merely a new Passover; it was also the new bread and wine of the Presence. Although most readers don't look at the Last Supper in terms of the bread and wine of the Presence, I invite you to look again:

And he took bread, and when he had given thanks he broke it and gave it to them, saying, "This is *my body* which is given for you. Do this *in remembrance* of me." And likewise the cup after supper, saying, "This cup which is poured out for you is *the new covenant in my blood*. . . . You are those who have continued with me in my trials; as my Father covenanted a kingdom for me, so do I covenant for you *that you may eat and drink at my table* in my kingdom, and sit on thrones judging the twelve tribes of Israel. (LUKE 22:19-20, 28-29)

Although often overlooked, there are a number of intriguing parallels between the bread and wine of the

Presence and the bread and wine of the Last Supper, as illustrated below:

<i>Bread of the Presence</i>	<i>The Last Supper</i>
1. Twelve Cakes for Twelve Tribes	1. Twelve Disciples for Twelve Tribes
2. Bread and wine of God's Presence	2. Bread and wine of Jesus' Presence
3. An "Everlasting Covenant" (<i>diatheke</i>)	3. A New "Covenant" (<i>diatheke</i>)
4. As a "Remembrance" (<i>anamnesis</i>)	4. In "Remembrance" (<i>anamnesis</i>) of Jesus
5. Offered by High Priest and eaten by Priests	5. Offered by Jesus and eaten by the disciples
6. Eaten at the Golden "Table" (<i>trapeza</i>) in the Jerusalem Temple (Exodus 25:23-30; Leviticus 24:5-9)	6. Jesus' "Table" (<i>trapeza</i>) in the Kingdom of the Father (Luke 22:19-20)

What are we to make of these parallels? Are they just coincidence? I don't think so. Instead, it seems to me, by means of his words and actions, Jesus was indicating that the Last Supper was not merely the institution of a new Passover. Nor was it only the giving of the new manna of the Messiah. It was also the institution of *the new Bread and wine of the Presence*, the bread of Jesus' own presence.

In short, when Jesus wanted to signify the everlasting covenant that he would establish between God and his people, he did not choose the flesh of the Passover lamb to do it. Rather, he drew their attention to the bread and wine of the Last Supper, which he identified as himself,

as his own body and blood. After his passion, death, and Resurrection, it was through this bread and wine, the new Bread of the Presence, that he would be with his disciples. That is why he says to them, "Do this in remembrance of me." When he wanted to leave them with a perpetual sign of his love for them, he gave them bread and wine: "This is my body which is given for you" (Luke 22:19). "This is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many" (Mark 14:24). *Like the priests in the Temple before him, by means of the Last Supper, Jesus was saying to the disciples: "Behold, God's love for you."*

THE REAL PRESENCE

We can wrap up this chapter by returning to the question with which we began the book. How is it that Jesus, as a first-century Jew, could have ever uttered the words "This is my body" and "This is my blood"? And how is it that the first Christians came to believe that the Eucharist really was the body and blood of Christ?

When we look at this question through ancient Jewish eyes, we can find an answer. If Jesus and the early Jewish Christians saw the Last Supper as the institution of the new Bread of the Presence, then it follows that they did not see it as ordinary bread and wine. It was, rather, the sign and instrument of Jesus' *real* presence. Just as God had been really and truly present to his people in the Tabernacle of Moses and the Temple of Solomon, so now Jesus would be really and truly present to his disciples through the Eucharist. And just as the old Bread of the Presence

had been the sign of God's "everlasting covenant," so now the Eucharist would become the perpetual sign of the new covenant, sealed in his blood. And just as the old Bread of the Presence was also the Bread of the Face of God, so now the Eucharist would be the Bread of the Face of Christ. Truly, in the Eucharist, the early Christians could say with Jesus, "Something greater than the Temple is here."

But how are we to understand such a mystery? How can Jesus truly be present under the appearances of bread and wine? How is this even possible?

For one thing, as we've already seen with both the manna and the Bread of the Presence, the mystery of Jesus' presence in the Eucharist is closely tied to the mystery of his divine identity. If Jesus was only an earthly Messiah, then one could easily call into question—indeed, one could easily call blasphemous—the idea that his blood would be the perpetual sign of the "new covenant." And if Jesus was only a great prophet, one could readily object to the idea that his body would become the new bread of God's presence. None of the prophets ever said anything like this.

However, if Jesus was *more* than a prophet, if he embodied "something greater than the Temple," yes, if he was the *divine* Son of God, then the new bread and wine of his new covenant were not just symbols. In a word, the new Bread of the Presence was miraculous. After all, it would take just that—a miracle—for bread and wine to be transformed into the body and blood of the Messiah.

Perhaps that is why Saint Cyril of Jerusalem—himself a native of the Holy Land and bishop of the church in Jerusalem in the fourth century A.D.—makes exactly this point. In one of the most ancient Christian writings that

we have on the Eucharist, Cyril uses the ancient Bread of the Presence to explain the mystery of Jesus' real presence:

In the Old Testament also there was the Bread of the Presence; but this, as it belonged to the Old Testament, has come to an end; but in the New Testament there is bread of heaven, and a cup of salvation, sanctifying soul and body. . . . Consider therefore the bread and the wine not as bare elements, for they are, according to the Lord's declaration, the body and blood of Christ; for even though sense suggests this to you, yet let faith establish you. Judge not the matter from the taste, but from faith be fully assured without misgiving, that body and blood of Christ have been vouchsafed to you. (SAINT CYRIL OF JERUSALEM, MYSTAGOGICAL CATECHESIS 4:5-6)

Again, for all this to be true, Jesus' action at the Last Supper would have to have been a *miracle*, and not just a sign or symbol. But, as Saint Cyril himself also points out, this isn't really a problem, given Jesus' record of performing miracles of supernatural transformation. As Cyril says: "Jesus once in Cana of Galilee turned the water into wine, akin to blood; is it incredible that He should have turned wine into blood?"

6



THE FOURTH CUP AND THE DEATH OF JESUS

Let's take a moment to recap our journey through Jewish Scripture and tradition up to this point. We've seen how the Jewish people in Jesus' day were awaiting the new exodus of the Messiah, and how Jesus signaled the fulfillment of those expectations. We've studied their hope for a new Passover, and how at the Last Supper Jesus identified himself as the true Passover lamb whose blood would be poured out in sacrifice. We've encountered their longing for the return of the miraculous manna, and how Jesus promised to give it to them in the form of his own body. Finally, we've seen their devotion to the Bread of the Presence, and how Jesus fulfilled this mysterious sign of God's covenant love in his actions over the bread and wine.

As we bring our examination to a close, there is one