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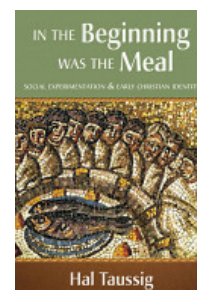
Book Review

In the Beginning Was the Meal: Social Experimentation and Early Christian Identity

Hal Taussig

Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2009.

Ever since I read Hal Taussig's intriguing work on the Lord's Prayer, I have followed his engaging scholarship with eager expectation. Add to this the growing awareness among scholars of the "Christian" Greek Scriptures of the centrality of food and the meal in gathering and building socio-faith communities, and one can see why his recent *In the Beginning Was the Meal* would be a find indeed. And, as expected, this book did not disappoint.



Building upon the awareness that Hellenistic "festive meals" were ubiquitous, Taussig underscores that they could and sometimes did have a radically egalitarian character as well. He grasps the reader's interest immediately by painting a picture of some hypothetical meals based solidly on his scholarship, interspersing these reconstructions with some summary commentary to highlight his key points. In the midst of this Taussig stresses clearly that the book's focus is the exploration of "the intersection of these festive meals with the beginnings of what came eventually to be called Christianity." (5) Then he proceeds to deliver on that promise.

After a brief summary of scholarship's challenge to Christendom's meta-narrative, Taussig jumps into his focus on the festive meal as a core identity marker for the incipient Jesus Movement. Moving from the general to the particular, the author describes in detail the full range, from purpose to behaviour, of the Hellenistic meal and how the Christ-believers fit into this pattern. Using the best of companion scholars Taussig employs ritual studies of meals to enhance his portrayal. I was taken especially with Taussig's analysis of such vital issues, both then and now, as social inclusion, resistance to empire, gender inclusion, and ethnic stress as they became manifest at the shared table.

In my judgment this study of Taussig stands as a giant among his already excellent works. His blend of methodological concerns, his scholarly thoroughness and his literary skill breathe life into a core topic too long ignored. Thank you Hal Taussig, scholar and pastor, for a profound and moving work of engaged scholarship.

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