When Jesus and his friends gathered in the upper room for the Last Supper, they participated in a Jewish family, social, even religious ritual which they all understood. It is clear that Jesus did something new within this established format. The accounts we possess concentrate on the unique actions and words of this Supper, streamlining or omitting the ordinary details. There was no point for the first witnesses to describe customary meal practices to other Jews. They reported on the elements which struck them as different.

This makes it difficult for later interpreters to re-create the context for the institution of the Eucharist. What kind of meal was the Last Supper, and at what part or parts of the meal did Jesus perform the actions and utter the words which gave a new meaning to the customary meal? This information is not essential for forming an understanding of the Eucharist, but knowledge of the context may uncover nuances and subtle emphases in what Jesus said and did. When reports differ about the order of events or the phrasing of the sayings, data about the ordinary ritual of the meal may help in establishing the original pattern.

Daily Jewish Meals

The Jews of Jesus’ time were part of a world which revered the formal meal as an important family and social ritual. This was true with varying emphases in the larger Greco-Roman world as well as in Judaism; but with the difference that Jewish meals were never purely secular. The Hebrew Bible speaks of a “covenant of salt” (Num 18:19; 2 Chr 13:50), by which sharers in a meal become bound in solidarity. It was considered a heinous crime to betray one with whom a meal had been shared (Ps 41:10; Jn 13:18).

The family meal was marked by thanksgivings at the beginning and at the end. To begin the meal, the head of the household held a piece of bread and said a prayer: “Blessed are you, O Lord our God, King of the world, who bring forth bread from the earth.” The bread was then broken into pieces and passed around to all the participants. At the end of the meal there was another thanksgiving, called Birkat Ha-Mazon, longer than the blessing at the beginning. It included a thanksgiving for the rich heritage of the land of Israel and the Law, in addition to a thanksgiving for the meal. On special occasions this would be over a cup of wine, but ordinarily wine was not used at daily meals.¹

Festive Meals

In the first century A.D. there was a standard form for the Jewish festive meal, of which there were variations for special occasions. Our information about the format of this meal comes from rabbinic sources later than the New Testament, so it might not reflect precisely the practice in the time of Jesus. But what I will be using in the following reconstruction comes from the Tannaitic literature of the first two centuries A.D. and is thought to be fairly accurate for the New Testament period.² Three summarizing texts are known from this early rabbinic period in witnesses gathered for the Mishnah tractate Berakoth. They differ only with regard to the order of mixing wine and washing hands:

What is the order of the meal? The guests enter the house and sit on benches and on chairs until all have entered. They all enter and the servants give them water for their hands. Each one washes one hand. The servants mix for them the cup; each one says the benediction for himself. The servants bring them the appetizers; each one says the benediction for himself. The guests go up to the dining room and they recline, and the servants give them water for their hands; although they have washed one hand, they now wash both hands. The servants mix for them the cup; although they have said a benediction over the first cup, they say a benediction over the second. The servants bring them the dessert; although they said a benediction over the first one, they say a benediction over the second, and one says the benediction for all of them. He who comes after the third course has no right to enter.3

This description is written to clarify ritual details and, like the accounts of the Last Supper, is not a complete program, but it does illuminate the known framework of Jewish meals. The Jewish festive meal had three courses: hors d’oeuvres, main course, and dessert. For the first course, guests were seated in an anteroom separated from the main dining room. The text reflects a period when the anteroom was on the ground floor, the refectory in an upper chamber. The guests washed one hand, the one used for eating (without utensil). The wine was mixed with water; guests blessed their own food and drink. The hors d’oeuvres could be a variety of things, such as lettuce, radishes, cucumbers, fruit and cheese.

After the appetizers, the guests moved upstairs to the main dining room. Festive meals were usually eaten in a reclining position, though ordinary meals were taken sitting. The reclining posture was an influence from Greco-Roman practice and was strong enough to counterbalance even the clear instruction of the book of Exodus to eat the Passover meal standing (Ex 12:11).4 At the beginning of the main course each person washed both hands, because now they would be needed for the meal and other food served. There was usually “first water” for washing before eating, and “last water” afterward.

Though it is not mentioned in the summary, the main course began with the same signal that initiated a family meal, the breaking of the bread by the host or head of the assembly, with the customary benediction mentioned above. Then as each kind of food appeared for the first time, the leader blessed it in the name of all. He dipped into the bowl first, and then all followed his example. The blessing of the wine is ambiguous in the text quoted above, but the other two rabbinic sources make it clear that the cup at the main meal was blessed by the leader for all, because they had now become a community: “Blessed are you, 0 Lord, our God, eternal king, who create the fruit of the wine.” The cups were refilled during this course as needed, at which point the individual said a private blessing.

At the end of the main course, the servants removed the food and brought in the small final course, a “dessert” consisting of bread and salted items of food.5 The benediction at this time was a lengthy thanksgiving for the meal and what it represented, an expansion of the ordinary grace, given by the leader in the name of all. On important occasions, solemnity was added by having this benediction recited over a third cup of wine, which was then passed around to all participants. This special cup of wine became known as the “cup of blessing,” a term which Paul uses in 1 Corinthians 10:16.6

In summary, the typical Jewish festive meal followed this outline:

First Course (Hors d’oeuvres)
Washing of one hand.
First cup of wine with individual blessing.
Appetizers with individual blessings.

Main Course
Washing of both hands.
Breaking of the bread.

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3T. Berakoth IV. 8. The other texts are Pal. Berakoth l0d and Babyl. Berakoth 43a.
5Whether this was a technical term for the third cup during Paul's time is uncertain; the rabbinic references may be to a later period: Ibid., 197, n. 4.
Second cup of wine with blessing by leader.
Sharing of meal.

**Third Course (Dessert)**
Bread and salted items.
Thanksgiving for meal.
(Occasionally: Third cup of wine, “cup of blessing,” shared by participants.)

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**Passover Meal**

Scholars who consider the Johannine chronology of Holy Week accurate usually understand the Last Supper as a Jewish festive meal of the kind just described. It was not a Passover meal as such but had Passover motifs because of the proximity of the feast; as today, a family Christmas meal may take place during the season rather than on the day itself. But this is not a settled issue, as we have seen. Several interpreters still consider the Last Supper to have been a Passover meal, and other Jewish meal forms are candidates as well.

The annual Passover meal was a unique observance but followed the general pattern of the regular Jewish festive meal. Some of the significant differences were the special foods, the recitation of the Haggadah or story of God’s salvation of the Hebrew people, and the addition of two cups of wine (for a total of four). The rabbis later said that this ritual of four cups came from the four Hebrew words used in Exodus 6:6-7 to describe the delivery of Israel from Egypt (translated in RSV as “bring you out,” “deliver you,” “redeem you,” “brought you out”), and that even a poor man should not receive less than four cups of wine on this great occasion.

The evening meal was usually taken in the late afternoon, but this time the meal began after the sunset which marked the beginning of the first day of Passover. The paschal lambs had been slaughtered earlier in the afternoon. The participants

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2Bahr is mistaken in supposing that there were four formal cups at every festive meal; see L.N. Dembitz, “Seder,” *Jewish Encyclopedia*, Vol II: 144.

blessed the first cup of wine as usual with the customary words. But there was also a special blessing for the sanctification of the day (*kiddush*). The order of these two blessings at the beginning of the Passover meal became a source of controversy between the schools of Rabbis Hillel and Shammai toward the end of the first century.9

The appetizers were blessed by the individual diners as usual. The menu for this night specified lettuce dipped in vinegar and salt water. After the breaking of the bread (signaling the beginning of the main course) came the blessing of the second cup of wine by the leader in the name of all. The food of the main course was unusual: unleavened bread, bitter herbs, *haroseth* (a mixture of nuts, fruit, and wine), and the paschal lamb. After the preparation of the second cup, the ritual called for the son to ask his father the important question: “Why is this night different from all other nights?” The complete form of the interrogation itemizes the unusual features of the Passover Meal:

- For on all other nights we eat leavened or unleavened bread; tonight we eat only unleavened bread.
- Every other night we eat all kinds of green vegetables; tonight, only bitter greens.
- Every other night we eat meat either cooked, roasted, or stewed; tonight, only roasted.
- Every other night we dip once; tonight we dip twice.10

This was the cue for the father to respond with the paschal Haggadah, the story of Israel’s slavery in Egypt and the deliverance by God’s power. The participants were to see themselves as part of this saving action, not simply remembering the events as glories of the past. The narrative summary in Deuteronomy 26:5-8 was used as the starting point of this recitation; it lent itself well to making all feel a part of the deliverance: “A wandering Aramean was my father;...the Egyptians treated us harshly, and afflicted us, and laid upon us hard bondage;...and the Lord brought us out of Egypt with a

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9M. Pesachim 10:2.

10M. Pesachim 10:4.
mighty hand and an outstretched arm." The narrative concluded with the recitation of the first part of the Hallel (Praise) Psalms.11

At the end of this main course a third cup of wine was mixed and a blessing said over it as a grace after meals. Usually dessert was brought in at this point, but this was forbidden at the Passover meal. The paschal lamb was the last food to be eaten during the main course; it was meant to be the "food which satiates," after which no food would be needed. A vestige of the third part of the regular festive meal remained in the mixing and blessing of a fourth cup12 with the recitation of the second part of the Hallel psalms and a blessing "over the song."

Combining its special features with the standard program for a festive meal, the Passover meal may be outlined as follows (unique elements are marked with an asterisk):

First Course
Washing of one hand.
First cup of wine with individual blessing.
*Blessing for the sanctification of the day.
Appetizers with individual blessings.

Main Course
Washing of both hands.
Breaking of the bread.
Second cup of wine with blessing by leader.
*Sharing the meal: unleavened bread, paschal lamb.
*Questioning and Haggadah.
*First part of the Hallel psalms.
Thanksgiving for meal with
*third cup of wine, the "cup of blessing."
*Fourth cup of wine and the second part of the Hallel psalms.
*Blessing over the song.

Kiddush

When making his case for the paschal character of the Last Supper, Jeremias mentioned (and discarded) three other Jewish meal patterns which have been proposed as models for the Last Supper: the Kiddush, the Haburah meal, and the Essene meal. Kiddush ("sanctification") is the prayer by which the holiness of the Sabbath or a festival is proclaimed. When the first stars appear after sunset, the head of the household says the blessing at table over a cup of wine.13 This is the blessing listed above during the first course of the Passover meal.

As Jeremias rightly notes, the Kiddush is not a meal at all, but a blessing at particular meals. The idea (influential around the turn of this century) that the Last Supper should be identified with the Kiddush arose because in later Jewish ritual the Sabbath Kiddush combined the blessing of the wine at the beginning of the meal with the breaking of bread. But at the time of Jesus there was no such combination.14

Haburah

A Haburah was a society of Pharisees united for the purpose of more precise and faithful observance of the Law. These groups, which originated in the second century B. C., met together for meals at which they supported one another in the renewal of their dedication.15 Some exegetes, following Lietzmann, have proposed this Haburah meal as the context for the Last Supper. The most thorough statement of this position in English is by Dom Gregory Dix in The Shape of the Liturgy.16 According to Dix, the members of a Haburah met for their meals weekly, generally on the eve of a Sabbath or feast. Their meal had the form common to the chief meal in

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11 The Hallel Psalms (113-118) sing of the Lord's greatness and his victory for the lowly.
12 It is not certain that there was a fourth cup of wine already in the time of Jesus.
every Jewish household, but with more attention to ritual formalities. Jesus and his disciples would have formed a Haburah, with the difference from other such groups in the strength of their bond to the leader and in Jesus' independent attitude toward the religious authorities.

Jeremias contested the idea of the weekly Haburah meal, for which he claims there is no solid evidence in the sources. He does admit that the groups met together for meals but these were irregular "duty" meals (weddings, funerals, etc.) at which others were also present; these meals did not, therefore, have a special ritual or even "sacramental" meaning for the group.17

The argument about the Haburah meal, for which there is sparse and ambiguous evidence, may have narrowed the focus of the debate too much. Recent discussion has shifted attention to the more general category of Jewish festive meals. Dix foreshadowed this shift when he suggested that critics who disapprove of his argument for the Haburah meal might simply ignore that word and apply what he said to the formal evening meal of the Jewish household.18

Essene Meal

After the discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls at Qumran in the late 1940's, much attention was given to possible connections between the Essene community and Jesus and his followers. The sect's documents show that the Essenes had daily communal meals. Were these meals the inspiration for the early Christian meals, and did they affect in any way the accounts of the Last Supper? Josephus describes the Qumran meal:

They take their seats without any uproar, then the baker serves to each commensal his bread, the cook puts before him a dish with but one foodstuff therein. The priest recites a prayer before the repast, and no one may touch it before the prayer is said. After the repast, he prays anew; all, both at the beginning and at the end return thanks to God, the bestower of the food which gives life.19

The Essenes' Manual of Discipline adds an element which makes the correspondence with the Last Supper more pointed: "When the table shall have been prepared for eating, or the wine for drinking, the priest shall first extend his hand to bless the first portions of bread or of wine" (I QS VI:4-6). This mention of the wine and its blessing and distribution along with the bread is expanded in The Rule for the Future Congregation of Israel:

If they happen to be foregathering for a common meal or to drink wine together, when the common board has been spread or the wine mixed for drinking, no one is to stretch out his hand for the first portion of the bread or wine prior to the priest. It is he who is to pronounce the blessing over the first portion of the bread or wine, and it is he that is first to stretch out his hand to the bread. After that, the anointed (king), a layman, is to stretch out his hand to the bread and after that the members of the community in general are to pronounce the blessing in order of rank. This rule is to obtain at all meals where there are ten or more men present.20

There is at first glance a similarity between the Essene meal and the Lord's Supper because of the mention of the bread and wine, the blessing and distribution by the priest. But any

18Dix, *The Shape*, 50, n. 2. The lack of attention to these daily meals and particularly to the general category of the Jewish festive meal is a serious lack in Jeremias' presentation.
influence either on the conduct of the Last Supper itself or the reports by the evangelists is very doubtful. It becomes even more doubtful when the Qumran meal is understood as a variation on the standard Jewish festive meal. Both the Qumran meal and the Last Supper are influenced by this standard format. A major difference of meaning between the Qumran meal and the Christian Eucharist is that the meals at Qumran anticipated the banquets of the messianic age to come; while the Christian ritual in addition celebrates the fulfillment in the presence of Jesus.

Todah

Recently scholars have begun to look to another form of sacred meal in their study of the early development of the Lord's Supper, a form that has deep roots in the Old Testament and was prominent in the time of Jesus. This is the todah, a thank offering by an individual or group which has experienced deliverance from sickness or other threat. The worshiper offers an animal in sacrifice in the midst of friends, and celebrates a new beginning with a meal offering (the todah) recounting the past troubles and the Lord's deliverance. The ritual is described in Leviticus 7:12-15:

He shall offer with the thank offering unleavened cakes mixed with oil, unleavened wafers spread with oil, and cakes of fine flour well mixed with oil. With the sacrifice of his peace offerings for thanksgiving he shall bring his offering with cakes of leavened bread. And of such he shall offer one cake from each offering, as an offering to the Lord; it shall belong to the priest who throws the blood of the peace offerings. And the flesh of the sacrifice of his peace offerings for thanksgiving shall be eaten on the day of his offering; he shall not leave any of it till morning.

According to a recent study by Cesare Giraudo on the literary structure of the Eucharistic prayer, the todah observance is a celebration of the covenant.\textsuperscript{21} It was especially important during post-exilic times and its influence appears in several psalms from that period which are witnesses to a spiritualizing of the idea of sacrifice. An unusual feature of the todah offering was the use of leavened bread; this normal bread of daily life emphasized the sacrifice of basic human nourishment by the one who had been rescued.\textsuperscript{22}

The verb root of todah is an intensive form of the word yadah ("throw") which means "to give thanks" and contains the idea of "confession" both as praising God's goodness and expressing sorrow for past infidelities. A typical psalm using the todah pattern is the lament (recounting suffering and possibly personal sin) concluding with a prayer of thanksgiving. In Psalm 22, which Jesus prayed on the cross (Mk 15:34), the psalmist relates his miseries but ends on a positive note of praise, probably in the context of a thanksgiving offering in the temple: "In the midst of the congregation I will praise thee " (v. 22). Psalm 69 follows the same pattern of lament and praise, but also expresses the idea that God is better pleased with the thanksgiving sacrifice coming from the heart than from animal sacrifice:

\begin{quote}
I will praise the name of God with a song; \\
I will magnify him with thanksgiving. \\
This will please the Lord more than an ox \\
or a bull with horns and hoofs. (vv. 30-31)
\end{quote}

As Gese comments, in these psalms we do not have so much a critique of animal sacrifice as an expression of the need for the total involvement of the person as the essence of sacrifice. The phrase which sums up this spirit is "sacrifice of praise" (Lev 7:12-19; Jer 17:26; Ps 50:14, 23).

With the todah as pattern, the Lord's Supper is the thank offering of the Risen Lord in which we participate. The saving death of Jesus is remembered, and salvation is proclaimed in the raising of the "cup of salvation" (Ps 116: 13). The old

\textsuperscript{21}See footnote 38 of Chapter 2. An earlier investigation along this line was made by

covenant was established in a blood ceremony and so was the second. To share the meal of the sacrificial animal and the bread-offering renewed one's union with the God of the covenant. To share the bread and cup of the Lord's Supper renews one's share in the new covenant in Christ.

Several years before interest focused on the *todah* in tracing the development of the Eucharist, liturgical scholars began pursuing another channel to similar conclusions about its origins. Much has been written during the past twenty-five years about the relationship of the ritual of the Eucharist to the basic Jewish prayer form, the *berakah* (blessing).23

In the late 1950's, J.P. Audet argued that the Christian Eucharist is based on the Jewish "cultic *berakah,*," and that besides *eulogein* (bless), two other Greek words, *exomologeithai* and *eucharistein*, are equivalent translations of the Hebrew *barak* in late Old Testament literature.24 Later study has concluded that Audet's identifications were too facile. The verb *eucharistein* (give thanks) is a proper Greek rendering for a Hebrew word used in Jewish worship, but the word is not *barak*.

Interest has focused on the *Birkat Ha-Mazon*, the Jewish grace after meals alluded to earlier. This prayer has three parts, a benediction (beginning with a form of *barak*), a thanksgiving (beginning with a form of *yadah*, the root of *todah*) and a supplication. A text of a *Birkat Ha-Mazon* traceable to the early second century A.D. reads as follows:

I. Blessed art Thou, O Lord, our God, King of the Universe, Who feedest the whole world with goodness, with grace, and with mercy. Blessed art Thou, O Lord, Who feedest all. II. We thank Thee, O Lord, our God, that Thou hast caused us to inherit a goodly and pleasant land, the covenant, the Torah, life and food. For all these things we thank Thee and praise Thy name for ever and ever. Blessed art Thou, O Lord, for the land and for the food.

III. Have mercy, O Lord, our God, on Thy people Israel, and on Thy city Jerusalem, and on Thy Temple and Thy dwelling-place and on Zion Thy resting-place, and on the great and holy sanctuary over which Thy name was called, and the kingdom of the dynasty of David mayest Thou restore to its place in our days, and build Jerusalem soon. Blessed are Thou, O Lord, who buildest Jerusalem.25

Talley argues that this prayer form substantiates the originality of Mark/ Matthew tradition's use of *eulogeas* ("blessed") in the bread-word (Mk 14:22; Mt 26:26), and explains the use of *eucharistias* ("gave thanks") in the cup-word (Mk 14:23; Mt 26:27). Over the bread Jesus would have recited a *berakah* (accurately translated by *eulogein*), corresponding to part one of the *Birkat Ha-Mazon*. Over the cup at the conclusion of the meal (after another short *berakah*), he then began the prayer which corresponds to part two (beginning with an intensive form of *yadah* meaning "to give thanks"—accurately rendered by *eucharistein*). This part of the prayer opens up the possibility of remembering the saving acts of God, a focus which was to become central to the Christian Eucharistic Prayer.

The use of *eucharistein* in the Supper accounts is thus rooted directly in the Jewish prayer tradition, but comes from the Hebrew *yadah* rather than from *barak*. Because the *yadah*-prayer was more open to liturgical expansion in terms of *anamnesis* (remembering God's mighty deeds), it better served the needs of the Lord's Supper. According to Talley, the prayer's opening *yadah* verb "proved determinative for Paul and Luke and Justin and the entire tradition, he gave thanks." Thus by the time of the Didache (c. 100), the Christian cultic meal was called *eucharistia*.26

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23 See Talley, "From *Berakah* to *Eucharistia.*"


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27 Ibid., 124. The transition from *eulogein* to *eucharistein* appears also in the multiplication accounts. In the parallels of the First Feeding, the Synoptics all have *eulogeas* (Mk 6:41; Lk 9:16), but John has *eucharistias* (Jn 6:11). For the Second Feeding, Matthew and Mark describe Jesus' invocation over the bread and fish by the verb *eucharisteas* (Mt 15:36; Mk 8:6).
Summary

The sparseness of the accounts of the Last Supper has made it difficult to reconstruct the framework with which to interpret the words and actions of Jesus. Within Judaism the meal was an important social and religious ritual with several variations. Besides the daily family meal, there was a pattern for a more festive meal which also provided a general outline for particular observances, such as the Passover meal. This meal began with the customary breaking of the bread and had two formal cups of wine, but on especially significant occasions provided for a third cup, the "cup of blessing," shared by the participants. Besides this, the Passover meal format called for an interpretative statement by the leader.

In searching for the context of the Last Supper, various Jewish meal rituals have been considered over the years, among them the Kiddush, the Haburah meal and the Essene meal. These forms have largely been abandoned as candidates; today the discussion revolves around the general category of the Jewish festive meal, or to the specific format used for the Passover meal. Recently, in investigating the development of the Lord's Supper, attention has been drawn to the todah meal of thank offering and the todah theme contained in the Jewish benediction after meals.