

[DRAFT] The Lord's Supper and the Logic of Sacrifice

In 1 Cor 11, Paul reprimands the Corinthians for the way they observe the Lord's Supper. He connects their manner of eating and drinking with physical afflictions in their community. "All who eat and drink without discerning the body, eat and drink judgment against themselves," he declares, "For this reason many of you are weak and ill, and some have died" (1 Cor 11:29–30). Many recent works ask how and why the Lord's Supper could bring harm to the Corinthian community, but they ultimately conclude that the mechanism by which improper eating causes affliction remains uncertain.

In this paper, I want to address this topic from a slightly different angle. Instead of asking, "Why does the Lord's Supper lead to affliction?" I will ask, "When Paul sees weakness, illness, and death, why does he assume a problem with the Lord's Supper is the cause?" I will consider if we can come to some greater clarity concerning the logic behind Paul's argument in 1 Cor 11:17–34 by reading the passage in light of other ancient discussions of sacrifice. I will first examine the comparison Paul makes between the Lord's Supper and other sacrifices in 1 Cor 10, looking at the sense in which the Lord's Supper is like or unlike those sacrifices and their associated meals. I will then ask how similarities may be significant for understanding Paul's view of the Lord's Supper. I will conclude with some comments about Paul and early Christianity in the broader context of Jewish and pagan cults in the early imperial period.

The Lord's Supper as Sacrificial Meal

I begin with the comparison between the Lord's Supper and other sacrifices in 1 Cor 10. Many scholars rightly acknowledge that Paul introduces sacrifices to δαίμονια in 1 Cor 10:19–21 in order to differentiate those sacrifices from the meal observed by the Corinthians. But how do those sacrifices and the Corinthians' meal differ and do they differ in kind or in some other way?

Paul makes two claims here about the Lord's Supper. First, taking from the cup and the bread means fellowship (κοινωνία) with the blood and body of Christ (1 Cor 10:16), much like how those who eat from sacrifices have fellowship (κοινωνία) with the altar (1 Cor 10:18). Second, participating (μετέχω) in the meal of the one bread means membership in the one body of Christ (1 Cor 10:17). He then says two things about sacrifices offered to δαιμόνια. First, Paul does not want the Corinthians to have fellowship (κοινωνία) with δαιμόνια (1 Cor 10:20). Second, he says a person cannot drink the cup of the Lord and the cup of the δαιμόνια, nor participate (μετέχω) in the table of the Lord and the table of the δαιμόνια (1 Cor 10:21). For Paul, both the Lord's Supper and sacrifices to δαιμόνια include κοινωνία and μετοχή with the divine. This similarity is striking.

What is more, Paul's analysis of sacrifices offered to δαιμόνια parallels what many other ancient, pagan texts say about their own cults. Ancient writers frequently label the gods as δαιμόνια, without implying anything negative by it (Diodorus Siculus, *Library of History* 4.3.4). Dio Chrysostom sometimes calls the gods δαιμόνια and says that humans can have κοινωνία with them (*Or.* 36.38). One inscription from Caria contains an invitation to a feast with a god where humans can have fellowship (κοινωνία) with the sacrifices and share in (μετέχω) the good cheer of the god's presence (*IStratonikeia* 25.2 – 9).

Of course, Paul urges the Corinthians to avoid sacrifices to δαιμόνια, but in light of the points noted above, this does not seem to be because the meals are different in kind, either to Paul or his former-pagan audience. Instead, Paul stresses avoidance of pagan sacrifice because the Lord's Supper and pagan rituals differ in object of worship, namely, either Christ, the Lord, or δαιμόνια. For Paul, the only proper sacrificial meal is the one that participates in the antecedent sacrifice of Jesus as the πάσχα (1 Cor 5:7). Paul therefore restricts the Corinthians'

participation in other forms of sacrifice while nonetheless affirming a conception of the Lord's Supper that is, at least in the ways highlighted, actually quite similar to other ancient sacrifices and the meals associated with them.

If Paul understands the Lord's Supper as something conceptually akin to other ancient sacrifices, but with a distinct and exclusive object of worship, then we can position the Lord's Supper within a framework of ancient sacrifice more broadly and ask whether and how 1 Cor 11:17–34 conforms to other discussions of sacrifice in other ancient literature. More specifically, we can consider instances where sacrifices fail and ask whether the causes, effects, and means of evaluation of failed sacrifices can help us make sense of Paul's argument.

When Sacrifice Goes Wrong

Sacrifices can fail for any number of reasons. An act of sacrilege such as desecrating a temple or shedding blood in a sacred space can quite naturally cause a sacrifice to fail. Plutarch tells a story in which a group of men murder Tattius while he offers sacrifices (*Rom.* 23.1–24.3). This leads to a catastrophic chain of negative consequences. But there are other, more subtle reasons for failure, too. In some cases, the offering is unfit. References in Herodotus, Plutarch, Pausanias, Diodorus Siculus, and others highlight the importance of offering only the appropriate sorts of animals, with the appropriate kinds of features, during a sacrifice (e.g. Herodotus, 2.38–39). Similar concern for the condition and characteristics of the offering appear in the Pentateuch (e.g., Lev 1 and *passim*). In other cases, the worshipper is unfit or unworthy (*ἀνάξιος*) to participate (Lucian, *Phal.* 2.13). Perhaps he has incurred pollution through contact with something unclean, so that he cannot participate in the cult until he purifies himself. In addition to the external standards for the offering and the worshipper's purity, internal issues can also thwart a sacrifice. Fred Naiden highlights, as one example, prohibitions against murderers at

sacrifices and notes that the presence of such a person would imperil the sacrifice for everyone (see Demosthenes, *Lept.* 20.158). Similarly, recent research from Andrej and Ivana Petrovic emphasises the fact that some cultic contexts also require internal purity, that is, the purity of the soul or mind.

If a sacrifice can fail, and if there are a slew of reasons why it might, then how can one know if fails? Observable signs frequently reveal unsuccessful cultic practices. These signs can vary. Animals, or even the gods themselves, can snatch up or disturb the offering during the ritual (Pausanias, *Descr.* 5.14.1). Worshippers might offer a sacrifice only to learn from the priest that the god refuses to respond to the request for an oracle (Herodotus, 19.1). In still other cases, ostensibly unrelated events reveal problems. Thucydides reports an instance where a sacrifice seems to occur without incident, but he points to the violation of the Herms at around the same time as a sign that the sacrifice actually failed (*History of the Peloponnesian War*, 6.27). Most importantly for this paper, physical afflictions could expose unsuccessful sacrifice. In 2 Chron 26:16–23, Uzziah tries to offer a sacrifice reserved for descendants of Aaron. The Lord strikes him with leprosy, showing that the Lord does not accept his attempted sacrifice. There are many other cases where a person or group of people offers a sacrifice that goes awry, and in response the gods inflict illness on a worshipper or curse her, and even, in rarer instances, cause natural disasters. Despite the variety of signs for failure reported here, they share in that they are observable.

Importantly, these signs appear during or after the sacrifice. We can draw two points from this. First of all, a community cannot know beforehand if a sacrifice will succeed, even if they do their best to meet the proper requirements for the sacrifice. Perhaps some unknown pollution clings to the worshippers that will spoil their sacrifice. Perhaps members of the

sacrificing group are unfit due to some crimes they have committed. Or perhaps the offering has some hidden defect. In any case, these barriers to sacrifice remain hidden until during the ritual or after the fact, when sickness, natural disaster, or whatever overtakes the community.

Second, because observable signs can reveal failed sacrifice, ancient people frequently interpret physical afflictions in their community as a sign of a troubled relationship with the gods. They then look back at their cultic practices to ask if some problem of ritual escaped their notice. If one could find a problem, then one could, hopefully, address it and remedy the situation. The community could expel the people who imperiled the sacrifice the first time. The community could cleanse itself of pollution, external or internal. The community could offer a different, unblemished sacrifice. In any case, it is the identification and evaluation of physical consequences that enables one to make the proper changes.

I've suggested here that sacrifice can fail for a number of reasons, that this failure can lead to physically realised consequences, and that one might not know whether a sacrifice would fail until after the fact. But how does this relate to Paul? Since we've already suggested that in some ways Paul depicts the Lord's Supper in terms of sacrifice, we can ask whether similarities between the Lord's Supper and other ancient sacrifices extend also to the logic by which Paul connects ritual failure and weakness, illness, and death. To consider this question, I will examine whether Paul thinks the Lord's Supper failed, what it is about the meal that would make it fail, how he would know if the meal failed, and what he thinks should be done about it to address the situation.

Paul and the Lord's Supper

Does Paul think the Lord's Supper has failed? In 1 Cor 11:17 Paul says that when the Corinthians gather together it is not for the better, but for the worse. Their way of eating the

Lord's Supper, with their divisions, hoarding, and unequal treatment of worshipers, means that they have missed the mark in some sense that deserves reprimand. Their mistake is so grave that Paul says they are not eating the Lord's Supper at all (1 Cor 11:20). Paul then intensifies the crime still further. He suggests that the Corinthians are actually despising (καταφρονέω) the church of God. Ancient writers can use this word to indicate sacrilegious acts against the gods that lead to divine intervention. In one inscription, a man purchases sacred wood and is punished by a god for it. He then warns others not to despise (καταφρονέω) the god (TAM V.1 179a, lines 10–13). For Paul, the way the Corinthians are observing the meal makes it into something else entirely and constitutes an act of offense against God's sacred assembly.

What is it about their meal that makes it a failure? Paul provides the specifics in 1 Cor 11:21–22 and 11:33–34, but the more general rules that govern the eating of the meal appear in 11:27–32. Paul says that anyone who eats the bread or drinks the cup in an unworthy manner is guilty of the body and blood of the Lord (11:27). He continues in 11:29, “For all who eat and drink without discerning the body, eat and drink judgment against themselves.” I take σῶμα, the object of διακρίνω in 11:29, to be the members of the community rather than the elements eaten at the supper. This aligns with the point made in 11:27 where it is the Corinthians' unworthy manner of eating rather than unworthy food that is at stake. There is also no mention of the blood in 11:29, despite the pairing of body and blood or bread and cup in every other mention of the elements in 11:17–34. Finally, taking σῶμα as the Corinthian body fits with what is said in 11:31. In that verse, if the Corinthians judge themselves, they are not condemned. My reading of 11:29 makes same point but inverted: if the Corinthians don't judge themselves, they are condemned. There is nothing wrong with the items eaten at this sacrificial meal, but there are

problems with the ones eating. Unworthy eating and eating without discerning the body violate the meal.

But how could Paul know that the meal failed and that people were eating without discerning the body? Paul lists observable consequences of the failed meal, namely, weakness, illness, and death among the Corinthians. He makes a causal connection in 11:30 between these afflictions and failure to discern the body. Some scholars suggest that Paul only makes an *ad hoc* connection between improper eating and drinking on the one hand and physical affliction on the other. In one sense, this is likely true. Paul may well have made the connection only once he had heard about the afflictions. This does not require, however, that the connection is random. The logic of sacrifice, to which Paul already appeals in 1 Cor 10, carries with it a system whereby one can look to observable signs, such as illness or death, in order to determine after the fact whether a particular sacrifice or other cultic ritual was successful or not.

There are other hints that Paul is doing precisely this. In 1 Cor 11:19 Paul says there must be factions among the Corinthians in order that the genuine (δόκιμος) may be revealed. This is a puzzling verse if we take it to mean that Paul desires division, full stop, since elsewhere in 1 Corinthians he presses so aggressively against it. Some scholars even believe Paul means this ironically. However, δεῖ can refer to what is necessary if what follows in the ἵνα clause is to happen. A similar pairing of these words appears in Acts 16:30. If we take the verse in this way, then Paul could mean that divisions at the meal are the necessary means by which Paul can determine which Corinthians are worthy. Δόκιμος/δοκιμάζω are frequently understood here in an eschatological sense or forensic sense. But this language can also indicate those approved to offer sacrifices (IG II² 1361).

Matthew Sharp argues in a forthcoming essay that Pauline religion is “empirical,” that is, that Paul looks to observable signs to determine the efficacy of the early Christian cult and to correct problems of praxis. With Sharp’s main point, I suggest that, in this passage, determining that the sacrifice has failed allows Paul to correct the Corinthians’ improper cultic practices. Paul sees afflictions in the community, he determines that there are problems with the sacrificial meal, and he urges that the Corinthians correct this issue by ensuring that they are fit to participate in it.

Conclusions

I began this paper by considering the comparison Paul makes between the Lord’s Supper and other sacrifices. Although Paul differentiates the Lord’s Supper and sacrifices to *δαιμόνια*, he outlines a difference in object of worship rather than a difference in kind. At a deeper level, the Lord’s Supper adheres to a common logic of ancient sacrifice in that it involves fellowship with the divine and participation in the table with the divine. I then considered failed sacrifices in the ancient world. I noted that observable consequences could reveal failures, and that one often would not know about problems with a sacrifice until after the fact. Ancient people often interpreted crises such as illness, death, or natural disaster as signs of a problem with a previous sacrifice.

Paul’s discussion of the Lord’s Supper in 1 Cor 11 bears remarkable similarity to other ancient discussions of failed sacrifice. He thinks the meal has failed to the extent that it is not the Lord’s Supper at all and, in fact, constitutes an offense against God’s sacred assembly. He identifies worshippers who eat unworthily as the source of the Corinthians’ problems. He reaches his conclusion with reference to the observable signs of weakness, illness, and death and even affirms that such a process of division and affliction is necessary to determine who is *δοκιμος*.

He then urges the Corinthians to change their behaviour to ensure they are fit for the meal. So, to return to the first question, why does Paul, when he sees weakness, illness, and death, conclude that the Lord's Supper is to blame? Because, simply, the ancients believed physical affliction could point to failed sacrifice.

What does this say about Paul and the movement that would become early Christianity? This suggests that early Christianity in the Pauline tradition remains a kind of ancient Mediterranean cult, indebted to conceptual frameworks as common in the ancient world as they are alien to the modern world. Understanding the Pauline epistles, or any other New Testament text, requires a careful analysis of the broader world of ancient Jewish and Greco-Roman religious thought. While Paul self-consciously distances himself and the Jesus movement from the many paganisms of his day, it is vital that we, as scholars of the ancient world, consider more precisely *where* and *how* this movement and those paganisms differ.