

A Biblical Explanation of the Mass

Dr. Brant Pitre

1. Introductory Rites

The Procession: Moses Enters the Tabernacle

Now Moses used to take the tent [=the Tabernacle] and pitch it outside the camp, far off from the camp; and he called it the tent of meeting. And every one who sought the LORD would go out to the tent of meeting, which was outside the camp. *Whenever Moses went out to the tent, all the people rose up, and every man stood at his tent door, and looked after Moses, until he had gone into the tent.* When Moses entered the tent, the pillar of cloud would descend and stand at the door of the tent, and the LORD would speak with Moses. And when all the people saw the pillar of cloud standing at the door of the tent, *all the people would rise up and worship, every man at his tent door.* Thus the LORD used to speak to Moses face to face, as a man speaks to his friend. (Exodus 33:7-11)

“Lord, Have Mercy” (Kyrie Eleison): The Blind Men and Jesus

And as they went out of Jericho, a great crowd followed him And behold, two blind men sitting by the roadside, when they heard that Jesus was passing by, cried out, *"Have mercy on us, Son of David!"* The crowd rebuked them, telling them to be silent; but they cried out the more, *"Lord, have mercy on us, Son of David!"* And Jesus stopped and called them, saying, *"What do you want me to do for you?"* They said to him, *"Lord, let our eyes be opened."* And Jesus in pity touched their eyes, and immediately they received their sight and followed him. (Matthew 20:30-31)

“Glory to God in the Highest” (Gloria): The Angelic Hymn of Joy

And Joseph also went up from Galilee, from the city of Nazareth, to Judea, to the city of David, which is called Bethlehem... to be enrolled with Mary, his betrothed, who was with child. And while they were there, the time came for her to be delivered. And she gave birth to her first-born son and wrapped him in swaddling cloths, and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn. And in that region there were shepherds out in the field, keeping watch over their flock by night. And an angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were filled with fear. And the angel said to them, *"Be not afraid; for behold, I bring you good news of a great joy which will come to all the people; for to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord. And this will be a sign for you: you will find a babe wrapped in swaddling cloths and lying in a manger."* *And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host praising God and saying, "Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace among men with whom he is pleased!"* *When the angels went away from them into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, "Let us go over to Bethlehem and see this thing that has happened, which the Lord has made known to us."* And they went with haste, and found Mary and Joseph, and the babe lying in a manger. And when they saw it they made known the saying which had been told them concerning this child; and all who heard it wondered at what the shepherds told them. But Mary kept all these things, pondering them in her heart. *And the shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, as it had been told them.* (Luke 2:4-20)

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2. Liturgy of the Word

The Responsorial Psalm: Sung Daily by the Levites in the Temple

This was the singing which the Levites used to sing in the Temple: On the first day they sang "The earth is the Lord's and all that therein is, the round world and they that dwell therein" (Psalm 24); on the second day they sang "Great is the Lord and highly to be praised in the city of our God, even upon his holy hill" (Psalm 48); on the third day they sang "God standeth in the congregation of God, he is a judge among the gods" (Psalm 82); on the fourth day they sang "O Lord God to whom vengeance belongeth, thou God to whom vengeance belongeth show thyself" (Psalm 94); on the fifth day they sang "Sing we merrily unto God our strength, make a cheerful noise unto the God of Jacob" (Psalm 81); on the sixth day they sang, "The Lord is king, and hath put on glorious apparel" (Psalm 93). On the Sabbath they sang "A Psalm: A Song for the Sabbath Day" (Psalm 92); a Psalm for the time that is to come, for the day that shall be all Sabbath and rest in the everlasting. (Mishnah, Tamid 7:4).¹

Standing for the Gospel Reading: the Israelites Stand for the Torah

And all the people gathered as one man into the square before the Water Gate; and they told Ezra the scribe to bring the book of the law of Moses which the LORD had given to Israel. *And Ezra the priest brought the law before the assembly, both men and women and all who could hear with understanding, on the first day of the seventh month. And he read from it facing the square before the Water Gate from early morning until midday, in the presence of the men and the women and those who could understand; and the ears of all the people were attentive to the book of the law. And Ezra the scribe stood on a wooden pulpit which they had made for the purpose... And Ezra opened the book in the sight of all the people, for he was above all the people; and when he opened it all the people stood. And Ezra blessed the LORD, the great God; and all the people answered, "Amen, Amen," lifting up their hands; and they bowed their heads and worshiped the LORD with their faces to the ground... [Also,] the Levites helped the people to understand the law, while the people remained in their places. And they read from the book, from the law of God, clearly; and they gave the sense, so that the people understood the reading. And Nehemi'ah, who was the governor, and Ezra the priest and scribe, and the Levites who taught the people said to all the people, "This day is holy to the LORD your God; do not mourn or weep." For all the people wept when they heard the words of the law. Then he said to them, "Go your way, eat the fat and drink sweet wine and send portions to him for whom nothing is prepared; for this day is holy to our Lord; and do not be grieved, for the joy of the LORD is your strength." So the Levites stilled all the people, saying, "Be quiet, for this day is holy; do not be grieved." And all the people went their way to eat and drink and to send portions and to make great rejoicing, because they had understood the words that were declared to them. (Nehemiah 8:1-12)*

¹ Herbert Danby, *The Mishnah* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1933), 589.

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3. The Liturgy of the Eucharist

“Holy, Holy, Holy” (Sanctus): Isaiah and St. John in the Heavenly Temple

In the year that King Uzzi'ah died *I saw the Lord sitting upon a throne, high and lifted up; and his train filled the temple. Above him stood the seraphim; each had six wings: with two he covered his face, and with two he covered his feet, and with two he flew. And one called to another and said: "Holy, holy, holy is the LORD of hosts; the whole earth is full of his glory."* And the foundations of the thresholds shook at the voice of him who called, and *the house was filled with smoke.* And I said: "Woe is me! For I am lost; for I am a man of unclean lips, and I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips; for my eyes have seen the King, the LORD of hosts!" Then flew one of the seraphim to me, having in his hand a burning coal which he had taken with tongs from the altar. And he touched my mouth, and said: "Behold, this has touched your lips; your guilt is taken away, and your sin forgiven." And I heard the voice of the Lord saying, "Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?" Then I said, "*Here am I! Send me.*" (Isaiah 6:1-8)

After this I looked, and lo, *in heaven an open door!* And the first voice, which I had heard speaking to me like a trumpet, said, "Come up hither, and I will show you what must take place after this." *At once I was in the Spirit, and lo, a throne stood in heaven, with one seated on the throne!* And he who sat there appeared like jasper and carnelian, and round the throne was a rainbow that looked like an emerald. Round the throne were twenty-four thrones, and seated on the thrones were twenty-four elders, clad in white garments, with golden crowns upon their heads... And round the throne, on each side of the throne, are four living creatures, full of eyes in front and behind: the first living creature like a lion, the second living creature like an ox, the third living creature with the face of a man, and the fourth living creature like a flying eagle. *And the four living creatures, each of them with six wings, are full of eyes all round and within, and day and night they never cease to sing, "Holy, holy, holy, is the Lord God Almighty, who was and is and is to come!* And whenever the living creatures give glory and honor and thanks to him who is seated on the throne, who lives for ever and ever, the twenty-four elders fall down before him who is seated on the throne and worship him who lives for ever and ever; they cast their crowns before the throne, singing, "Worthy art thou, our Lord and God..." (Revelation 4:1-11)

The Epiclesis: Calling Down Fire from Heaven

When Solomon had ended his prayer, fire came down from heaven and consumed the burnt offering and the sacrifices, and the glory of the LORD filled the temple. And the priests could not enter the house of the LORD, because the glory of the LORD filled the LORD's house. *When all the children of Israel saw the fire come down and the glory of the LORD upon the temple, they bowed down with their faces to the earth on the pavement, and worshiped and gave thanks to the LORD, saying, "For he is good for his steadfast love endures for ever."* Then the king and all the people offered sacrifice before the LORD. (2 Chronicles 7:1-4)

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“This is My Body; This is My Blood” (Words of Consecration): The Last Supper

When it was evening, he sat at table with the twelve disciples, and as they were eating, he said, "Truly, I say to you, one of you will betray me..." Now as they were eating, Jesus took bread, and blessed, and broke it, and gave it to the disciples and said, "*Take, eat; this is my body.*" And he took a cup, and when he had given thanks he gave it to them, saying, "*Drink of it, all of you; for this is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins.*" (Matthew 26:20-28)

“Lord, I am Not Worthy to Receive You”: the Faith of the Centurion

As he entered Capernaum, a centurion came forward to him, beseeching him and saying, "Lord, my servant is lying paralyzed at home, in terrible distress." And he said to him, "I will come and heal him." But the centurion answered him, "*Lord, I am not worthy to have you come under my roof; but only say the word, and my servant will be healed.* For I am a man under authority, with soldiers under me; and I say to one, 'Go,' and he goes, and to another, 'Come,' and he comes, and to my slave, 'Do this,' and he does it." When Jesus heard him, he marveled, and said to those who followed him, "Truly, I say to you, not even in Israel have I found such faith. *I tell you, many will come from east and west and sit at table with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob in the kingdom of heaven, while the sons of the kingdom will be thrown into the outer darkness; there men will weep and gnash their teeth.*" And to the centurion Jesus said, "Go; be it done for you as you have believed." *And the servant was healed at that very moment.* (Matthew 8:5-13)

“Blessed is He Who is Called to the Supper of the Lamb”: the Heavenly Feast

After this I heard what seemed to be the loud voice of *a great multitude in heaven*, crying, "*Hallelujah! Salvation and glory and power belong to our God, for his judgments are true and just...* Then I heard what seemed to be the voice of a great multitude, like the sound of many waters and like the sound of mighty thunderpeals, crying, "*Hallelujah! For the Lord our God the Almighty reigns. Let us rejoice and exult and give him the glory, for the marriage of the Lamb has come, and his Bride has made herself ready; it was granted her to be clothed with fine linen, bright and pure*"--for the fine linen is the righteous deeds of the saints. And the angel said to me, "*Write this: Blessed are those who are invited to the marriage supper of the Lamb.*" And he said to me, "These are true words of God." (Revelation 19:1-9)

The Catechism on the Mass

“In the earthly liturgy we share in a foretaste of that heavenly liturgy which is celebrated in the Holy City of Jerusalem toward which we journey as pilgrims, where Christ is sitting at the right hand of God, Minister of the sanctuary and of the true tabernacle. With all the warriors of the heavenly army we sing a hymn of glory to the Lord; venerating the memory of the saints, we hope for some part and fellowship with them; we eagerly await the Savior, our Lord Jesus Christ, until he, our life, shall appear and we too will appear with him in glory” (CCC 1090).