CHAPTER THREE

IMPERIAL IDEOLOGY AND THE ORIGINS OF CHURCH ORDER


In this chapter and the next two, we shall deal with the developments in the life of the early Church which mirrored the Imperial Cult as it developed in the social and political context of pagan Rome. We shall deal in this chapter exclusively with Luke-Acts, for which we accept a date after Nero, but before Domitian, of about 85 A.D.1 We shall, in Chapter 4, consider the community of Clement at Rome and their relations with the Imperial Cult both intellectually and practically, in comparison with the circle of in Asia Minor in Domitian’s time, to which Luke-Acts was addressed. In Clement’s Corinthians the demands for order are self-consciously constructed after Roman models and express the very concerns with natural and social chaos that the Stoic metaphysic of the Imperial Cult had sought to address. We shall then (Chapter 5) consider what we will argue to be the Domitianic text of the Apocalypse, and its quite different approach to the Imperial Cult. The Apocalypse mirrors Domitian’s changes in the Imperial Cult, and, in a manner different from Luke-Acts, formulates a distinctive contra culture that reverses the images and values that define the concept of power in the host culture.

In Chapter 6 we shall find reflected in Ignatius of Antioch, particularly in his Romans and Ephesians, the martyrlogical aspect of a contra culture. Ignatius described the ministerial representatives who joined him from various Churches as a cultic procession. The procession has the features of a Christian Eucharist, as its members lead Ignatius across Asia Minor to the arena at Rome. Thus we shall be able to complete our argument that the Order of the Imperial Cult finds a form and an iconography reflected in the Order of the

Christian Cult as it emerges in the early second century. That reflection was destined to continue and to develop into a new form in the confrontation between Cyprian and his fellow-bishops, and the Roman Empire of Decius Trajan.

But let us turn first of all in this chapter to the reformulation of early Christian eschatology in *Luke-Acts*. We shall argue that the purpose of that reformulation was to enable the author to define the Order and worship of the Christian cultus analogously with that of the Imperial.

We shall endeavour to answer two critical questions:

1. Why did Luke reshape Christian eschatology so that he could defer the expectation of the day of judgement to an indefinite future? (*Lk. 21,24d; Acts 1,7*)

2. Why, furthermore, did Luke, clearly a deuteropaulinist in the generation after the death of his community’s founding apostle, stress that Christianity was the fulfillment of Judaism in a way that was even more sympathetic to the latter than even Paul’s final position (in contrast to *Galatians*) in *Romans* 9–12?

The traditional answer to 2. has been that Luke’s two-volume work was intended to be an ecumenical document, reconciling differences between Paul’s churches and the original Jerusalem community. We could respond by pointing out that Paul never really attacked Judaism in the way this view presupposes, but in fact stressed its continuity in terms of fulfilment. But then we must ask why Luke should stress that continuity when writing for a gentile audience. The traditional answer has always been suspect in terms of historical method since it implies that late first century communities developed according to the logic of his Christian community’s own internal discourse that was only minimally related historically and culturally to the developing wider, pagan culture.² *Luke* is supposed to be solely concerned with healing internal divisions within the community in order to make the community stronger and more self-secure.

More recent literature has, moreover, acknowledged the problem

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