

The Table of the Lord: Paul's Eucharistic Use of Malachi in 1 Corinthians 10:21

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Abstract

Paul is alone among New Testament authors in using LXX Malachi's *τραπέζης κυρίου* (*trapeza kyriou*, *table of the Lord*). In bringing his lengthy section on Christian freedom to a close, Paul addresses a specific concern of the Corinthian church: the eating of meat sacrificed to pagan idols. In 1 Cor 10:14–22 we see Paul use *τραπέζης κυρίου* and other Eucharistic language to frame the celebration of the Lord's Supper as the ideal counter-example to this Corinthian practice. Why, in this setting, would Paul make use of Malachi's phrase? What does *τραπέζης κυρίου* communicate to Paul's audience that other Eucharistic language can not?

This paper will propose that Paul's use of Malachi's *τραπέζης κυρίου* (*trapezēs kyriou*) allows him to speak of the Eucharist in sacrificial terms and provides later Christian writers a New Testament precedent for using Malachi in a Eucharistic sense. It will be argued (1) that Paul certainly has Malachi's disputation with the Levitical priest in mind when he uses *τραπέζης κυρίου* (*trapezēs kyriou*) in 1 Cor 10:21, (2) that the context of Malachi's own use of *τραπέζης κυρίου* (*trapezēs kyriou*) provides a vision of a future, sacrificial worship of Yahweh by "the nations," and (3) that Paul intends for these sacrificial overtones to be heard in his use of the Eucharist as a counter-example to the consummation of idol meat.

Introduction

The modern interpreter of Scripture, when presented with Patristic exegesis, is often taken aback by the hermeneutical methodology and conclusions of many early Christian writers. Are they merely proof-texting the Old Testament in search of nuggets of support for their own theology? Would not a modern grammatical-historical hermeneutic negate much of their conclusion? Or my own personal favorite

anachronism when dealing with the Fathers: *Why can't they just show us how they got from point A to point B? Would it have killed them to give us a chapter on their methodology before getting into the text?*

If one were to spend an entire afternoon reading what second century Christians wrote about the Eucharist—and let us pause for a moment to recognize how few audiences would appreciate an opportunity to do such a thing—one would be presented with a puzzling claim throughout the works of various authors: the Christian celebration of the Eucharist is the fulfillment of the eschatological vision found in Malachi 1:10-11. No less than three first and second century texts reach this conclusion: the *Didache*, the writings of Justin Martyr, and those of Irenaeus of Lyons. Are these authors novel in their application of Malachi's vision to the celebration of the Eucharist? Is there any New Testament precedent for doing so? This paper will explore one possible New Testament instance of a Eucharistic application of Malachi: Paul's use of LXX Malachi's *τραπέζης κυρίου* (*trapeza kyriou*, *table of the Lord*) in 1 Corinthians 10:21.

Paul is alone among New Testament authors in using Malachi's *τραπέζης κυρίου* (*trapezēs kyriou*, *table of the Lord*). In bringing his lengthy section on Christian freedom to a close, Paul addresses a specific concern of the Corinthian church: the eating of meat sacrificed to pagan idols. In 1 Cor 10:21 we see Paul use *τραπέζης κυρίου* (*trapezēs kyriou*) to frame the celebration of the Lord's Supper as the ideal counter-example to this questionable Corinthian practice.

“You cannot drink the cup of the Lord and the cup of demons. You cannot partake of the *table of the Lord* (τραπέζης κυρίου) and the table of demons.”

Why, in this setting, would Paul make use of Malachi’s phrase? What does “table of the Lord” communicate to Paul’s audience that other language does not?

This paper will propose that Paul’s use of Malachi’s *τραπέζης κυρίου* (*trapezēs kyriou*) allows him to speak of the Eucharist in sacrificial terms and provides later Christian writers a New Testament precedent for using Malachi in a Eucharistic sense. It will be argued (1) that Paul certainly has Malachi’s disputation with the Levitical priest in mind when he uses *τραπέζης κυρίου* (*trapezēs kyriou*) in 1 Cor 10:21, (2) that the context of Malachi’s own use of *τραπέζης κυρίου* (*trapezēs kyriou*) provides a vision of a future, sacrificial worship of Yahweh by “the nations,” and (3) that Paul intends for these sacrificial overtones to be heard in his use of the Eucharist as a counter-example to the consummation of idol meat.

Is Paul using Malachi in 1 Corinthians 10:21?

Much attention has been given to other Old Testament references throughout this pericope, and few commentators have given more than a passing reference to Paul’s use

of τραπέζης κυρίου (*trapezēs kyriou*).¹ Some have not seen fit to include *any* mention of Malachi when discussing Paul's use of "table of the Lord."² Our first question, then, must be: does Paul have Malachi in mind here?

There are at least two competing explanations for Paul's motivation for using "table of the Lord" in his dichotomy between Christian and pagan sacrifices. Summary and simplification of major arguments will be necessary here.

Conzelman is among those who see Paul as using "table" language in his dichotomy primarily because of its wide-spread use in pagan contexts. Paul's use of "table" language is due primarily to the fact that the Greco-Roman Corinthians were familiar with its "general pagan usage." He concedes that Paul may be using Malachi's τραπέζης κυρίου (*trapezēs kyriou*), but instead of using the phrase as an allusion to Malachi itself, Paul is merely using it as a "presupposed, established designation" for the celebration of the Lord's Supper.³ The thrust of the meaning of "table of demons"

¹ Joseph A Fitzmyer, *First Corinthians: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* (New Haven; London: Yale University Press, 2008), 394, spends three lines discussing Malachi. Those mentioning Malachi in passing include Anthony C Thiselton, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians: A Commentary on the Greek Text* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: W.B. Eerdmans, 2000), 777; Raymond F Collins, *First Corinthians* (Collegeville, Minn.: Liturgical Press, 1999), 96.

² Gordon D Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: William B. Eerdmans, 1987).

³ Hans Conzelmann, *Corinthians. a Commentary on the First Epistle to the Corinthians* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1975), 174.

and “table of the Lord” lies not in the Old Testament’s use of such phrases, but rather in that of the Corinthians’ Greco-Roman world.

Fitzmyer, on the other hand, sees Paul’s use of *τραπέζης κυρίου* (*trapezēs kyriou*) as likely carrying with it the overtones of Malachi’s own use of the phrase. For him, Paul “adopts and applies” Malachi’s language to the Christian celebration of the Lord’s Supper. This does not prevent Fitzmyer from recognizing that pagan understandings of *τραπέζα* (*trapeza, table*) play a role in Paul’s rhetoric, but that Paul intends for his audience to be drawn back to Malachi is, for Fitzmyer, likely.⁴

The wider context of our verse is full of Old Testament allusions. Paul has already referenced “our fathers [who] were under the cloud and [who] all passed through the sea” (1 Cor 10:1-5). He has recounted much of Israel’s journey to and from Sinai (1 Cor 10:6-10). In the immediate context of our verse Paul urges his audience to “consider the people of Israel” and precedes to discuss the alimentary nature of some of their Levitical sacrifices (1 Cor 10:18). Beginning in 10:1 Paul draws the attention of his audience to Old Testament Israel, and by 10:18 he has explicitly referenced Levitical sacrifice. Paul appears to be preparing his readers to hear echoes of Malachi’s disputation with the Levitical priests in his use of “table of the Lord” in 10:21.

⁴ Fitzmyer, 394-5.

Though it is common language within the Christian community throughout its history, τραπέζης κυρίου (*trapeza kyriou, table of the Lord*) appears only twice within the entire LXX, and both instances fall within Malachi's initial disputation with the Levitical priests (1:7, 12). If Paul is indeed intending for his audience to hear echoes of Malachi's disputation with the Levitical priesthood in his dichotomy between the "table of demons" and the "table of the Lord," what is there to hear? If we were to place our ears to the text, what rumbles would we hear coming from Malachi's own use of the phrase?

τραπέζης κυρίου and Sacrifice in Malachi

In the second oracle of Malachi we are confronted with the prophet's first major rebuke: the priests of Israel have despised the name of Yahweh by offering polluted food on the altar. The Temple has been rebuilt, yet pure worship of Yahweh is not taking place within the restoration community. The problem that had plagued humanity in the very opening chapters of the Old Testament persists here in its final chapters: the offering of impure sacrifices.

This oracle (Mal 1:6-2:9) contains no less than three allusions to earlier Old Testament passages that will prove to be significant for later Christian use of Malachi 1:11. We will summarize them briefly here.

(1) *The message from the man of God to Eli in 1 Samuel 2:27-36.* In this opening chapter of Samuel, we see an oracle concerning the failure of the Levitical priesthood and an

eschatological vision of a day where sacrifices will be continually made to Yahweh. The priests of Malachi's day are not the first to offer impure sacrifices.

(2) *The reforms of Hezekiah in 2 Chronicles 29:3-11*. Before the reign of the reforming King Hezekiah, the Levitical priesthood had "forsaken" Yahweh by abandoning the Temple. They "shut the doors of the vestibule and put out the lamps, and have not offered incense or made burnt offerings in the holy place to the God of Israel." It is because of this, Chronicles argues, that Yahweh has made Judah an object of his wrath. After a return to faithful worship, it would appear that things had taken a turn for the worse by Malachi's day. How far, the reader of Malachi might ask, had the Levitical priests fallen from their enthusiastic return to faithfulness during the reign of Hezekiah? An answer is seen in the plea from Yahweh in Malachi 1:10a, "Oh, that someone among you would shut the temple doors, so that you would not kindle fire on my altar in vain!" It would be better for Israel if no offerings were made in the Temple than for them to continue in their offering of impure sacrifices. The very offense made by the Levitical priests under the reign of Hezekiah is now seen as a plausible suggestion for the Levitical priests of Malachi's day.

(3) *The priestly blessing of Numbers 6:23-27*. In our first two earlier Old Testament allusions we see examples of the Levitical priesthood straying from their vocation and preventing a pure sacrifice from being offered. In our final allusion, we see Malachi "exegetically invert" the Priestly Blessing of Numbers 6:23-27. Michael Fishbane notes

that “all the key terms of the Priestly Blessing are alluded to, or played upon” in Malachi 1:6-2:9, and that this oracle by Malachi appears to condemn the priests “measure for measure” in relation to the Priestly Blessing.⁵ Perhaps the most drastic of these measure for measure inversions is the reversal of “the LORD make his face shine upon you” found in the Priestly Blessing into the spreading of the dung of the impure offerings onto the faces of the priests themselves in Malachi 2:3.

In these allusions to previous prophetic rebukes of the Levitical priesthood, we see the oracle against the priesthood in Malachi 1:6-2:9 in the context of a wider Old Testament pattern. As Israel progresses, the failure of the Levitical priesthood is a constant theme. By the time of Malachi, it would appear as if the Levitical priesthood had reached a new low. For all that has been said against the Levitical priesthood, the necessity of sacrifice itself is unchallenged. The means by which offering is made is surely being challenged by the end of Malachi (i.e. the Levitical priesthood vs. “the nations”), but that an offering will always be necessary for true worship of Yahweh appears to be quite clear.

In both instances (Malachi 1:7, 12), the “table of the Lord” (τράπεζης κυρίου) is being defiled or despised by the impure sacrifices offered by the Levitical priests. This creates a dichotomy between a future pure sacrifice to be offered among “the nations” (1:11)

⁵ Michael Fishbane, *Biblical Interpretation in Ancient Israel* (Clarendon Press, 1985). That Malachi’s oracle is “*exegetical* in nature” and the inversion of the Priestly Blessing is successfully argued for in 332-334.

and the current defiled ones being offered by the Levitical priests (1:7, 12). Though there is a contrast between the pure and defiled offerings, both are presumedly being offered on the "table of the Lord" (τραπέζης κυρίου). One day, according to Malachi, "the nations" will present a pure sacrifice to Yahweh (Malachi 1:11). It is with this vision in mind that we return to 1 Corinthians.

Paul's Eucharistic Use of Malachi

Paul alludes to the Old Testament's climactic disputation with the Levitical priesthood (Malachi 1:6-2:9) in the climax of his own argument against consuming meat that has been sacrificed to pagan gods.⁶

"...You cannot partake of the *table of the Lord* (τραπέζης κυρίου) and the table of demons."

Paul does not introduce the "table of the Lord" as the climactic counter-example to the pagan practice of consuming that which had been sacrificed out of nowhere. Even before reaching his own account of the institution of the Lord's Supper in the following chapter, the immediate and wider context of 10:21 includes Eucharistic language that is sacrificial in nature.

Earlier in 5:7, Paul has already referred to Christ as "our Passover [lamb]" (τὸ πάσχα ἡμῶν, *to pascha hēmōn*). This reference to an alimentary sacrifice is not Paul's

⁶ Paul's use of the Lord's Supper as a counter-example to this practice is seen by Verbrugge as "the key to his climactic argument."

only instance of mixing themes of meal and sacrifice. Before invoking Malachi's language of τραπέζης κυρίου (*trapeza kyriou*) and all its sacrificial overtones in 10:21, Paul uses meal language to describe the Eucharist in 10:14-20: the *cup of blessing*, the *breaking of bread*, and *partaking of the one bread*. In 10:18 he reminds his audience of the alimentary nature of some of the Levitical sacrifices (cf. Lev 7:11-18). This combination of sacrifice and meal language reaches its climax in the parallel dichotomies of 10:21.

If Paul is indeed intending for the sacrificial overtones of Malachi's use of "table of the Lord" to be heard in his own use of the phrase, our question must be: Why? What is accomplished in such an allusion? By way of conclusion, I propose two possible reasons for Paul's allusion to Malachi here:

First, Paul is perhaps reminding his audience of Malachi's disputation with the Levitical priests in preparation for the stark warnings against improper observance of the Lord's Supper that will follow in 11:17-34. Before his harsh critique of their practice during the meal, Paul is reminding the Corinthians of the long history of offering impure sacrifices and the devastating consequences seen therein.

Second, and finally, in specifically using Malachi's "table of the Lord" in this dichotomy (considering that other language was available for him to use if he were simply looking to rhetorically complement "cup of demons/cup of the Lord"), is Paul presenting the celebration of the Lord's Supper as the fulfillment of Malachi's vision of a day when "the nations" present a pure sacrifice to Yahweh? Given the rarity of

τραπέζης κυρίου (*trapeza kyriou*) in the canon, the sacrificial nature of Malachi's own use of the phrase, the saturation of Old Testament allusions in this pericope, and his previous use of (at least quasi-) sacrificial language related to the Eucharist, this author tends to answer, "probably."

Paul does not forbid the Corinthians from "drinking the cup of demons" or "participating in the table of demons" because Christians do not do this sort of thing (i.e. participate in alimentary sacrifice); he forbids it precisely because Christians already participate in true sacrifice when they drink "the cup of the Lord" and participate in "the table of the Lord." It is not possible (οὐ δύνασθε) to perform alimentary sacrifice to God and idols. Perhaps the Eucharist is able to serve as a "key" to Paul's argument here because he believes that what is happening in the pagan temples is an empty parody of what actually happens in the Eucharist.

Conclusion

In his essay "Eucharist, Sacrifice, and Scripture", Michael Vasey comments that "two facts are clear: the New Testament never speaks of the Eucharist as a sacrifice, and the early church very quickly began to do so."⁷ It is his former point that this study wishes to engage.

⁷ Michael Vasey, "Eucharist, Sacrifice, and Scripture" in *Essays on Eucharistic Sacrifice in the Early Church*, eds. Colin Ogilvie Buchanan and Rowan Williams (Bramcote, Notts.: Grove Books, 1984), 7.

Given Paul's use of "table of the Lord," I would submit that Vasey's notion of the New Testament *never* speaking of the Eucharist as sacrifice is difficult to defend. *In what sense* Paul, or the early church for that matter, understood the Eucharist to be a sacrifice or offering is a matter of intense debate. *That* Paul understood the Eucharist to be sacrificial in some sense appears to be clear. When the early church began to "speak of the Eucharist as a sacrifice," they found precedent to do so in Paul's own use of Malachi.