

THE BIBLICAL BASIS OF THE HOLY QUORBANA

*Roy Abraham Varghese, a member of St. Mary's Malankara Catholic Church of Dallas, Texas, is the editor of various books on the interface of science, philosophy and religion, including **Cosmos, Bios, Theos** (Open Court, Chicago), described in *Time* as "the year's most intriguing book about God" and widely reviewed in technical and popular publications, with contributions from 24 Nobel Prize-winning scientists; **Cosmic Beginnings and Human Ends** (Open Court, Chicago), winner of a*



*Templeton Book Prize in 1995; **Great Thinkers on Great Questions** (OneWorld, Oxford and distributed by Penguins); and **Theos, Anthropos, Christos** (Peter Lang, New York), a volume in the *American University Studies in Religion* series. His most recent book is **God-Sent! A History of the Accredited Apparitions of Mary** (Crossroads, New York, 2000). This article is preview of*

*his forthcoming book on the Eucharist, **God-Fleshed!**, which was featured in the April 23, 2000, issue of the Catholic newspaper, *Our Sunday Visitor*.*

The center of the Syro-Malankara universe is the Holy Qurbano, the Divine Liturgy, the Sacrifice of the Mass. As a missionary Church sharing common roots with an Orthodox sister church, the Syrian Orthodox Church, and a Protestant ecclesial community, the Mar Thoma Church, Malankarans have both an opportunity and an obligation to explore the relationship of Scripture to this beautiful liturgy that traces its roots to St. James the Apostle. At the heart of our dialogue is the question of what takes place during the Divine Liturgy. There can be little doubt that those who first celebrated the liturgy believed that the consecration of bread and wine led to its transformation into the flesh and blood of the Son of God made man. But starting in the 19th century, under the influence of Protestant missionaries, some Syrian Christians rejected this ancient affirmation citing the Bible as their authority. The question we will briefly review is what the Bible actually says about the question of what happens during the Lord's Supper. My contention here is that, far from contradicting the reality of the transformation of bread and wine into the divine Body and Blood, the Bible is the strongest supporter of this holy teaching.

If we read the Bible as a whole, we see that it chronicles the explosive emergence and maturation of key common themes and concepts across both the Old and the New Testaments. Thus we read in the Old Testament about: Abel's sacrifice of a first-born lamb, Melchizedek's offering of bread and wine; Abraham obeying God and offering his son in sacrifice (only to be stopped by an angel); the sons of Israel being protected by the sacrifice of a lamb as the Angel of Death passed over Egypt; the manna that fed the Israelites in the desert; the Holy of Holies constructed by the Israelites; the annual sacrifice of the Passover celebrated by Israel; Malachi's prophecy of a future perfect sacrifice to be performed by the pagans from the rising of the sun to its setting. In the New Testament, we read about the miracles of the loaves which is followed by Jesus' command to eat His Flesh; the Passover meal at which Jesus tells the Apostles that they must remember Him by offering up His Body and Blood under the appearance of bread and wine; the sacrifice of Christ the "Paschal Lamb" on Calvary; the two disciples to Emmaus who discover Jesus in the "breaking of bread"; the Apostles continuing the tradition of "breaking the bread"; the continuing intercession of Christ in Heaven shown in the Epistles to the Hebrews and the Romans; and the mysterious Lamb that was slain in the Book of Revelation.

Today, two thousand years after Christ, most of us are so familiar with His command to eat His Body and drink His Blood that we do not realize how extraordinary it was not just to His hearers but in the context of religious history as a whole. Never in recorded history had any leader of a religion made such a demand. No prophet of Israel, no Hindu, Buddhist, Taoist or Confucian sage had ever asked his followers to consume him. But this is exactly what Jesus commanded adding that only those who followed this command would receive eternal life. He was Life and to receive this Life, to share in the divine Life, one would have to eat His Flesh. His hearers knew what He was saying and that is why even many of His disciples left Him. "Hard saying" though it was, the first Christians felt compelled to take Jesus at His word. Second century writers like Tertullian and Minucius Felix noted that cannibalism was one of the primary charges made against Christians. So important was this command of Christ that it is specifically recorded in every Gospel and repeated by the greatest of the missionaries, St. Paul, who said that He personally "received" it "from the Lord."

St. Paul, one of the earliest New Testament witnesses, says two things that are of interest here. Somehow "the bread that we break" is "a participation in the body of Christ" (I Corinthians 10:16). Moreover, "anyone who eats and drinks without discerning the body, eats and drinks judgment on himself. That is why many among you are ill and infirm, and a considerable number are dying." (I Corinthians 11:30). These passages indicate that "the breaking of the bread", which had become a fundamental part of Christian life (Acts 2:42), was not simply a symbolic meal or a memorial service. It had tangible effects and unworthy participation was an invitation to sickness, even to death. And this was a teaching that St. Paul "received from the Lord".

There is also an obvious pattern of parallels. Melchizedek, King of Salem (Jerusalem), offers a sacrifice of bread and wine at the commencement of the Old Covenant. Likewise Jesus Christ, King of Jerusalem, Who is "declared by God high priest according to the order of Melchizedek" (Hebrews 5:10), offers a sacrifice of bread and wine to introduce a New and Everlasting Covenant. Among the multitude of other parallels, the following are particularly significant here:

Abraham, the Father of Israel, offers up his son as a sacrifice

God the Father gives His Only-begotten Son for He "so loved the world"

Lamb without blemish offered up in sacrifice

The all-holy Lamb of God offered up in sacrifice

The blood of the lamb preserves the People of God from physical death

The Blood of the Lamb preserves the People of God from spiritual death

Blood of animals offered in sacrifice seals the old covenant

Blood of the Lamb offered in sacrifice seals the new covenant

The Feast of Passover is a

The Lord's Supper is a commemoration of

commemoration of the first
Passover and is to be celebrated
by the sacrifice of a lamb and the
complete consumption of its flesh

Bread from heaven preserves
the people of Israel in the desert

God is literally present among His
People in the Ark of the Covenant
which also contained the heavenly
manna

Desecration of the Ark of the
Covenant results in sickness
and death

Prophecy of a pure sacrifice offered
in all nations from the rising of
the sun to its setting

High Priest makes atonement for his
sins and the sins of his people by
entering and offering blood once a
year in the Holy of Holies which is
patterned on Heaven

the Last Paschal Meal and is to be celebrated
by the unbloody offering of the Lamb and
the consumption of Its Flesh

The Daily Bread from the Father in Heaven
gives strength in temptation and deliverance from
evil. Jesus is born in Bethlehem which means
"House of Bread".

God is literally present among His People in
the Body and Blood of the Lord which
consummates the New Covenant and which retains
the appearance of bread and wine

Unworthy reception of the Lord's Body
and Blood results in sickness and death

The Lord's Supper is to be celebrated by Jews
and Gentiles until the Second Coming of the Lord

The eternal High Priest makes atonement once
for all for the sins of His People by shedding His
own blood and then enters Heaven itself where
He serves as a Minister of the Sanctuary and
commences a ministry of intercession for those
who approach Him

With this overview, we will consider a few common questions about the Eucharistic teachings of the New Testament:

1. Was Jesus using symbolic language at the Last Supper when He spoke of the bread and wine as His Body and Blood?
2. Was Jesus using symbolic language in John 6 when He spoke of the need to eat His Flesh to receive eternal life?

The Last Supper

The so-called Institution Narratives, the passages in Matthew, Mark and Luke and in St. Paul's Epistle to the Corinthians, in which Jesus institutes the Eucharist at the "Last Supper" are central to Eucharist doctrine and practice. Jesus' words, "This is my body ... This is my blood" lie at the core of every Eucharistic liturgy. Like the Word that brought all things into being (John 1:3), these Words are words of creation and transformation that actually bring about what they

pronounce. Biblical scholars hold that the Institution formulas used in the various narratives were actually in use in the liturgies of the early Church. About these texts, we can say the following. When Jesus said, "Take and eat; this is my body", He meant His statement to be taken either symbolically or literally. A study of the earliest liturgies and the early Fathers will show that the first Christians certainly understood Him literally. That Jesus intended to be taken literally seems certain in view of the following:

1. The Synoptic Gospels and St. Paul testify unanimously to the same basic format of institution.
2. This was a grave, even tragic, occasion and it seems unlikely that Jesus would have allowed any scope for misunderstanding Him. Certainly, He made no attempt to explain His words in terms of symbolism or a parable.
3. He tied His Words of Institution to the Covenant. The covenants of Israel were sealed with the blood of the sacrificial victim. Here Christ was speaking of a New Covenant and the Blood that would seal it was to be His Own. We are also commanded to continue the covenantal offering of His Body and Blood ("Do this") through which the new covenant is renewed and re-presented. And whereas the Paschal Meal of the Old Covenant was eaten in memory of Yahweh, the New Paschal Meal is centered on Jesus ("Do this in remembrance of me."). Moreover, the New Covenant could not be in any sense inferior to the Old. Central to the Old Covenant was the localized Presence of Yahweh with His People in the Holy of Holies. Likewise, the New Covenant is built around the permanent physical Presence of Jesus with His People in His Body and Blood - contrast "I am with you always, until the end of the age." (Matthew 28:20) with "I will be with you" (Exodus 3:12).
4. The meaning of the Crucifixion - the final triumph of the Savior - is given in these narratives: His Blood is shed "on behalf of many for the forgiveness of sins."
5. When the Institution narratives are read in conjunction with John 6 - see below - there is no further room for doubt about whether or not the words of institution are to be taken literally as they always have been.

In the narrative in Luke, Jesus says, "Do this in memory of me." The "this" that we are supposed to do is the offering of His Body. The word used here for "in memory" is *anamnesis*, one of nine other possible words in Greek with the same meaning. This particular word is used because it is associated with sacrifice and as used here "*anamnesis* does not refer merely to remembering a past event or a past sacrifice; rather it refers to remembrance brought about by the act of sacrifice."

John 6

We will begin by saying that there are clearly instances in this chapter where Jesus intends to be symbolic. Just as clearly there are instances here where He is being literal. Thus, when He says, "whoever believes in me will never thirst" He is being symbolic and when He says "whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life" He is being literal.

How do we know when He is being symbolic and when He is literal? For one thing, we know that in every instance in the New Testament when Jesus' teaching provoked the Jews to anger it was for proclaiming a literal truth. His parables and metaphorical language simply as stated did

not rouse their wrath. (It might be said that His teaching about rebuilding the temple in three days is an exception but “temple” was often used to refer to the body in the New Testament and Jesus was here referring to His Body.) When Jesus said “Before Abraham was I AM”, there was no question that He meant His statement literally – and hence the Jews sought to kill Him.

In John 6, Jesus is teaching two great truths, the first about Who He was and the second about the Eucharist. First, He says that He is the Bread of Life Who has come from Heaven and that anyone who believes in Him will not hunger or thirst and will have eternal life. This claim angers the Jews who know Him as the son of Joseph. Second, He says that the bread that He gives is His Flesh “for the life of the world” and that only those Who eat His Flesh and drink His Blood will have life. This second teaching was too much for even many of His disciples who now left Him (“This saying is hard; who can accept it?”). Although they could not comprehend this mysterious teaching the Apostles, however, accept it because they have already accepted Him as “the Holy One of God.”

We know that Jesus’ command that we eat His Flesh and drink His Blood is to be taken literally for the following reasons:

1. There is not a single instance of a symbolic command to eat the Flesh and drink the Blood of Christ or God in either Testament.
2. If Jesus intended to be symbolic, He could simply have said this was the case to the scandalized Jews. Instead He proceeded to elaborate on this command thus further enraging them and running the risk even of losing His Apostles. In other instances, when He was using symbolic language, He explained the true meaning of what He said to His disciples.
3. In 6:63 Jesus says, “It is the spirit that gives life, while the flesh is of no avail. The words I have spoken to you are spirit and life.” It is obvious here that the flesh He is referring to is not His Flesh – if He did the prior teaching that the Word became flesh for our salvation would be meaningless.” The “flesh” referred to here is the carnal way in which unbelievers look at spiritual things including the carnal refusal to accept Christ’s command to eat His Flesh and drink His Blood.
4. The Greek word for “eat” in the verses where Christ asks us to eat His Flesh is translated “chew” or “gnaw” and is quite obviously physical in meaning; a symbolic interpretation would be a stretch.
5. Liberal Protestant exegetes like Rudolf Bultmann admitted that John 6:54-58 is to be taken literally: “It is a matter of real eating and not simply of some sort of spiritual participation.” (Bultmann’s way around this “hard saying” was to regard it as a later addition.) In addition to Bultmann, Robert Sungenis draws our attention to such other prominent Protestant exegetes as Alastair Heron and C.K. Barrett who argued for a Eucharistic interpretation of John 6.
6. St. Paul and the authors of the other Gospels also took Christ’s teaching quite literally because they record His command to eat His Body and drink His Blood without giving any indication that this command is to be taken symbolically.
7. The first Christians were accused of being cannibals precisely because their beliefs and practices called for them to eat the Flesh and drink the Blood of the Lord. The literal interpretation of John 6 is found also in the texts of the ancient Fathers, Councils and Liturgies.