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
  • 23 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, 24 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.” 25 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.” 26 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)
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