

# **FIRST AMONG EQUALS:**

**THE PRE-NICENE CHRISTIAN EUCHARIST  
IN THE CONTEXT OF GRECO-ROMAN MYSTERY CULTS**

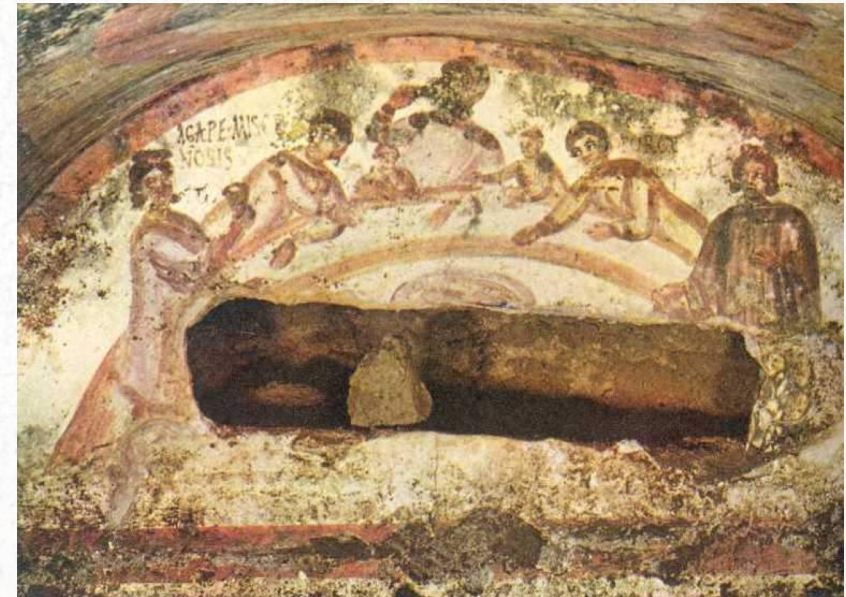
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# THE CHRISTIAN EUCHARIST

- Eucharist = Basis of Early Christian Worship
- Two Parts:
  - Prayers
  - “Breaking of Bread”
- Three Traditions:
  - Marco-Pauline
  - Johannine
  - Didactic



Fresco of the Eucharist, c. 200s CE,  
Catacombs of Peter and Marcellinus, Rome



# THE MARCO-PAULINE TRADITION

- Paul's First Letter to the Corinthians, c. 50 CE
- Gospel according to Mark, c. 64 CE
- Words of Institution
  - <sup>23</sup> For I received from the Lord what I also handed on to you, that the Lord Jesus on the night when he was betrayed took a loaf of bread, <sup>24</sup> and when he had given thanks, he broke it and said, "*This is my body that is for you. Do this in remembrance of me.*" <sup>25</sup> In the same way he took the cup also, after supper, saying, "*This cup is the new covenant in my blood. Do this, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of me.*" <sup>26</sup> For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes. (1 Cor. 11, NRSV)



# MYSTERY CULTS IN THE ROMAN EMPIRE

- Key Cults:
  - Dionysus (Bacchus)
  - Demeter (Eleusinian Mysteries)
  - Isis
  - Mithras
  - Cybele (Magna Mater)
- Secret Initiations
- Community Feasts



Mithraeum of San Clemente, Rome, in use c. 100s CE



# ROMAN FEAST AS *IMITATIO DEI*

- *imitatio dei* = imitation of a god
- Bull Sacrifices of Mithras
- Eleusinian Mysteries of Demeter
- Christianity:
  - Baptism
  - “Lord’s Prayer”
  - Eucharist (in Marco-Pauline Tradition)



Mithras Sacrificing the Bull, c. 100 - 200s CE  
Borghese Collection in the Louvre, Paris



# ROMAN FEAST AS THEOPHAGY

- Bacchic Feast
  - *sparagmos* – rending of a live animal
  - *omophagy* – raw consumption of animal flesh
  - sacred animal = divine presence in the victim
- Eucharistic Feast
  - Divine Presence in Eucharist
  - Ignatius of Antioch, c. 35 - 107



Red Figure Pottery Depicting Sparagmos, c. 400s BCE  
Cabinet des Médailles, Paris



# SOCIOLOGICAL FUNCTION: COMMUNITY AND IDENTITY

- Rituals Reinforce Communal Bonds
- Large-Scale Roman Empire
  - Smaller, Insular Communities
- Cult of Isis in Apuleius' *Metamorphoses*
- Paul and Ignatius on Communal Aspects of Eucharist



Fresco of Eucharist, Catacombs of Priscilla, Rome, c. 100s CE



# PSYCHOLOGICAL FUNCTION: SOTERIA AND AFTERLIFE

- Promise of Better Afterlife = Relief from Anxieties
- Bacchic/Orphic Gold Tablets
- Ignatius: “medicine of immortality”



Orphic Gold Tablet, c. 300s BCE, Getty Museum, Los Angeles



# ANTHROPOLOGICAL FUNCTION: PHYSICAL NEED

- Eucharist as Full Meal
  - “*agape*” feast
- Roman Ritual Sacrifices = Source of Food
- Tangible, Physical Benefits for Initiates



Relief of Sacrifice on the *Ara Pacis*, Rome, 9 BCE



# CHRISTIANITY AS *PRIMUS INTER PARES*

- Christianity as Mystery Religion
  - Practice, Doctrine, and Function of Eucharist is Similar to Other Ritual Feasts
- “First Among Equals”
  - Christianity Survives and Dominates Other Cults



Ruins of the Temple of Isis at Pompeii, c. 79 CE