

**Steven Nemes. *Eating Christ's Flesh: A Case for Memorialism*. Cascade Books, 2023. 222 pp. \$44.00 (hbk); \$29.00 (pbk).**

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Steven Nemes has been quite public about his recent abandonment of the doctrine of the Trinity. For this reason, many Trinitarians will be disinclined to read this book. On certain online forums, I have invited severe criticism and hostility upon myself for merely mentioning his book. This is regrettable in my opinion. In fact, Nemes often underscores how a memorialist view of the Eucharist is not incompatible with Trinitarianism. He notes, for example, that Cornelius Honius and Ulrich Zwingli were Trinitarians and both affirmed that Christ is present in the Eucharist by virtue of his divine nature, although they also denied that he is present corporeally (13–14). Sadly, in our age of polarization there are many who will be unwilling or incapable of learning from someone whom they regard as an ideological adversary.

Throughout the book Nemes offers many thoughtful, unique, and helpful insights. He organizes his book around what he sees as the three major paradigms of eucharistic theology: memorialist, pneumatic, and real presence. He distinguishes the memorialist from the real presence view in terms of whether the eucharistic bread and wine are taken to be the real body and blood of Christ. He differentiates the memorialist from the pneumatic view in terms of whether the Eucharist is thought to effect a special union with Christ beyond that of mutual love (chap. 1).

Nemes discusses the Bread of Life discourse in John 6, asking what exactly Jesus meant when he spoke about eating his flesh (chap. 2). Several opinions are surveyed, including those of Augustine, Lanfranc, Thomas Aquinas, Martin Luther, John Calvin, and Martin Chemnitz, along with contemporary commentators like Alvin F. Kimel, James M. Arcadi, and Stephen R. Holmes. He concludes that Jesus was not speaking about a real but a figurative kind of eating. One “eats” Christ’s flesh by “taking joy” in his person and work. To argue otherwise inevitably leads to many theological absurdities, baseless metaphysical speculations, or conveniently evasive appeals to “mystery.”

In chapter 3, Nemes addresses how the words of institution are to be best interpreted, arguing that it is more intuitively appealing to read these words in a figurative rather than a literal sense. This is how we normally interpret words when “what is said taken literally” (*quod dicitur ad litteram*) does not match up with “what appears” (*quod videtur*). For example, if a man tells his son, “Your room is a pigsty,” or if he points to a dot on a map and says, “This is Phoenix, Arizona,” no one takes him to be speaking of ontologically identical realities. Moreover, the Old Testament Passover celebration serves as a helpful analogy to the Eucharist since it was also a symbolic ritual that was designed to commemorate an important redemptive event of the past. Despite what is sometimes alleged, it was not a literal “re-presentation” of a past event. To be sure, a believing Jew was, in a sense, able to participate in the original Passover event just as a believing Christian is, in a sense, able to

participate in the passion of Christ. But this is not achieved by somehow bringing those events into the present and experiencing them as if they were presently occurring. Rather, it is done by appropriating to oneself the redemptive benefits that these events were meant to convey.

Chapter 4 deals mainly with eucharistic texts in 1 Corinthians. Against both the real presence and the spiritual presence views, Nemes argues that “sharing in the blood/body of Christ” (10:16–17) does not refer to a sharing in Christ’s divine or human essence. If it did, this would be difficult to distinguish from pantheism. The union with Christ that one experiences when celebrating the Eucharist is better seen as a union of mutual friendship and love:

Those who take part in the meal personally appropriate Jesus to themselves and thereby show their commitment and loyalty to him. Through their simultaneous participation in a ritual declaration of allegiance, believers make manifest the existence of a group of which they are each a part in virtue of their common attitude toward Jesus. That which makes the group to be one is the fact that each person shares the same object of commitment and loyalty as the others, and this is how they are made one body. (84)

According to Nemes, the sacrilege that the Corinthians committed against “the body and blood of Christ” (1 Cor 11:27-30) had nothing to do with their misuse of “magical objects” (86). Rather, their sacrilege lay in the contempt that they were showing for what the symbols of bread and wine represented, namely, the sacrificial death of Christ. Thus, nothing that Paul says to the Corinthians here implies that Christ’s flesh and blood are really present in the Eucharist.

Nemes deals with the early Fathers in chapters 5–6. He argues that although their language is usually ambiguous and hence compatible with either a real presence or a memorialist interpretation, it makes better sense to interpret them from a memorialist perspective. For example, when arguing against the docetists, the early Fathers would often point to the Eucharist as proof that Jesus had a real fleshly body. But if they were basing these arguments on their belief in real presence, no docetist or docetist sympathizer would have found them convincing. Their “argument,” in that case, would then have run something like this:

Jesus’s flesh and blood are really present in the Eucharist; therefore, Jesus must have had a real body and blood.

A docetist who rejected the reality of Jesus’s real body and blood would not have believed that Jesus’s real body and blood are present in the Eucharist. So this “argument” would have begged the question entirely.

A memorialist interpretation would allow the Fathers to have employed a better form of argument, one that appealed to “the best explanation of certain shared data on which all sides agree” (97). Their form of argument, if I understand Nemes correctly, would run something like this:

You docetists celebrate the Eucharist just like we do; in this ritual you recognize (as we do) that the bread and wine are figures or types of Jesus’s body and blood; but this notion is not consistent with your metaphysical outlook; how could such

material items—the “beggarly elements” and productions of an evil Demiurge—be used as symbols of Jesus’s flesh and blood if Jesus never had real flesh or blood and was never even a material being, and had nothing but contempt for the material world?

Another reason to interpret these Fathers as memorialists, according to Nemes, is that they sometimes speak about the Eucharist as providing nourishment to the communicant’s own body and blood. Justin, Tertullian, and Irenaeus all make statements to this effect. If they were claiming that a person’s body and blood are literally nourished by the flesh and blood of Christ, one would have to regard them not simply as proponents of real presence but of “the basest sort of superstitious cannibalism” which “even most thoughtful proponents of real presence deny, namely that Christ’s body and blood are digested, assimilated into the body, and expelled” (127–28). For this reason, it seems preferable to understand these Fathers as recognizing that the bread and wine function in two ways—as food and drink *for our bodies* and as religious symbols that help the Christian call to mind and appropriate to oneself the work of Christ. Their language is best understood metonymically therefore; as Augustine put the matter: “[The sacraments] generally take their names from the mysteries they represent” (*Letter* 98.9).

A point that Nemes makes over and over, in his treatment of both Scripture and the Fathers, is that texts relating to the Eucharist are often ambiguous in themselves. Someone who reads them with a “metaphysical hermeneutic”—that is, with an assumption that words like “body,” “blood,” “participation,” etc. are used with reference to *ontological* realities or experiences—will find support here for his or her belief in real presence; someone who reads them with a “symbolic/phenomenological hermeneutic”—that is, with the assumption that the same words are used with reference to *metaphorical* or *apparent* realities—will find support here for his or her belief in memorialism. It is therefore simplistic and question-begging to appeal to these sorts of texts as meaningful support for one’s position. Exegetical support for either position will have to be sought in other texts where commonly agreed upon hermeneutical principles can be employed.

Chapters 7 and 8 explore the relevance of phenomenological philosophy in eucharistic doctrine. Against the tendency of many philosophers and theologians to define reality in terms of highly abstract notions that are beyond the grasp of our sensory experience, Nemes suggests that we can grasp reality in a more meaningful and Christian way if we define it in terms of our manifest experiences. Proponents of real presence advocate for a “rupture” between the real and the manifest. This is problematic not only because it is unbiblical but also because it leaves one open to the “egoistic problem” and to epistemological skepticism since it prevents one from ever knowing whether any manifest thing is, in fact, real or only a mental projection. Zwingli already recognized the absurdity in this way of thinking. Nemes characterizes him as a kind of proto-phenomenologist.

Nemes thinks that a memorialist view would resonate especially well with Christians who find value in analytic philosophy since it is not grounded in metaphysical speculations about such things as substances existing without accidents, accidents existing without their subjects, the ubiquity of Christ’s natural flesh, and the illocal eating of his flesh. A memorialist can endorse an understanding of the Eucharist that is “parsimonious, intuitive, and does not require speculative metaphysical theses without a clear basis in experience or the biblical *loci classici*” (187).

Whatever tradition one follows with respect to eucharistic doctrine, Nemes’s book would be a thought-provoking and worthwhile read. His argument for how to intuit figurative

language is especially insightful and hermeneutically compelling. And many of his assessments of early church writings are persuasive. He is right, for example, that the *Didache* has nothing to say about real presence. He also makes a convincing case against Ignatius being a proponent of real presence. He is correct, in my estimation, that certain protestations against accusations of cannibalism fit better with a memorialist perspective. And then, of course, we must reckon with Augustine. His remark that “[the sacraments] generally take their names from the mysteries they represent” was meant as a corrective to those who were understanding the Eucharist a bit too literally. He suggests that Christ’s eucharistic words be understood metonymically, as with the custom of identifying the Pasch with “the Lord’s Passion” or of saying on Sundays, “Today the Lord is risen” (*Epist.* 98.9 *ad Boniface*). Commenting on this text, the later Ratramnus would accurately observe that for Augustine “the sacraments are one thing and that the things of which they are sacraments are another” (*De corpore* 36). A half a millennium later, Zwingli and Calvin likewise appealed to Augustine when arguing that Christ’s corporeal presence cannot be accessed here on earth in the eucharistic elements since his body is now located in heaven (cf. Augustine, *Comm. on John* 50.4, 13; 106.2; *Against Faustus* 1.20.11). Regrettably, Nemes’s book focuses only on the Fathers of the first two centuries and therefore has little to say about Augustine.