

# Nine Ways the Eucharist Is Hidden in the Old Testament

by [Stephen Beale](#) on October 29, 2013

**John Henry Newman once compared Scripture to an inexhaustibly rich wilderness**—never failing to reward the faithful explorer with thrilling new discoveries yet always beyond his ability to master it completely:

It cannot, as it were, be mapped, or its contents cataloged; but after all our diligence, to the end of our lives and to the end of the Church, it must be an unexplored and unsubdued land, with heights and valleys, forests and streams, on the right and left of our path and close about us, full of concealed wonders and choice treasures. (*An Essay on the Development of Christian Doctrine*, 71).

The Eucharist is among those ‘concealed wonders and choice treasures’ in the Old Testament. At first, with the obvious exception of the manna heaven that rained down on the Israelites, it seems that there is little in the Old Testament that foreshadows the extraordinary new reality that is the Eucharist. But Newman invites us to venture deep into the hidden valleys and the secret gardens of the Old Testament. When we do, it turns out the Eucharist is everywhere—from the Pentateuch to the prophets.

**1. The forbidden fruit.** The forbidden fruit of the Garden of Eden seems like the last place one would see a foreshadowing of the Eucharist. But medieval commentators saw the Eucharist as the “antidote to the poisonous effects of the apple,” according to Ann Astell, in *Eating Beauty*. Just as eating of the forbidden fruit was a sin of pride, avarice, gluttony, or disobedience, so the Eucharist was seen as inculcating the corresponding opposite virtues: humility, poverty, abstinence, and obedience, according to Astell. The parallel goes even deeper: in eating the forbidden fruit, Adam and Eve brought death into the world while those who partake in the Eucharist are promised eternal life.

**2. Fruit of the Tree of Life.** The connections between Eden and the Eucharist are reinforced in the last book of the Bible. First a reminder: there were actually two types of trees in Eden. The one that gets most of the attention is the tree of knowledge of good and evil—it is the fruit of this tree that Adam and Eve were forbidden to eat. But, when the pair are banished, a second tree is mentioned: “See! The man has become like one of us, knowing what is good and what is bad! Therefore, he must not be allowed to put out his hand to take fruit from the tree of life also, and thus eat of it and live forever” (Genesis 3:22). In Revelation, John indicates that, through Christ, we will be able to eat of the fruit of this second tree. In Revelation 2:7, John writes, “To the victor I will give the right to eat from the tree of life that is in the garden of God.” Ten verses later we read: “To the victor I shall give some of the hidden manna”—a clear reference to the Eucharist. (I’m particularly indebted to Deacon Sabatino Carnazzo for this reading. For more about the Eucharist and the Garden of Eden, [read his article](#) at the Institute of Catholic Culture.)

**3. The blood of Abel.** This is another one that seems an odd type for the Eucharist. But Scripture links the blood of Christ with Abel. In Genesis 4:8, after Cain has slain his brother, God speak to him, “What have you done? Your brother’s blood cries out to me from the ground!” In Hebrews 12:24, St. Paul draws a connection with Christ, calling Jesus “the mediator of a new covenant, and the sprinkled blood that speaks more eloquently than that of Abel.” St. Gregory the Great [elaborates on this](#), “The blood of Jesus calls out more eloquently than Abel’s, for the blood of Abel asked for the death of Cain, the fratricide, while the blood of the Lord has asked for, and obtained, life for his persecutors.” When we receive the Eucharist, St. Gregory adds, we too must cry out and proclaim our faith in Jesus. “The cry of the Lord finds a hiding place in us if our lips fail to speak of this, though our hearts believe in it,” he concludes.

**4. Sacrifice of Melchizedek.** In Genesis 14, after Abraham rescues Lot and his relatives who had been seized in an invasion of Sodom, a most strange figure bursts into the scene: Melchizedek, the king of Salem comes out to greet him. We are told in Genesis that he was a priest of “God Most High”—long before the institutional priesthood of Israel was established. And, ages before the gospel was brought to the Gentiles, Melchizedek had somehow come to know God. Later in Scripture we read that he was “without father, mother, or ancestry, without beginning of days or end of life, thus made to resemble the Son of God” (Hebrews 7:3). Melchizedek is thus portrayed in Scripture as one who foreshadowed Christ, Himself true king and perfect priest. The parallels go even further: in Genesis 14:18 Melchizedek offers a sacrifice of “bread and wine,”—a foreshadowing of the Eucharist, according to [the Haydock Bible Commentary](#).

**5. The *todah*.** As Catholics we know that the Passover was the primary Old Testament sacrifice that is the backdrop for the Eucharist. But another important one was the *todah*, a sacrifice offered in ancient Israel after a person had been saved from a life-threatening situation. Here’s how [one writer](#) describes the sacrifice: “The lamb would be sacrificed in the Temple and the bread for the meal would be consecrated the moment the lamb was sacrificed. The bread and meat, along with wine, would constitute the elements of the sacred *todah* meal, which would be accompanied by prayers and songs of thanksgiving. ...” Does this not immediately call to mind the Eucharist? In Hebrew, *todah* means thanksgiving, which is exactly the literal translation of the Greek word *eucharista*. Indeed, both are sacrifices of thanksgiving for salvation.

**6. Elijah in the desert.** In 1 Kings 19, Elijah flees from Jezebel into the wilderness. After wandering for a day, he sinks down by a lone tree and begs God to let him die. Instead, he is sent an angel who brings a “hearth cake and a jug of water.” But this was not normal food—it was enough to sustain him on a 40-day journey to Mt. Horeb where he had a profound encounter with God in the “whistling of a gentle air.” Catholic interpreters have long seen this super food given to Elijah as a type of the Eucharist. (Sources include: [Dr. Marcellino D’Ambrosio](#) and the [Franciscan Friars of the Immaculate](#).)

**7. Bread of the Presence.** In ancient Israel, the Bread of the Presence was set out on a golden table in the tabernacle as “a memorial of the oblation of the Lord” (Leviticus 24:7). The bread was to be before the presence of God continually, was perfumed with frankincense, and accompanied by constantly burning lampstands. New bread was put out every Sabbath and only those who had recently abstained from sexual relations—normally priests—could eat it. When the table that held the bread was carried out of the tabernacle, it was veiled. In fact, when the

tabernacle was moved, all the vessels in it were carefully wrapped. Those transporting the vessels were to not directly touch these vessels, lest they die (Exodus 25, Leviticus 24, Numbers 4, and 1 Samuel 21). Does not this all sound quite familiar? Indeed, it's harder to imagine a more obvious precedent for the devotion and reverence with which Catholics of today treat the Eucharist.

**8. Isaiah's coal.** Once we arrive in the prophetic books, we encounter some truly extraordinary and provocative types of the Eucharist. First, in Isaiah 7, the prophet envisions God sitting on a throne, flanked by the seraphim angels. "And one of the seraphims flew to me, and in his hand was a live coal, which he had taken with the tongs off the altar. And he touched my mouth, and said: Behold this hath touched thy lips, and thy iniquities shall be taken away, and thy sin shall be cleansed" (Isaiah 7:6-7). In Church liturgies, particularly in the Orthodox tradition, the fiery coal prefigures the Eucharist. The Liturgy of St. James describes Communion as "receiving the fiery coal" and, in the Liturgy of St. John Chrysostom, the priest says, "Lo, this has touched your lips and has taken away your iniquity," according to [one Orthodox writer](#). The parallels couldn't be clearer: like the fiery coal, the Eucharist comes to us from the altar and cleanses us of sins (specifically venial sins, but it also fortifies us against mortal ones).

**9. Ezekiel's scroll.** Another extraordinary foreshadowing of the Eucharist is in Ezekiel 2. Like Isaiah, the prophet has a vision of God and the Spirit of the Lord enters him. Then, in verse 8, he hears these words, "open thy mouth, and eat what I give thee." "And I looked, and behold, a hand was sent to me, wherein was a book rolled up: and he spread it before me, and it was written within and without: and there were written in it lamentations, and canticles, and woe." In the next chapter he describes his eating of this book: "And I did eat it: and it was sweet as honey in my mouth" (verse 3). Catholic interpreters over the centuries have seen this sweet scroll that was eaten as another sign of the Eucharist (the most recent example is Scott Hahn's new book, [\*Consuming the Word\*](#)). The episode illustrates well what we experience in the two liturgies of the Mass. In the first, we consume the Word, in the readings of Scripture and the homily that is preached on them. Then, in the second liturgy, we consume the Eucharist, which, as the Body of Christ, is the Word made flesh - <http://catholicexchange.com/nine-ways-the-eucharist-is-hidden-in-the-old-testament/>