

Jin Hwan Lee. *The Lord's Supper in Corinth in the Context of Greco-Roman Private Associations*. Lanham, MD: Lexington Books/Fortress Academic, 2018. 239 pages. \$110.

How particular readings of particular moments of scripture become ubiquitous is quite a mystery. In *The Lord's Supper in Corinth in the Context of Greco-Roman Private Associations*, Jin Hwan Lee gives a considerable gift to preachers by calling into question how particular readers read Paul's description of the Lord's Supper in 1 Corinthians 11. The story, as it might be told by a pastor hoping to give his congregants some historical context, goes like this: the food for the Lord's Supper banquet was provided by the wealthier members of the congregation, but, due to their work obligations, the poorer members of the church arrived late to this banquet. The wealthy members, however, had already eaten and drunk their fill, leaving themselves inebriated and their poorer brothers and sisters still hungry. Paul chastises them for this behavior, and encourages them to show deference to one another regardless of socioeconomic status.

Lee's book provides a helpful critique of this retelling and, while the insights gained from his sociohistorical analysis will mostly be of interest to New Testament scholars, there is quite a bit of material that will be of great interest to ministers. To wit, Lee's first chapter is an investigation of banquet practices in the ancient world and their connection to dining practices in the New Testament. Lee contends that the Last Supper, both its original institution and its consequent ritual form in Corinth, would have shared several features common to Greco-Roman dining practices, particularly the structure of a shared meal (Greek: *deipnon*) followed by a sharing of wine (*sumposion*) (18). Chapter 2 provides the reader a deeper analysis of a particularly relevant type of Greco-Roman banquet—the banquets of private associations. While the Greco-Roman world was rife with a variety of “official associations,” associations reserved for the elite and promoted by the state, Lee's interest is in private associations as the eventual home for the mostly non-elite social group of the early Church. Lee is clear to note that he is not claiming that the early Church was itself a private association (55), only that the controversy at Corinth might be illumined by examining the banqueting practices of the most similar sort of group, whose norms and mores the Christ group at Corinth were likely to imitate.

A critical result of Lee's study of private associations is the lack of “patronage banquets,” i.e. banquets in which the wealthier members of an association would provide the food for the non-elite members of the group. Even the funds for the food came from a common fund (70), casting a great deal of doubt on the popular reading cited above. Key also in his analysis are two points: first, while it was common practice to levy fines on association members for misconduct, it is striking that there is little evidence that *late arrival* to a banquet was ever fined. Second, private associations practiced a variety of methods for distributing the food at common meals, but very little evidence exists to suggest that the allotment of food disproportionately favored the elite, nor is there evidence to suggest that the distribution was expected to be entirely equal. In the third chapter, Lee applies these historical datapoints to the particular conflict at Corinth. He advances a non-temporal reading of the schism, arguing that the conflict had nothing to do with the arrival time of the members of the community but rather with the *seating arrangements* at the meal. Given the paucity of evidence that late arrival was a banqueting faux pas and that disproportionate food distribution was never much of a problem within private associations, Lee argues that the schism in the Corinthian congregation, therefore, had to be over poorer members, newly elected to a form of leadership in the Church, taking up seats of power that would, in a typical association banquet, go to members of wealth and power. Thus, the wealthier members

“practiced the Lord’s Supper as if it was their own private banquet,” taking the seats to which they were accustomed, making group solidarity all but impossible (143).

Readers will find this book a helpful guide to recent trends in New Testament scholarship on Paul’s account of the Lord’s Supper and a startling reinterpretation of a passage vital for sacramental theology.

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