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'Our Opinion Is in Accordance with the Eucharist': Irenaeus and the Sitz im Leben of Mark's Gospel

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Volume 13:
The First Two Centuries
Apocrypha
Tertullian and Rhetoric
From Tertullian to Tyconius



PEETERS

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**‘Our Opinion is in Accordance with the Eucharist’:
Irenaeus and the *Sitz im Leben* of Mark’s Gospel**

Charles A. BOBERTZ, Collegeville, USA

ABSTRACT

This article explores Irenaeus of Lyon’s 2nd century understanding of Eucharist in relation to a historical and theological reading of *Mark’s* Gospel, specifically the feeding narrative cycles (*Mark* 6:30-52; 8:1-21). Irenaeus contends, most particularly in books IV and V of *Adversus haereses*, that the union of divine spirit and flesh in the humanity of Jesus and its replication in the Eucharistic bread serves as primary refutation of docetic heretics. Jesus was, and his Eucharistic body is, fully a part of creation in contrast to only a spiritual entity. Similarly *Mark’s* understanding of Eucharist linked to the *body* of Christ and its instantiation in the Christian ritual gathering (*Mark* 6:52; 8:21) is perhaps the controlling theology of his narrative presentation of Jesus.

In many of its historical judgments, classic historical critical scholarship of the 19th and 20th centuries posited a radical disjuncture between the theological and doctrinal understanding present within the canonical New Testament and theological formulations present within ‘early Catholic’ (*Frühkatholizismus*) literature.¹ Yet the obvious fact that a general ancient and eastern Mediterranean world-view would have been shared by all early Christian groups in the first five or so centuries should prompt scholars to look for shared theological sensitivities and expression in the entire scope of early Christian literary production. The goal of this paper is to investigate a major theological concern shared by both the Gospel of *Mark* and Irenaeus, namely, the connection between the bodily incarnation and resurrection of Christ and the expression of that physical reality in the early Christian ritual meal. In both *Mark* and Irenaeus this theological idea and its expression within ritual practice takes place within a world marked by the widespread intellectual influence of Hellenistic dualism, an

¹ Irony abound here. Enlightenment scholars such as John Toland (1670-1722) argued for the arbitrary nature of canonical selection while Protestant scholars focused on the indelible uniqueness of the biblical books, see David Laird Dungan, *A History of the Synoptic Problem* (New York, 1999) 287; 313. In many modern graduate programs there exists a split between the study of the New Testament and [other] early Christian literature.

influence which militated against any notion of physical redemption through bodily incarnation and resurrection.²

Irenaeus' understanding of the Eucharistic meal plays a central role in his refutation of various forms of Gnosticism in the *Adversus haereses*.³ Gnosticism, as Irenaeus came to understand it through reading and experience, was rooted in a dualistic understanding of the superiority of the spiritual over the material world. Gnostics were therefore utterly skeptical about the idea of redemption within the created order manifest in bodily incarnation and resurrection.⁴ In response Irenaeus asserts boldly that God joined himself with created man in order to redeem the creation from within creation itself.⁵ According to Irenaeus, the original creation of Adam by God resulted in a primeval harmony between the Creator God and the Creature Adam, a harmony damaged by the event of Adam's disobedience to God. Yet even at creation itself God foreknew this result as well as the remainder of the story of fallen creation. Hence the sin of Adam in effect created history, a time in which fallen humanity could be prepared to receive its redemption in the incarnation of the second Adam, Jesus Christ. This period of mankind's preparation is the story of biblical Israel told in the Scriptures. In Irenaeus' teaching of 'recapitulation', the incarnation of Christ captures fully, or consummates within itself, the entirety of the first pristine creation and the history created by the subsequent fall of Adam.⁶ The spirit of God infusing the material body of Jesus, received from the Virgin Mary,⁷ at incarnation again established the original harmony of the Adamic creation. Yet this time, instead of the disobedience of Adam there is the obedience of Christ. The story of Jesus Christ in the gospels is the story of humanity this time in obedience and harmony with God. Still the debt of the old Adam had to be paid, sin had come into the world through the disobedience of Adam and so sin had to be taken from the world through the obedience of the second

² An extensive survey of this influence, rooted in ancient Platonism, is forthcoming in Stephen J. Patterson's Hermeneia commentary on the *Gospel of Thomas*. There he cites useful surveys by Jan Bremmer, *The Early Greek Concept of the Soul* (Princeton, 1983); W.C.K. Guthrie, *Orpheus and Greek Religion* (revised; New York, 1966); Franz Cumont, *After Life in Roman Paganism* (New York, 1959); and Gregory Riley, *Resurrection Reconsidered* (Minneapolis, 1995), 7-68.

³ The syncretistic origins of Gnosticism continue to be explored by scholars: see, e.g., Bentley Layton, *The Gnostic Scriptures: A New Translation* (San Francisco, 1987), though its central tenant of dualism between the spiritual and material world is well established: Birger A. Pearson, *Ancient Gnosticism: Traditions and Literature* (Minneapolis, 2007), 15-9; Hans Jonas, *The Gnostic Religion* (Boston, 1963), 32. Citations to *Adversus haereses* are taken from the *Sources Chrétiennes* edition: *Contre les hérésies: Irénée de Lyon. Édition critique d'après les versions arménienne et latine*, sous la direction de Adelin Rousseau avec la collaboration de Bertrand Hemmerdinger, Louis Doutreleau et Charles Mercier (Paris, 1965).

⁴ Irenaeus, *Adversus haereses* III 7.

⁵ *Ibid.*: 'et facere ut et Deus assumeret hominem et homo se dederet Deo...'

⁶ *Ibid.* IV 38; V 21.1.

⁷ *Ibid.* V 1.2; for virgin Mary's reversal, through obedience, of the disobedience of virgin Eve, see, *Adv. haer.* V 19.

Adam Christ. In Jesus Christ's fully human obedience, even unto death on a cross, the original creation is restored, the restoration demonstrated in the bodily (*i.e.* creation) resurrection of Jesus Christ.⁸ As a result the bodily resurrected Christ is now the full original harmony between God and God's Creation, the entire story of which was foreknown and foreordained from God from the very beginning of creation itself.

Most important for the present study, however, is the manner in which Irenaeus understands the ritually gathered community, the Church, to be the *body* of Christ. This dramatic equation of Christ with Church emerges from Irenaeus' close reading of the gospel narrative. Irenaeus reads the episode of the last supper wherein Christ affirms the bread to be his body (*'panem suum corpus esse confitebatur'*) and mixed cup to be his blood (*'temperamentum calicis suum sanguinem confirmavit'*)⁹ to provide the proper understanding of the events of the passion within his overall understanding the story of Christ as recapitulation. Above all Jesus Christ in the gospels must be understood to be a body with flesh and blood (*i.e.* creation itself). In a direct refutation of a gnostic reading of the same story, Irenaeus claims that Jesus could not have been a man 'in appearance' (*quasi homo*) because water and blood flowed from his side at his execution and, more important, he was laid in a tomb and his body was raised from the dead.¹⁰ So in the depiction of the final meal of Jesus with his disciples when Jesus claims that the bread is his body and confirms the mixed cup to be his blood he is asserting the bodily or created nature of the elements infused with the Spirit of God. Just as Jesus himself must be a body infused by Spirit, the original creation in harmony with God, so must the ritual elements, bread and wine, be part of the created order, a body, that is, they are the original creation in harmony with God.¹¹

It is here, however, that the key connection between the elements of the ritual meal (the *body* of Christ), and the gathered assembly (the present church) is made. For Irenaeus understands the ritual elements, the body of Christ, also to be the gathered community, the church assembled as the body of Christ. Hence for Irenaeus the Church as the *body* of Christ in the world is all that the story of Christ is in the gospels, namely, the recapitulation of the original creation within the world. And just as with the gospel story of Christ, the Church as the body of Christ redeems the world through its obedience. The Cross of Christ in the gospels is now Christian martyrdom. The incarnate body, the Church, must enact the obedience of Christ on the Cross, in ritual performance of the passion in liturgy and proper manner of life and in so doing become the entire story of Creation and Redemption in the world.¹²

⁸ *Ibid.* V 19.

⁹ *Ibid.* IV 33.2.

¹⁰ *Ibid.* IV 33.2.

¹¹ *Ibid.* IV 18.5.

¹² *Ibid.* III 18.5; IV 33.9.

The Eucharist, therefore, plays the same role as Adam and Christ in the story of both Creation and Redemption. The Spirit of God inhabited the creation, the Body of Adam prior to Sin, and so also inhabited the Body of Jesus Christ at the incarnation. As both Adam and Christ consisted of two parts, the flesh and the spirit, so the Church gathered with the Eucharistic elements consists in two parts, the flesh and the spirit.¹³ The understanding of the Church's liturgy, therefore, stands as a direct refutation of the Gnostics who deny the possibility of flesh (creation) animated by the Spirit of God for the purpose of a life in harmony with God.¹⁴ For Irenaeus' opponents here, creation, by definition corrupt and decaying, is not the object of salvation but rather that from which the Spirit of God must escape. For these Christians the idea of an eternal body, a *resurrected body*, is utterly objectionable. But for Irenaeus this is precisely what the Eucharist manifests, for as the *body* of Christ in the world it is an eternal body, enacting the presence of Christ, the restored creation, within the world. The meal therefore serves as nourishment of the bodies that partake of it, transforming their present corruption of the body to the state of incorruption by itself being spiritual food. The Eucharist, in other words, is already the harmony of God's spirit with creation which, through ritual eating and drinking, transforms the present body of the Christian by the infusion of Spirit into the eternal body of the Resurrection. The Eucharist itself is the demonstration of the resurrection body of Christ in the world, the restoration of creation and redemption enacted by Christ.¹⁵

Moreover the Church, as the body of Christ fed by the body of Christ, has been harvested from the rest of humanity.¹⁶ It stands in the midst of the world as what the world was meant to be from the very beginning of time. Not only does the Christian find herself or himself through the nourishment of Eucharist, transformed to an incorruptible resurrection body, but she or he is joined to the restored creation itself. Creation and the human community within it are once again animated by the spirit of God in an original and intended harmony. Within the world but not of the world, the Church manifests what the world should and will come to be.

¹³ *Ibid.* IV 18.5: '*quemadmodum enim quiescit ad terra panis est percipiens invocationem Dei jam non communis panis est sed Eucharistia ex duabus rebus constans terrena et caelistic.*' There is also a Greek fragment that confirms the sentiment here.

¹⁴ *Ibid.* V 2.2: '*eum calicem qui est creatura suum sanguinum confessus est ex quo auget nostrum sanguinem et eum panem qui est a creatura suum corpus confirmavit ex quo nostra auget corpora.*'

¹⁵ *Ibid.* V 2.3: '*sic et nostra corpora ex ea nutrita et reposita in terram et resoluta in ea resurgunt in suo tempore Verbo Dei resurrectionem eis donante in gloriam Dei Patris qui huic mortali immortalitatem circumdat et corruptibili incorruptelam gratuito donat.*'

¹⁶ Joel R. Kurz, 'The Gifts of Creation and the Consummation of Humanity: Irenaeus of Lyons' Recapitulatory Theology of the Eucharist', *Worship* 83 (2009), 112-32, 123.

We are now in a position to summarize the basic features of Irenaeus' Eucharistic theology which will be important in understanding the theologically driven narrative of *Mark*: First, Jesus Christ at his incarnation is the restoration of the original (Adamic) creation intended by God; second, in his ministry Jesus Christ recapitulates the story of Adam's sin and the subsequent history of Israel with the difference that this time Jesus Christ (Adam) is fully obedient to God; in the obedient death Christ re-establishes the harmony between creation and God and the *body* of Jesus is raised, animated by the Spirit of God, as an eternal resurrected body; third, Jesus establishes the Eucharist as his *body*, creation animated by the Spirit in harmony with God; fourth, the Church, as the *body* of Christ, is joined with Christ in baptism and nourished by the Eucharist to become the resurrected body,¹⁷ that is, its role is to gather people abundantly, as the seed brings forth great harvest,¹⁸ who will recapitulate the story of Christ, and so become Israel nourished and on its way to full gospel obedience in both life and martyrdom.¹⁹

The *Sitz im Leben* of *Mark's* Gospel

There can be no doubt that Irenaeus derives some of this Eucharistic theology from his reading of the gospel narratives, most especially the narrative of the Last Supper in the Synoptics. Yet it can also be shown that the gospel narratives, in this case the Gospel of *Mark*, are marked by theological motifs quite similar to those of Irenaeus but which show no sign of having directly influenced Irenaeus' understanding of the Eucharistic ritual. In other words, it is my contention that one can read closely Irenaeus' understanding of the Eucharist and *discover* a theological understanding of the Eucharist within the ancient Christian religious and philosophical context that forms a principal backdrop for understanding both *Mark's* narrative theology and Irenaeus' more developed theology expressed in *Adversus haereses*. Irenaeus' theology of Eucharist is not entirely derivative from the Gospel narratives, rather it emerges from a theological position already influencing the narratives of the first century, especially the narrative theology undergirding the Gospel of *Mark*.²⁰

Mark's theological understanding of Jesus Christ can be discerned from the fact that he begins his narrative with a story of ritual baptism. John's baptism in the Jordan in the wilderness (*Mark* 1:4-5, ἐν τῇ ἐρήμῳ ... ἐν τῷ Ἰορδάνῃ

¹⁷ *Ibid.* 129; for baptism as re-creation see *Adv. haer.* I 21.1.

¹⁸ *Ibid.* V 2.3.

¹⁹ See note 15 above.

²⁰ To show fully this relationship would take more explanation than I can provide here; I refer the reader to my forthcoming book, *A Liturgical Reading of the Gospel of Mark*, to be published by Baker Academic Press.

ποταμῶ) brings us into the story of Israel, both Exodus (*Ex.* 14:16-29) and the Crossing to the Promised Land (*Josh.* 3:17), and demonstrates that a theology of recapitulation is already undergirding the narrative presentation. The story of Israel will again be played out in Jesus' ministry in the time of the narrative, but this time obedience will be complete.

So it is that the purpose of the ritual cleansing of baptism depicted here is for 'the forgiveness of sins' (*Mark* 1:4), precisely the reversal of the original state of Adamic sin. In *Mark* therefore the opening ritual description immediately points the reader to the plot of the narrative, the story of Jesus Christ's obedient death on the Cross, but also reflects the first readers' experience of being baptized into that same death (*Rom.* 6:3). Indeed *Mark* explicitly connects the narrative story of the baptism of Jesus to the later passion of Jesus: John the Baptist is deliberately described as Elijah²¹ and Elijah shows up as the key figure in the crucifixion (*Mark* 15:35-7). John states that Jesus 'will baptize you with the Holy Spirit' (ἐν πνεύματι ἁγίῳ, *Mark* 1:8) while on the cross Jesus gives forth the Spirit (ἐξέπνευσεν, *Mark* 15:37). At the baptism scene the skies are torn asunder (σχίζομένους τοὺς οὐρανοὺς), the Temple curtain is torn in two (ἐσχίσθη εἰς δύο, *Mark* 15:38).

The connection of the initial baptism of Jesus into his own death, readily identifiable as an understanding of recapitulation, also explains a theological conundrum often noticed by commentators: if John's baptism is for the forgiveness of sin then why would Jesus, supposedly without sin, have to be baptized?²² In the logic followed by both *Mark* and Irenaeus, Jesus in the gospel will enact the story of Israel, the Exodus and Crossing to the Promised Land, in full obedience and thereby reverse the history of Adam's and Israel's disobedience.²³ Put differently, Jesus' Baptism in the narrative begins the story with an enactment of his own obedient death on a Cross. The incarnate one will enact and reverse the story of Adam's and Israel's disobedience in his death and thereby restore creation: thus Jesus 'rises' from the waters of John's baptism (death), is infused with the Spirit of God and declared to be in filial relationship with God (*Mark* 1:10-1). In the narrative which follows Jesus is this figure, the

²¹ For a detailed analysis see Frank J. Matera, 'The Prologue as the Interpretive Key to Mark's Gospel', *JSNT* 34 (1988), 3-20. *Mal.* 3:1 indicates that Elijah comes to 'prepare the way' (*Mark* 1:3) while John in fact is depicted in the clothes of Elijah (*2Kings* 1:8).

²² Attempts to explain this conundrum are many: see, e.g. James R. Edwards, *The Gospel According to Mark* (Grand Rapids, 2002), 34; Augustine Stock, *The Method and Message of Mark* (Wilmington, 1989), 52; Morna Hooker, *The Message of Mark* (London, 1983), 10; Joel Marcus, *Mark 1-8* (New York, 2000), 164; C.E.B. Cranfield, *The Gospel According to Saint Mark. An Introduction and Commentary* (Cambridge, 1959), 52.

²³ This is clearly indicated by *Mark* 1:13: the successful outcome of the temptation in the wilderness (after the story of the Exodus/Baptism) reverses the episode of Israel's disobedience in that same wilderness. *Matthew* actually reads *Mark* in this same way, declaring the baptism to 'fulfill righteousness' (*Matth.* 3:15) while the Q version of the temptation in Luke expands as well the basic theme of reversal (*Luke* 4:1-13).

resurrected Christ, Adamic creation in right relationship with God. The narrative task of Jesus now will be to 'teach' the Church to become what He is already. The Eucharistic assembly of Jews and Gentiles, men and women, must enact the obedient story of Christ that ends in the Cross. In the narrative the Eucharist will create the Church that becomes Christ in the world.²⁴

Mark's narrative moves from the baptismal scene to the first feeding narrative (*Mark* 6:30-41) with a rapid pace.²⁵ It begins with the recruitment of four fishing disciples, the first two of whom (Peter and his brother Andrew) are commanded to become 'fishers of people'.²⁶ Key to this section of the gospel is Jesus' encounter with the extraordinary faith of Gentiles and their admission to discipleship, the 'family' of Jesus.²⁷ The parables speak to the miraculous growth of the Church, the 'word' having been planted on amenable soil, an unmistakable reference to the success of the Gentile mission (*Mark* 4:8).

To place this drama in terms outlined by Irenaeus' understanding of the Eucharist, the narrative is simultaneously about 'Jesus', what he says and does as he recapitulates the story of Israel, and the Church as it recapitulates the story of Jesus in its experience of the reality of the Gentile mission in the years after Jesus' execution. It is also for *Mark* what the Church ought to be as the presence of Christ in the world, that is, that it ought to accept and nourish the Gentile mission, and the persecution which follows from that mission (*Mark* 13:9-10), as part of the plan of God for the redemption of humanity and creation. As in Irenaeus' understanding, Jesus is simultaneously himself and the 'body of Christ', that is, the physically gathered Church in the world.

Perhaps this sense of how *Mark* operates as a narrative created by a distinctive Eucharistic theology becomes most evident in the recounting of the two feeding narrative cycles in *Mark* 6:30-56 and 8:1-21. Two characteristics of the Markan text in these episodes especially reflect his shared theological relationship with Irenaeus: First, the physicality, and therefore full humanity, of the resurrection of Christ corresponds to the physicality of the ritual meal. Second, the elements of the ritual meal, specifically the bread (loaf), is equated with the gathered community of Jews and Gentiles in the Church. Here we can only lay out these two characteristics schematically.

²⁴ A theology of recapitulation informing *Mark's* narrative helps us to understand the dynamic opening of the narrative as well as the subsequent unfolding of 'biblical' events in the story of Jesus with his disciples – an oft noted and thoroughly described feature of the narrative of *Mark*. See, e.g., Joel Marcus, *The Way of the Lord* (London, 2004); Rikki Watts, *Isaiah's New Exodus in Mark* (Grand Rapids, 2000).

²⁵ The narrative moves in almost staccato like transitions marked often by καὶ εὐθὺς (immediately).

²⁶ ποιήσω ὑμᾶς γενέσθαι ἁλιεῖς ἀνθρώπων, *Mark* 1:17.

²⁷ Two key pericopes in this sequence are the healing of the paralytic who appears to be a Gentile (he is carried to Jesus by *four* men, a number which seems to indicate Gentiles in *Mark* (*Mark* 2:1-11; cf. 8:9) and the admission that those who have come to discipleship are to be the 'family' of Jesus (*Mark* 3:34-5).