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Introduction

The thesis of this book is that the Lord's Supper of the first-century CE was an anti-imperial praxis. Whenever early Christians met for a communal meal they saw themselves as participating in subversive non-violent acts against the Roman Empire.

1.1 Statement of the Problem

What actually took place when a first-century church gathered to eat the Lord's Supper? Did its members, like their twenty-first century counterparts, take a bite of bread and a sip of wine in memory of their Lord? In recent times scholars have taken a fresh look at how and why the early church met around the Lord's Table. Thus far they have been successful at reconstructing the outward form of the Lord's Supper, but have not ventured into the political nature of the meal. Since all meals in the Roman Empire were political as well as social functions, what political function did the Lord's Supper serve? This book seeks to offer an answer.

1.2 Need for the Study

While most research on the Lord's Supper prior to the twentieth century had focused on the meal as a sacrament, with particular attention given to the nature and meaning of the elements, a shift in scholarship began to take place near the quarter-century mark when Hans Lietzmann advanced the theory that the nascent church met for a combined non-sacramental

agapé feast and a symbolic sacramental Eucharist.[1] His position was embraced widely by scholars including D. Dix,[2] J. Jeremias,[3] P. Bradshaw,[4] and I. H. Marshall,[5] among others.

Nearly a half-century later V. Eller[6] proposed that the Lord's Supper or Eucharist was in its entirety a full evening meal without any distinction between sacramental and non-sacramental as Lietzmann suggested. R. Banks[7] and E. LaVerdiere[8] were two scholars who embraced this new understanding and continued to write about it.

Only within the past two decades, M. Klinghardt,[9] D. Smith,[10] and H. Taussig[11] have built a convincing case that the Lord's Supper was not only a full meal, but followed the structure of a two-course Roman banquet with a *deipnon* and *symposium*. They argued that from all outward appearance, there was little, if any, difference between a banquet eaten by Christians and their non-Christian counterparts.

During this same time frame, R. Horsley,[12] W. Carter,[13] and others began examining Jesus and his movement in the context of the Roman Empire. They showed the difficulty with which the early *ekklesiai* functioned within a domination system that claimed it had been chosen by the gods to rule the world, and used its power to guarantee its success. Proclaiming an alternative vision for the world, the churches stood opposed to Roman ideology and imperial rule. Building upon the work of these researchers and their predecessors, the author shows that when examined in the context of Roman imperialism an even sharper picture

1. Lietzmann, *Mass and the Lord's Supper*. Lietzmann's view was widely accepted among scholars until Smith's and Klinghardt's groundbreaking research. Since then only a small minority hold to separation of *agapé* and Eucharist, the most notable being German NT scholar Bernd Kollmann, *Ursprung und Gestalten der frühchristlichen Mahlfeier*.
2. Dix, *Shape of the Liturgy.*
3. Jeremias, *Eucharistic Words of Jesus*.
4. Bradshaw, *Eucharistic Origins*.
5. Marshall, *Last Supper and Lord's Supper*.
6. Eller, *In Place of Sacraments*.
7. Banks, *Paul's Idea of Community*.
8. LaVerdiere, *Dining in the Kingdom of God*.
9. Klinghardt, *Gemeinschaftsmahl und Mahlgemeinschaft*.
10. Smith, *From Symposium to Eucharist*.
11. Smith and Taussig, *Many Tables*.
12. Horsley, *Jesus and Empire* and Horsley, *Jesus in Context*.
13. Carter, *Roman Empire and the New Testament* and Carter, *Matthew and Empire*.

of the Christian meal emerges. While it followed the outward form of a Roman banquet, it functioned as an anti-imperial activity.

In light of James Scott's landmark research on how people living under oppressive regimes use hidden transcripts—behind-the-scenes actions to express their opposition and voice their hope for change[14]—this monograph postulates that the Lord's Supper might rightly be classified as a hidden transcript. This means that when first-century believers, especially the marginalized and disenfranchised, gathered together to eat a communal meal, they sought ways to express their resistance toward Rome, particularly during the symposium portion of the meal.

After searching databases, combing through the critical commentaries, querying leading academics in the field of Greco-Roman meals, and finding no scholarly work published on the subject, the author saw a need for such a project that would fill the existing void.[15]

1.3 The Importance of the Study

In conducting his research, the writer corresponded with many leading experts on Greco-Roman meals, including Andrew McGowan, Reta Finger, Art Dewey, Dennis Smith, Carolyn Osiek, and David Balch to name a few. Many offered sound advice and encouragement. A few were willing to brainstorm through email, but none was aware of any scholarly work dealing with the Lord's Supper as an anti-imperial activity; hence, the importance of this study.

This is also the first examination of the Lord's Supper through Scott's lens of "hidden transcripts," which adds credence to the thesis that the Lord's Supper is an anti-imperial practice.

When the Lord's Supper is placed within the historical context of a Jesus movement that nonviolently opposed the tyrannical practices of the empire, it becomes clear that it was an act of resistance and took on political significance. Believers not only gathered to eat and satisfy their appetites, they engaged in various kinds of anti-imperial symposium activities that included prophetic utterances, singing protest songs, and lifting a toast to a man whom Rome deemed worthy of a criminal's death.

14. Scott, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance*.

15. Three years after this research was underway, Taussig included a twenty-eight-page chapter on the Christian meal as an act of resistance to Roman imperial power (*In the Beginning,* 115–43). He devotes five of those pages to an argument that Christian meals were anti-imperial because believers made "libations" to Christ instead of to Caesar. This writer will challenge that assertion in chapter 2.

By failing to recognize the anti-imperial nature of first-century Christian meals, the modern church has eviscerated the Lord's Supper of its political significance. As a result, the Lord's Supper rarely serves the same function as it did at the time of Peter and Paul but has devolved into a symbolic act that offers spiritual solace to the partakers but does little to contest the policies of modern-day tyrants who rule their empires for the benefit of the few and to the detriment of the oppressed masses.

1.4 Objectives of the Study

The first objective of this study is to advance the scholarly understanding of Christian meals. Just as this writer's research was built on the work of Banks, Smith, Taussig and others, so he hopes his research will serve the same purpose for the next generation of scholars.

The second objective is to recreate in the historical imagination of the readers a more accurate and clearer picture of the political nature of the Lord's Supper than previously existed.

The third objective is to help exegetes, be they scholars or studious pastors, to look afresh at key passages which deal with Christian meals in order to help them more precisely interpret these texts.

1.5 Limitations of the Study

The writer limits his study of Christian meals mainly to the writings of Luke and Paul but occasionally refers to other gospels and letters for support and/or clarification.[16]

This study does not seek to reconcile or harmonize contradictory accounts that appear in the Synoptics, believing that each author tells his own version of the Jesus story, choosing to include and exclude specific events and details. Even when different gospel writers tell the same story, they often nuance it for their own purposes, remember it differently, and make it applicable to their particular audiences. Therefore, this is not an attempt to reconstruct the life of the historical Jesus.

This research is limited to the first-century CE. It examines documents and events from other periods only when they illuminate our understanding of the Lord's Supper as it was practiced in the first century.

16. An explanation as to why the researcher limited his discussion of meals in the Gospels primarily to the Gospel of Luke is found in chapter 5.

This research additionally limits its treatment of the Roman domination system to that information which is pertinent to the topic. It is not a full-fledged history of the Roman Empire, the Caesars, Roman military, etc.

This research is also limited to comprehending the anti-imperial nature of Christian meals and does not deal with the nature and substance of the elements, the order of the institutional words, or other sundry controversies surrounding the Lord's Supper.

1.6 Outline of the Study

Chapter 2 shows that Christian communal meals followed the same format as the Greco-Roman banquet, which was an important social institution in the first-century CE and used by Rome to enforce patronage and stratification. Christians, however, used their meals to promote the kingdom of God and resist the empire.

Chapter 3 identifies the Passover as a subversive, anti-imperial meal that the Jews ate as they anticipated divine liberation from Pharaoh's tyrannical rule. The author will trace the Passover—as far as can be discerned from biblical and other texts—from its inception to the first-century CE when Jews once more found themselves under foreign rule and sought encouragement in the meal, looking again for God's deliverance.

Chapter 4 critically examines the Roman domination system, which sought to control the lives of the masses through political, social, and military means, and provided the context for the anti-imperial nature of the Lord's Supper. Special attention will be given to the political and economic conditions of the time.

Chapter 5 analyzes the meal practices of Jesus according to the Gospel of Luke, showing how the Lukan Jesus used the symposium to speak against Roman and Jewish practices of stratification and to promote a kingdom ethic that included egalitarian table fellowship—a reflection of the eschatological banquet when people from all walks of life will sit at the table with Abraham in the kingdom. Jesus' table talks and examples served to inform the church how it was to eat its communal meals.

Chapter 6 examines the Lukan version of the Last Supper where Jesus infuses the Passover feast with eschatological meaning. It further explores the relationship between the Last Supper and the Lord's Supper.

Chapter 7 shows how the early church—living in the midst of Roman domination and drawing upon lessons gleaned from Passover, Jesus'

mealtime teachings, and the Last Supper—practiced a pro-kingdom of God, anti-imperial meal ethic. It will focus on 1 Cor 11:23–26, women and slaves reclining at the table, the place of prayer and letter reading at the meal, and how the believers sang subversive songs and hymns to promote their beliefs and oppose the empire.

Chapter 8 takes an in-depth look at the gift of prophecy as an example of a symposium mealtime activity. Particular attention is given to the anti-imperial content of Christian prophecy, which exalted Jesus as Lord, offered hope to the oppressed, and spoke of judgment upon all powers that opposed God's kingdom.

Chapter 9 summarizes the study, drawing conclusions and making suggestions for further scholarly research on the Lord's Supper as an anti-imperial praxis.