

# The Biblical Perspective of Eucharistic Spirituality

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## 1. Introduction

Spirituality is an innate desire in a being for the experience of the transcendent. St. Augustine says: "You have made us for yourself, Lord, and our hearts are restless, until they rest in you."<sup>1</sup> Agreeing with the viewpoint of Augustine, the contemporary spiritual author Ronald Rolheiser states: "Spirituality is about what we do with our unrest."<sup>2</sup> The core of Eucharistic spirituality is the passionate desire for deep intimacy with the Eucharistic Lord. And so, transformed by his presence, we become a Eucharistic presence wherever we are. Jesus gives us the invitation to experience his intimacy in the Eucharist. "Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest."<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Augustine, *The Confessions of St. Augustine*, trans. Frank Sheed (New York: Sheed & Ward, 1943), 1, quoted in Ronald Rolheiser, *The Holy Longing: The Search for a Christian Spirituality* (New York: Doubleday, 1995), 5.

<sup>2</sup> Augustine, *The Confessions of St. Augustine*, 5.

<sup>3</sup> Mt 11: 28 NRSV.

To dwell deep into the Eucharistic spirituality, let us analyse the Biblical traditions of both the Old Testament and the New Testament.

### **1.1 Eucharistic Spirituality: The Old Testament Perspective**

Eucharistic spirituality is prefigured in the Old Testament in the form of sacrifices. Israelites ardently believed that there was no communion without sacrifice.<sup>4</sup> They were aware that what pleased Yahweh was the internal disposition with which one offered the sacrifice than the external rituals. The gift, once accepted, established the union between God and the worshipper. The most important dimension of the sacrifice was its expiatory effect. It mended the broken covenantal relationship between Yahweh and the worshipper.<sup>5</sup> The worshipper displayed his/her absolute dependence on God through the sacrifice. It was also an expression of one's sincere plea for the fulfilment of the favour that he/she stood in need of. The immolation of the gift, partial or complete, denoted divine acceptance. It reminded them of the fact that once an offering was made, it was irrevocable forever. The sacrificial meal followed by the sacrifice symbolically presented the union between Yahweh and the worshipper.<sup>6</sup> Let us analyse the sacrifice offered by Abel, Abraham, and Moses to have a better understanding of the Old Testament sacrifices.

#### **1.1.1 The Sacrifice of Abel**

In Genesis chapter four, we come across the narration about the sacrifices of Abel and his brother Cain. Abel was a shepherd, and he offered the fat portions of his fatlings. His brother Cain was a farmer and he offered grains as his offering. The biblical author did not clarify why God accepted Abel's sacrifice and not that of Cain. The well-known theologian Jean Danieolu opines that God accepted Abel's sacrifice not because he was righteous, and Cain was not righteous. Instead, God chose Abel according to his divine

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<sup>4</sup> Robert Barron, *Eucharist* (New York: Orbis Books, 2008), 62.

<sup>5</sup> Frederick Moriarty, "Abel, Melchizedek, Abraham," *The Way*, V, 2 (1965): 97-98.

<sup>6</sup> Moriarty, "Abel, Melchizedek, Abraham," 98-99.

predilection, which would repeat in salvation history, choosing the younger one over the firstborn. Similarly, the acceptance of Abel's sacrifice implies the absolute gratuitousness of our own salvation.<sup>7</sup>

### 1.1.2 The Sacrifice of Abraham

Friendship with God means that it is a covenant that involves a sacrifice, namely, the abandonment of oneself to the will of God. When we think of the sacrifice of Abraham, the topmost thought in our mind would be God asking him to sacrifice his son Isaac. In any case, God demands another sacrifice from Abraham before the sacrifice of Isaac.<sup>8</sup> "Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to the land that I will show you."<sup>9</sup> When we analyse salvation history, we realize that our friendship with God was ruptured through the disobedience of humanity. To restore this friendship, God demanded the test of obedience through complete abandonment to His will.<sup>10</sup>

We see in Genesis Chapter fifteen, the second sacrifice that God demanded from Abraham. "Bring me a heifer three years old, a female goat three years old, a ram three years old, a turtledove, and a young pigeon."<sup>11</sup> As per the Lord's instruction, Abraham cut these animals into two and placed them on the altar. When Abraham fell into a deep sleep, the Lord sent fire and accepted the sacrifice. The context of this sacrifice was Abraham reminding God about his promise. By accepting the sacrifice God was reassuring Abraham that the promise would be fulfilled.<sup>12</sup>

The third sacrifice that God asked Abraham was the sacrifice of his son Isaac, who fulfilled God's promise. Why did God ask Abraham to sacrifice his beloved son? The heroic witness of Abraham teaches us that the faith journey involves a series of tests. Every sacrifice demands our willingness to give up what we think is essential or a gift that we keep close to our hearts.

<sup>7</sup> Moriarty, "Abel, Melchizedek, Abraham," 100-101.

<sup>8</sup> Barron, *Eucharist*, 65.

<sup>9</sup> Gen.12: 1 NRSV.

<sup>10</sup> Barron, *Eucharist*, 65.

<sup>11</sup> Gen15: 9 NRSV.

<sup>12</sup> Barron, *Eucharist*, 66.

The offering of a sacrifice is not merely an external act rather an internal disposition that seeks the primacy of God's will and the realization that all gifts belong to God.<sup>13</sup> Hence, the covenantal union between God and humanity is always accompanied by one's willingness to sacrifice.<sup>14</sup>

### **1.1.3 The Sacrifice of Moses**

The greatest covenant that God made with Israel is through the instrumentality of Moses during their Exodus journey. God allowed Moses to pass through the experience of being a wandering shepherd in the desert so that he would be trained in patience and endurance to become the shepherd of Israel. Moses' confrontation with Pharaoh and his patient endurance with the people of Israel becomes the liberator's sacrifice. The Passover meal that Israelites ate before their liberation from Egypt was part of the sacrifice of the lamb. The sprinkling of lamb's blood on the doorpost saved them from the angel of death. The Passover meal indicates the restoration of their lost intimacy with Yahweh. As a result, Passover becomes a constant reminder of their price for freedom and communion with Yahweh.<sup>15</sup>

Once they received the Torah at Mount Sinai, Moses ordered the slaughter of oxen and splashed its blood on the altar and the people. Splashing of the blood on the people indicated God's pledge of fidelity. The splashing blood on the altar indicated Israel's reciprocal fidelity to Yahweh. The sacrifice marked the inseparable relationship between the Torah and the emergence of the priesthood. The priest, who is called to stand between Yahweh and the people offers sacrifice to restore the lost intimacy of the people with Yahweh to enjoy His friendship again.<sup>16</sup>

## **1.2 The Old Testament Symbols for the Eucharistic Spirituality**

Once God established a new covenant with Israel at Mount Sinai, the sacrifice became an essential element of Jewish life because it

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<sup>13</sup> Moriarty, "Abel, Melchizedek, Abraham," 103-104.

<sup>14</sup> Barron, *Eucharist*, 70.

<sup>15</sup> Barron, *Eucharist*, 70-71.

<sup>16</sup> Barron, *Eucharist*, 72.

reminded them of the covenant that the Lord made with them. "I will take you as my people, and I will be your God. You shall know that I am the Lord your God, who has freed you from the burdens of the Egyptians."<sup>17</sup> Let us discuss some of the Old Testament symbols to have a deeper understanding of sacrifice.

### 1.2.1 Manna

In Exodus chapter sixteen, we come across the description of manna. In the desert, God gave this miraculous bread from heaven to the Israelites. They did not know what it was, and for this reason, they called it 'manna.' The word manna is derived from the Hebrew root *man hu* meaning 'what is it?' Manna had deeper implications for Jews, which was reflected in their traditions. They believed that manna was not only a miraculous food but also pre-existent. It had existed even before the fall of Adam and Eve. Another prominent belief was that it was kept on high in the heavenly temple to feed God's people. The third common belief was that when the Messiah comes, he will bring this manna which was stopped at the time of Joshua when the Israelites entered the Promised Land.<sup>18</sup> We see in Exodus chapter sixteen Yahweh instructing Moses to keep an Omer of manna in the tabernacle throughout their generations as a reminder of God's providence during their wilderness journey. Along with manna, which was the heavenly bread God also gave flesh from heaven. He provided them also the meat of quail. Thus, they ate the manna in the morning and the meat of quail at twilight.<sup>19</sup>

### 1.2.2 The Bread of the Presence

In Exodus chapter twenty-four, we read about the solemn banquet of Moses and the seventy leaders of Israel along with Aaron and his sons in the presence of God. "They beheld God, and they ate and drank."<sup>20</sup> To commemorate this event, God asked Moses to

<sup>17</sup> Ex. 6: 7 NRSV.

<sup>18</sup> Brant Pitre, *Jesus and the Jewish Roots of the Eucharist: Unlocking the Secrets of Last Supper*, with a foreword by Scott Hahn (New York: Image, 2016), 86.

<sup>19</sup> Pitre, *Jesus and the Jewish Roots of the Eucharist: Unlocking the Secrets of Last Supper*, 83.

<sup>20</sup> Ex. 24: 11 NRSV.

construct the tabernacle as shown him on the mountain. Yahweh asked Moses to place three sacred objects in the tabernacle. The first sacred object was the Ark of the Covenant, the second sacred object was the golden lampstand known as Menorah, and the third sacred object was the golden table of the bread of the Presence.<sup>21</sup> In this manner, the earthly tabernacle becomes the visible sign of the heavenly place of God, and the earthly bread of the Presence becomes the visible sign of the face of God.<sup>22</sup> Thence, the sanctuary was meant for Yahweh to live among his people.<sup>23</sup> The bread was not the only item on the golden table. There were flagons and bowls for pouring libations, that is, the sacrificial drink offerings of the wine. Due to this, we could see the bread and wine of the Presence on the altar.<sup>24</sup>

This bread of the Presence reminded the people of Israel of four important religious principles of their life. The first principle is that it reminded them of the perpetual covenant between Yahweh and Israel. The second principle is the continual presence of Yahweh with them. The menorah was kept burning continually in the tabernacle to denote Yahweh's presence in the tabernacle.<sup>25</sup> The third principle is that it was not a mere symbol rather, it was an unbloody sacrifice. The bread and wine both were meal and sacrifice. It was a sacrifice offered by priests to Yahweh, and at the same time, it was a meal given to his priests by Yahweh Himself. The fourth principle is that the bread of the Presence was not any sacrifice, but it was the most holy sacrifice performed by his high priest on the Sabbath day.<sup>26</sup> This way, the bread of the Presence indicated the unfailing accompaniment of Yahweh along with

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<sup>21</sup> Pitre, *Jesus and the Jewish Roots of the Eucharist: Unlocking the Secrets of Last Supper*, 119.

<sup>22</sup> Pitre, *Jesus and the Jewish Roots of the Eucharist: Unlocking the Secrets of Last Supper*, 122.

<sup>23</sup> Roy Gane, "Bread of the Presence and Creator-In-Residence," *Vetus Testamentum*, XLII, 2 (1992):182-183.

<sup>24</sup> Pitre, *Jesus and the Jewish Roots of the Eucharist: Unlocking the Secrets of Last Supper*, 120.

<sup>25</sup> Pitre, *Jesus and the Jewish Roots of the Eucharist: Unlocking the Secrets of Last Supper*, 119.

<sup>26</sup> Pitre, *Jesus and the Jewish Roots of the Eucharist: Unlocking the Secrets of Last Supper*, 124-125.

the people of Israel. They were privileged to have their Creator-provider residing with them.<sup>27</sup>

### 1.2.3 Blood of the Lamb

The Israelites believed that Yahweh dwelt among them, which meant among their uncleanness too. The sense of unworthiness made them keep the atonement or removal of impurity as one of the significant dimensions of their worship. Israelites gave prime importance to the sense of purity. Levi's sons' tragic destiny made them understand purity as a matter of life or death. They believed that impurity was contagious. It can be spread from one person to the other, and the entire society can be affected by it. For this reason, the atonement sacrifice was at the heart of their spirituality. They had individual atonement to decontaminate the individuals. All the same, once a year, the whole Jewish community had to offer the atonement sacrifice as a community for the wellbeing of the entire community.<sup>28</sup> On that particular day, the high priest entered behind the veil to incense the mercy seat, carrying the blood of the oxen to seek forgiveness from the Lord for his own sins and the blood of the goat to offer atonement sacrifice for the sins of the people.<sup>29</sup>

## 1.3 Eucharistic Spirituality: The New Testament Perspective

Let us analyse the New Testament writings and see how the Last Supper of Jesus became the New Passover, likewise, how Jesus identified himself with the paschal lamb, miraculous manna, and bread of the Presence.

### 1.3.1 Synoptic Perspective

The synoptic gospels present the Passover in the context of the Eucharist. The evangelists derive a fuller understanding of the Eucharist from the paschal mystery of Christ. The Passover and

<sup>27</sup> Gane, "Bread of the Presence and Creator-In-Residence," 202-203.

<sup>28</sup> Walter Edward Brooks, "The Perpetuity of Christ's Sacrifice in the Epistle to the Hebrews," *Journal of Biblical Literature*, LXXXIX, 2 (1970): 208-209.

<sup>29</sup> Brooks, "The Perpetuity of Christ's Sacrifice in the Epistle to the Hebrews," 208-209.

passion enlighten us about the Last Supper, and the Last Supper shed more light on the Passover and the passion narrative. Jesus offers his body and blood at the Last Supper as the sacrificial realities. The unleavened bread symbolizes the body of Christ, which would be offered on the altar of the cross as a sacrifice.<sup>30</sup> It is also the body of Jesus that has risen from the dead. The vine symbolizes the blood of Christ, which would be offered as a blood covenant, poured out at the foot of the altar for the expiation of sins. Accordingly, the sacrifice of Christ established the new covenant between God and man.<sup>31</sup>

### 1.3.2 Pauline Perspective

Paul presents the Eucharistic tradition to the Corinthian community in the context of their internal issues. The Corinthian community that gathered for the breaking of the bread stood far away from the commandment of Christ to love one another.<sup>32</sup> Paul states that the Last Supper took place on the night Jesus was betrayed, keeping in line with the gospel tradition. Here, we see after the indicative statement 'this is my body,' an addition of 'which is for you,' and after the consecration of both the bread and wine, the statement 'do this in remembrance of me.' Paul also highlights the statement 'cup is the new covenant in my blood.' Because of this, Paul considers the Eucharist as the Supper of the Lord, which nourishes the members of the believing community with spiritual food and drink. As a consequence, they become the people of the new covenant. This new covenant is sealed by his death, an expiatory sacrifice for the forgiveness of sin.<sup>33</sup>

The Christian community is called to imitate this sacrificial love through their unity and fraternal love. Jesus expressed the

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<sup>30</sup> Joseph M. Powers, *Eucharistic Theology* (London: Billing & Sons Limited, 1968), 61.

<sup>31</sup> Powers, *Eucharistic Theology*

<sup>32</sup> Benny Thettayil, "Do You Not Have Homes to Eat and Drink In? (1Cor.11:22) The Eucharist and Paul's Call for Unity in 1 Corinthians," *The Mystery of The Eucharist: Essays on the Occasion of the Eucharistic Year*, eds., Sebastian Athappilly and Paulachan Kochappilly (Bangalore: Dharmaram Publications, 2006), 43.

<sup>33</sup> Thettayil, "Do You Not Have Homes to Eat and Drink In? 45.



unconditional love of God during his ministry by finding out the least, the last, and the lost of society. Jesus established a new covenant with persons like Zacchaeus, the Samaritan woman, the leper, the woman caught in adultery, etc. They experienced the unconditional love of the Lord. Every Eucharistic celebration is God's re-enactment of the covenant that he established through Jesus.<sup>34</sup> In the Old Passover, the Israelites commemorated their liberation from the bondage of Egyptians through the sacrifice of the paschal lamb. For Paul, Eucharist is the new Passover which is marked by the self-sacrifice of Jesus. Jesus asked his disciples to commemorate this event in his remembrance. All the same, it is not an annual commemoration; rather, the Eucharist is an anamnesis and every time they commemorate this event, they will be rewarded with the fruit of the Exodus which is liberation from all forms of bondage.<sup>35</sup>

### **1.3.3 The Epistle to the Hebrews Perspective**

The author of the letter to the Hebrews presents an analogy between Jesus' sacrifice and the Day of Atonement. The Day of Atonement is considered the most solemn feast of the Jews, the day on which the sin offering was made in its fullest form. The high priest enters behind the veil into the holy of holies. Being in the presence of God, he incenses the mercy seat and sprinkles it with the blood of a bull for his own sins and with the blood of the goat for the sins of the people.<sup>36</sup> Usually, the high priest enters into the copy of the true tent, a tabernacle made with hands. Whereas Jesus entered not into a sanctuary made with hands but into heaven itself. He entered there not with the blood of goats and bulls but with his own blood, once and for all, to the domain of God. There he intercedes on behalf of us.<sup>37</sup> The Old Testament sacrifices were incapable of liberating from sin and achieving the desired effect of union with God. But Christ has brought atonement with God through his perfect sacrifice wherein he

<sup>34</sup> Thettayil, "Do You Not Have Homes to Eat and Drink In? 44.

<sup>35</sup> Thettayil, "Do You Not Have Homes to Eat and Drink In? 45.

<sup>36</sup> Thettayil, "Do You Not Have Homes to Eat and Drink In? 46.

<sup>37</sup> Brooks, "The Perpetuity of Christ's Sacrifice in the Epistle to the Hebrews," 208.

acted as the priest and the victim.<sup>38</sup> Thence, we have a high priest in heaven, who is seated at the right hand of God, who ministers in the heavenly sanctuary which is made by the Lord. His priestly offering is an ongoing function. He is a priest forever, according to the order of priest-king Melchizedek. Wherefore, his priestly ministry lasts forever.<sup>39</sup>

## 1.4 Conclusion

Israelites were aware that the impact of sin was the greatest barrier that hindered them from entering into communion with Yahweh. For that purpose, they tried to expiate the impact of their sins through animal sacrifices. Yet, none of those sacrifices could liberate them from the bondage of sin. Therefore, in the fullness of time, the son of God incarnated as a human person to offer himself as a perfect sacrifice so that we will be delivered from the bondage of sin forever through his meritorious sacrifice and re-establish our broken friendship with Yahweh. We have seen that some of the Old Testament sacrifices such as the sacrifice of Abel, Abraham, and Moses were perfectly fulfilled in the person of Jesus, who offered the most pleasing sacrifice to God. Furthermore, the Old Testament Eucharistic symbols namely manna, the bread of the Presence, and the blood of the lamb have been realized in the person of Jesus. Eucharistic spirituality is a clarion call to be aware of his sacrificial love and grow in our Eucharistic intimacy day by day.

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<sup>38</sup> Brooks, "The Perpetuity of Christ's Sacrifice in the Epistle to the Hebrews," 211.

<sup>39</sup> Brooks, "The Perpetuity of Christ's Sacrifice in the Epistle to the Hebrews," 213.