Miracle and Mission is a revision of James Kelhoffer’s 1998 doctoral dissertation, written under Adela Yarbro Collins at the University of Chicago. Kelhoffer offers a comprehensive analysis of Mark 16:9–20, verses that are widely regarded as a secondary addition to the Gospel of Mark. Kelhoffer does not revisit the textual question of the authenticity of these verses, nor is he concerned with the question whether Mark intended 16:8 as the end of his work. He assumes that 16:8 is the earliest recoverable ending. Nevertheless, textual criticism lurks in the background of this study as a sort of original cause, for as Kelhoffer notes, an unintended consequence of the verdict that these verses are “inauthentic” was the implicit corollary that they are “insignificant.” On the contrary, Kelhoffer aims to recover the “Long Ending” (LE) as an important witness to second-century Christianity.

Chapter 1 is a model history of scholarship. Here the author’s thoroughness is evident. There is no shortcutting, shallow treatment, or dodging of difficult foreign-language material. The work is carefully researched and copiously documented, definitely not reading for the fainthearted. Two centuries of research are handily divided into phases, summarized, and critiqued.
Chapter 2 examines the literary dependence of the LE on canonical and noncanonical Christian literature. Joseph Hug, a writer of a major work on the LE, has argued that the LE was independent of the canonical Gospels. Kelhoffer refutes Hug point by point, showing the LE’s clear indebtedness to Scripture and proving, one might say, that Hug can no longer be embraced. The chapter is persuasive but also tedious. Every phrase of the LE is analyzed, and most are traced to potential sources in the canonical Gospels. A few of these connections are tenuous (e.g., a single word as an “echo” from Matthew or Luke), and at times the author of the LE seems to be denied the possibility of an original thought, but in the main Kelhoffer is right: the LE is largely a pastiche of motifs from appearance stories and other Gospel narratives (see the helpful summary on pp. 121–22).

Chapter 3 struck me as somewhat redundant. The LE’s dependence on traditional materials is reprised in what seems like a rearrangement of the parallels found in chapter 2, now according to the order of the New Testament canon rather than according to the verses in the LE.

In chapter 4 the unity of the LE is defended despite its rapid movement and shifts of subject. Kelhoffer argues that the LE should not be considered a series of appearance stories but rather a series of appearance reports. With the exception of the last appearance, virtually no details are given. This chapter also convincingly establishes the date of the LE as 110–140 C.E. The redaction theories of Paul Mirecki, another major writer on the LE, are shown to be tenuous, in part by Kelhoffer’s broader sampling of comparative miracle stories, whose diversity of forms makes unnecessary Mirecki’s hypotheses. Finally, Kelhoffer observes that as a whole Matthew 28:9–20 is the closest literary parallel to the somewhat disparate materials of the LE.

The remainder of the book, chapters 5–7, examines three specific motifs in the LE: miracles as the authentication of Christian preaching, the handling of snakes, and the drinking of poison with impunity. These chapters use a history of religions approach in that they gather parallels from a broad range of classical, Hellenistic, Jewish, and early Christian sources. Again, Kelhoffer’s thoroughness is evident. No quick, easy computer searches here. Kelhoffer has read broadly and errs on the side of inclusiveness. One indicator of this is his listing not only of literary motifs but also nonliterary phenomena such as vase paintings and amulets. As Kelhoffer himself acknowledges, “The sheer number of references may seem tedious at times” (341). Nevertheless, the collections in chapters 6 and 7 in particular are genuinely new contributions to the history of scholarship. Kelhoffer’s lists of parallels are themselves unparalleled, but because of their breadth, the connection of the parallels to the LE is sometimes tenuous and of modest relevance to interpretation. For example, Kelhoffer admits there are no grounds “for a literary connection between the Bacchae [of Euripides] and Mark 16:18a” (356),
this after four pages of discussion of the literary data, followed by five and a half pages treating pictographic evidence. Similarly, he concludes that “it is not possible … to ascertain a direct line of influence from any one of the sources … to the exclusion of numerous others” (409, Kelhoffer’s emphasis). Kelhoffer is rightly cautious to assume no more than the general familiarity of the LE’s author with the Hellenistic literary and religious milieu, but given such a modest conclusion, the reader might wonder why such an extensive treatment was necessary. Perhaps this criticism is tantamount to observing that the work is a dissertation. A reviewer once commented about my own dissertation (which contained major sections of history of religions parallels) that the nature of such research is to bring the force of a sledgehammer to bear on cracking a walnut.

Of an eight-page epilogue, six and a half pages are devoted to a summary of the book. While there is certainly some benefit in a succinct précis after nearly five hundred pages of research, one might have hoped for more than a page and a half of integrative and inferential conclusions. In particular, if the LE was composed in order to bring Mark to a suitable close, the conclusion might have addressed the question: Did the author of the LE succeed? Does the LE supply what the Gospel promises? Does it provide narrative closure? How did the LE make Mark more acceptable or more “orthodox”?

Finally, two minor quibbles: First, Kelhoffer argues that the LE was not a fragment of another document but was composed specifically for the purpose of augmenting the Second Gospel. I remain unconvinced. Given the awkward connection to 16:8 and the unneeded identification of Mary Magdalene in verse 9, the fragment theory strikes me as more likely. If 16:9–20 was composed to supplement Mark, its author was literarily challenged (see Bruce M. Metzger, A Textual Commentary on the Greek New Testament [2d ed.; 1994], 104–5). Second, I found the bibliography confusing, divided as it is into eight parts. While this may facilitate locating works under a particular rubric, it complicates most bibliographical searches.

In sum, Miracle and Mission is must reading for persons concerned with the ending(s) of Mark. Without a doubt, it is the definitive study on the topic. The book is also to be recommended highly to persons with special interests in second-century Christianity. Because of its bulk and density, the work will be appreciated chiefly by specialists, but for those readers it provides a treasure chest of thematic parallels and intertextual insights.