

## **Transubstantiation, a Popish invention? The Bible Jews and the Fathers Vs. Evangelical Doctrines of Eucharist**

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Just out of curiosity, I tried my search engine on googlebooks with the word “transubstantiation.” Number two in my search was a howler: *The History of Popish Transubstantiation* (1840). Again, number four of my search looked intriguing: *Transubstantiation Unscriptural: Proved in Two Letters* (1833). Firstly, 4 of 10 books on my first search-page were positive, while 6 of 10 were books by anti-Roman Western Christian authors. The most interesting was *Ierugia: On Transubstantiation* (1851), which directly cited and correctly referred to the testimony of St. Cyril of Jerusalem (c. AD 383). As we will see, despite the state of scholarship until this last century, there was a sense that the fourth century really marked a scientific advance of the discussion of Eucharistic change. Sometimes unnecessarily grumpy Christian confreres accuse Catholics of being innovators for not only composing a Creed of belief, but by daring to say that ineffable word: “transubstantiation.” This article serves as a remedy or solution to such objections

### 1. THE BIBLE AND TRANSUBSTANTIATION

Let’s start with the Bible, which reads thus: “These things saith the Lord: Hereby shalt thou know that I am the Lord: behold I strike with the rod that is my hand on the water which is in the river, and it shall change it into blood” (Ex 7:17). What’s the big deal? Well, God took one natural kind of thing (viz., an individual instance of a nature) and replaced it with another. I mean, God displaced the substance of water and replaced it immediately and miraculously with blood. Maybe you are not very impressed with God’s miracle; well neither were the Egyptian “charmners” who had a potion to do the same a few passages later (Ex 7:21–22). Still, this doesn’t by itself prove much except that Jews themselves understood and received this teaching as a case of transubstantiation by about 40 AD. Let’s take a look at Philo of Alexandria: “For, too, they trans-elementate (μεταστοιχειούσι) the frogs into the natures of serpents and turn water into bloody flesh [...]” (Philo, *De migrationi Abrahami*, chapter 15, section 83). Let’s notice some key terms: nature #1 has its basic elements replaced by nature #2. This is, essentially, all that transubstantiation claims. There are a succession or a conversion of unrelated and disparate natures (both descriptions will do in the ancient and in the Medieval theories). Well, what about the appearances, characteristics, or accidents? Well, what about them? They are window dressing, not necessary, not key to one substance being instantaneously changed into another; viz., they are pure accidentals in our conversation! If you want to talk about the appearances or whiteness, quantity, and other characteristics of substance #1 perduring, well that’s an added consideration but hardly at the root of the Scholastic, let alone the Philonian, theory of substance-to-substance change. I also underline that Philo combined water-to-blood kinds of change to be in the same category as (Mosaic) staffs-into-snakes kind of change. This is important, since the philosophical tradition of the pagan Eastern Roman Empire and even authors like St. John of Damascus (died c. AD 753) consider snakes and Boucephalous (Alexander the Great’s horse [!]) to be hypostatic beings, or each to be an hypostasis, which will eventually be made interchangeable with person (πρόσωπον) at Christian Ecumenical Councils. I note, however, that Philo’s technical term is not the Exodus 7:17: “transmute (μεταβάλλω),” but the more precise “trans-elementate (μεταστοιχειώ) - that

means to change the elementary nature of a thing into something else. Well, it's not the Greek word "transubstantiate (μετουσιώω)" but not to worry, all in good time.

## 2. THE FATHERS AND BIBLICAL TRANSUBSTANTIATION

Basically, Philo's fellow citizen of Alexandria, Origen had passing interest in the Nile-to-blood change and even passed on an *obiter dictum* here and there that became a tradition received by Eusebius in Palestine and by the aforementioned St. Cyril of Jerusalem. Well this tradition of changing one present substance or existent nature into another was fairly easy to absorb by the likes of Cyril. After all, Christ himself had foreshadowed such changes, saying: "And don't opine to tell yourselves: 'We have Abraham as our Father.' Now, I say to you that God is able to raise out of these stones children who belong to Abraham" (Mat 3:9). The objection, here, might be *raised* (pardon the pun!) that Jesus is foreshadowing his death and resurrection by typology: "to *raise* children from stones." This is actually helpful, nonetheless, for carcasses-being-raised is also a miraculous change of a dead non-personal, non-living substance into a living person. Here, taken literally, Jesus claims that non-personal, non-living rocks can become persons; so, too, bread becomes a divine person. I underline the fact that Jesus makes a claim that impersonal inanimate creatures can be instantaneously changed into personal natures by divine power. This is at the core of the notion of transubstantiation; namely, an instantaneous change of one substance into another whereby the former substance was unable to be naturally disposed toward the second by a successive form and as its potential end term (viz., natural stopping point for a new species) in the known physical order of nature. To produce young children from rocks would be a case of Jesus keying into this tradition of Nile-water turning into blood.

At any rate, when Cyril apparently got hold the Nile-to-blood tradition, he too thought Jesus was able to raise up hypostases from inanimate objects like rocks and water. Cyril writes: "The beginning of signs regarding Moses is blood and water, and the ultimate of all signs Jesus is the same. First, he transmuted (μετέβαλεν) the river of Moses into blood and Jesus ultimately brought out water from his side along with blood" (*Catecheses illuminandorum XII–XVIII*, 13.21). As we saw, the term "transmute" was biblical in Exodus 7:17. Now we are brought to look at Jesus's water miracles as cases parallel to the Nile-to-blood miracles. Take a look at Cyril's second application of the same principle: "Since then he himself has declared and said of the bread, 'This is my body,' who shall dare to doubt any longer? And since he has affirmed and said, 'This is my blood,' who shall ever hesitate, saying, that it is not his blood? He once turned water into wine, in Cana of Galilee, at his own will, and is it incredible that he should have turned wine into blood?" (*Catéchèses mystagogiques*, IV.1-2). Basically, Cyril took the production of water from Jesus's side and the production of wine from water to be cases of substance to substance change and then compared these to the Eucharist, where Jesus took the substance of bread and made it flesh and took an aggregate of wine-natures and transmuted them into blood.

Cyril's contemporary, who was an avid reader of his works, St. Ambrose of Milan (d. c. 399) repeated Cyril's doctrine, but noticed his own catechumens saying: "You assert to me that I am taking the *body* of Christ, but I *see* something else!" (*On the Mysteries*, 9.50). Ambrose solves the objection by claiming that the individual being (*hoc esse*) that nature has formed can be changed by the power of a benediction during the Eucharistic consecration, wherein "nature is transmuted (*natura mutator*)." After all, says he: "Moses, when holding a rod, threw it and it was made (*facta est*) into a serpent; he took it back by the tail and it was reverted back (*revertit naturam*) into the nature of a staff" (ibid., 9.51). Not only can an inanimate object be

instantaneously and miraculously converted into an hypostasis (e.g., Dr. Suesse’s Sis the snake!), but the prototypical Jewish transubstantiation example is cited: “The Egyptians were running to the purely flowing waters, then in the next instant (*subito*) blood began to erupt from the source-waters” (ibid.). Notice that the teaching of Ambrose is a virtual anticipation of the full definition that Scholastics will use: (1.) an individual nature is changed into another, (2.) this happens instantaneously, (3.) the succession of substances cannot be explained except for a divine miracle.

Despite the clarity of these examples and of this teaching, the Antiochene tradition never seemed to warm to a high Christology or Mariology from the fourth through the sixth centuries (for our purposes), let alone a “high” Eucharistic theology. During that time, Nestorius formed a sort of newfangled opposition to this realism and its notion of substantial change. His book that survives is the so-called *Bazaar of Heracleides* (pp. 327–328), which has of course been dubbed to be better renamed Nestorius’s *Bizarre* self-defense! Nestorius attacks not *Cyril of Jerusalem*, but *Cyril of Alexandria*. The Alexandrine saint developed his own conviction of substance-to-substance change (which St. Cyril of Alexandria had called: transmutation, trans-elementation, and transformation) of the Nile-waters and taken it a step further, suggesting in his letters attached to the Council of Ephesus, that every Eucharist was a mini-event of the Incarnation. Nestorius impugned this idea of Cyril’s by doubling down on the fact that just as Jesus’s physical human embryo was never divine (at conception, let’s say), neither is the Eucharist really anything else except the *nature* or *substance* of bread that has some sort of relation to or presence of the divinity in it. Of course, the oddball anti-Roman Catholics of the contemporary blogosphere have essentially resurrected Nestorius (unknowingly one can hope)!

### 3. THE FIRST WITNESS AGAINST PATRISTIC TRANSUBSTANTIATION: NESTORIUS

It was likely in reaction to Nestorian Eucharistic theory that the famous miracle of St. Arsenius took place; namely, there was an ostensibly Nestorianizing monk in the desert who denied the physicality (viz., fleshly nature) of the body and blood in the Eucharist. The monk was challenged by fellow monks to a prayer-athon to resolve the issue, after which the Nestorianizing monk became enlightened as to the truth at Christian liturgy. The story goes thus:

They [monks] went on Sunday to the church, and the three [monks] set themselves up apart on a cushion [...] Their noetic eyes were opened and while the bread was put onto the altar a **child appeared** (ἐφαιίνετο [...] παιδίον) only to these three. When the priest extended [his hands] to break the bread for distribution, behold: an angel of the Lord descended from heaven, having a sword, and sacrificed the child and emptied his blood into the chalice. When the priest broke the bread into small portions, the angel also cut small portions from the child. And as he went to receive from the holy mysteries, only bloody raw flesh-meat was given to him. And he saw, he feared, and cried out saying: “Lord, I believe that the bread is your body and the chalice is your blood.” And the raw flesh-meat in his hand immediately became bread in accordance with the mystery, and he communicated while thanking God. And the old man said: “God knows human nature that it is not able to eat crude, raw flesh-meat, and because of this **he transmuted his body into bread and his blood into wine** (μετεποίησε τὸ σῶμα εἰς ἄρτον, καὶ τὸ αἷμα αὐτοῦ εἰς οἶνον) for those who receive with faith.”

So much for Nestorius’s bread remaining after the consecration theory, right? No, it’s back in action as Nestorius *redivivus* in the blogosphere; apparently important to emphasize that to be means to pick the opposite of whatever Roman Catholics either say or do; no matter the cost.

#### 4. ST LEONTIOS OF JERUSALEM (AD 533-8) AND THE TERM TRANSUBSTANTIATION

If the question was settled for pro-Cyrrillians or the party of St. Cyril, a sort of aberration along different lines popped up in Constantinople around AD 448, wherein the famous Eutyches (excommunicated by the Chalcedonians and, later, even by the Coptic Orthodox) tried to deny the univocal or wholesale interchangeability of Mary's biological flesh with that of Jesus at the Incarnation. Mary was a true mother and single donor and the connection whereby Jesus is consubstantial or of the same flesh as you and I. Well, to combat the heretical Eutyches both orthodox Catholics and Miaphysites had to hone their Jesus-talk. In the midst of this, there began discussions in Jerusalem in the AD 530s about how to think about the mutually unacceptable theory of the Monophysites or Eutychians. They were condemnable for claiming that the Incarnation was an instant whereby either what was biological flesh was transubstantiated into another nature, viz., the very divine nature. On the opposite end, some of them wrote and argued in such a way that they could be accused of the opposite extreme; namely, that the Monophysite Jesus had one nature whereby divine substance or the divine nature was degraded or transubstantiated into the substance of flesh. In either case there was this process: (1.) A first substance belonging to an identifiable nature exists, (2.) An instant occurs where a divine miracle removes or changes the prior substance, (3.) At that moment a different form or form-matter being replaces the original substance miraculously. Let's take a look at St. Leontios's summarization of the Monophysite theory:

“Eutyches says the same thing in that he uses the expression without any change, though the meaning doesn't stay the same, for he uses ‘one incarnate nature of God the Word’ to mean that the nature of the Word was transubstantiated (μετουσιωθέντος) into flesh, and that the Lord possesses nothing consubstantial with us” (Leontios, *Testimonies of the Saints*, p. 52).

This might be the same word and the same basic notion of change that Cyril of Jerusalem had, but some literalist and skeptics want to see in plain sight the obvious connection to Eucharist. After all, reasoning, inference, analogy, and implications are often deemed heretical in anti-intellectualist circles; a sort of Neanderthalic literalism and appeals to Mr. Obvious will only satisfy the anti-abstractionists. So, Leontios does not disappoint, for he calls upon the very image that his illustrious fellow Jerusalemite (Hagiopolite) Cyril had made famous in Greek and Latin in the fourth century:

Every union seen to complete some newer nature shows that nature to possess certain things which neither of the natures united possessed on its own. On its own, neither a soul's nature nor a body's is ever hungry or thirsty [...] or just perceives a sense-object by means of its senses. It's just as in the case of the flute and the fluteplayer: neither makes music on its own. What then was the Lord –who [by their argument] is neither God nor man– shown to possess on his own? “the reasonable answer,” they say, “is walking on the water in a bodily way, and that sort of thing.” One shouldn't consider this to be a property of a compound nature, though, for God has often so arranged it that those of the saints who travel by water are carried bodily on it, though it's agreed there's no compounding by substance into either a nature or an hypostasis in their case! If, then, there's no natural property (φυσικὸν ἰδίωμα) belonging to Christ in particular, neither is there any one particular nature that belongs only to him – not by a mixing together, as in the case of fermented liquors, **not by transubstantiation** (κατὰ μετουσίωσιν), **as in the case of the**

**Egyptians' water that became blood**, nor by transformation, as in the case of copper that turns into verdigris, nor yet by the necessity of a natural union, as in the case of a man's soul that comes into existence in a body. Though a Billy goat has the ability to bleat [...] it's still not the case that, if [a mimicking] man also happens to bleat –being an imitator of things that possess different natures from his– he's plainly showing his nature to be compound! On the contrary, he's revealing operations characteristic of two natures [of rational soul and irrational body] on the basis of that identical one nature of his. Similarly, the capacity to be moved from place to place belonged to human nature, but for the heavier [human] nature of the body not to sink, being carried by the lighter nature of water [...] that belongs to a divine nature. It has the ability, and ability supremely characteristic of it, to make (ποιῶσαι) and to transmute (μεταποιῶσαι) all natures, to cause them to exist (οὐσιῶσαι) and to transubstantiate (μετουσιῶσαι) them, and to deprive them of substance (ἀποουσιῶσαι), even though it springs from the same person. (Leontios, *Aporiae*, ch. 6)

So, there it is, the primary example of substance-to-substance or succession of two substances change is the Eucharistic example of Nile-water being miraculously transformed into (human[?]) blood. So, should we now admit with the saints and Fathers that “transubstantiation” is not only Eucharistic, not only a properly defined substance-to-substance change, but that it is an invention of Leontios around AD 536? No, for Leontios himself attests that he's using a term that has apparently been in existence for some time, for he claims:

Again, was the one nature of the Word of God, now the incarnate nature, ever not incarnate, or was that never the case? If this is unambiguous issue for them, one needs to hear from them: if it belonged to God the Word, and was a nature, and was one even before the [accidental] taking on (ἐπεκτήσατο) of flesh, what did it take on when it became flesh, or what did it lose? If it didn't take anything on –for the term “incarnate” isn't used in the sense of change and transubstantiation (μετουσίωσιν), **as when we say of ice that water's one nature “turned to stone”**– it's clear that it took on flesh, that is, humanity. But what is this humanity, a quality (ποιότης), or some nature? If this nature that's taken on is unquestionably a nature in addition to the one nature of the Word of God that took it on, they're going to have to tell us candidly just how many natures there are! (Leontios, *Aporiae*, ch. 59)

These two mega-quotes from Leontios require a lot of unwrapping. First, Leontios reveals that his term: “transubstantiation” is standard fare for talking about substance-to-substance change in Late-Antique, Greek circles. We can't know how old this word even is. A conservative guess would suggest, since Leontios attests that the word is common and known, that it should have been around during his educational years. This might move it back to the late-fifth century. Next, both of Leontios's discussion are worried about accidents or qualities. Just as with Cyril of Jerusalem and Ambrose of Milan, a substantial change that is instantaneous can be one where the appearances (e.g., staffs-to-serpents) change or can be one where the original qualities remain the same. Leontios – for us twenty-first-century types – uses the unimpressive example of the single existent nature of a man bleating or producing the quality of a Billy goat. If our senses have access only to hearing, then we mistake a real substance (man) for being a different kind of nature. Even Leontios's idea of the Word “taking on flesh” uses the verbal notion of taking on something as an accident in the Aristotelian categories. Basically, Leontios's discussion of transubstantiation includes the following: (1.) substance-to-substance instantaneous changes, (2.) the potential of such a change to look the same or to be accidentally different, (3.) the possibility of natural substances to be changed to supernatural ones, (4.) the natural possibility of natural substances to

instantaneously change (water) into new substances (stone-like ice) (5.) The best example of transubstantiation is the biblical change of Nile-water into blood.

## **Conclusions**

The value of these ancient witnesses were later resurrected by authors like George-Genadius Scholarios (c. 1437) to speak about Eucharistic change in the Eastern Orthodox Church. The reason why is obvious; namely, Leontios is perfectly suited to the doctrine of substantial change in the Eucharist as it began to be discussed in more detail between Eastern Orthodox and Roman Catholics, who were natural allies in the fourteenth century on the subject. Later, Dositheos of Jerusalem at a Pan-Orthodox Council of Jerusalem (c. 1672) made a further claim that not only was “transubstantiation” (which he defined as bread and wine being “substantially (οὐσιῶδως)” converted into the body and blood of Christ) the doctrine of the Eastern Orthodox Church but that it was patristic and had been used in Christology. Well, Dositheos was right and blogospheric and ahistorical claims against the doctrine of transubstantiation are simply wrong. The nature, substance, i.e., breadness and wineness, are no more and only the substance of Jesus’s glorified body underlies the species (per Ambrose) or phenomena of the bread and wine. Anything less is simply not Biblical, not patristic, and not Catholic, it even goes against Pan-Orthodox councils and is the victory of a Nestorian wish over orthodox reality.