Book Reviews

James A. Kelhoffer
Miracle and Mission: The Authentication of Missionaries
and Their Message in the Longer Ending of Mark
Wissenschaftliche Untersuchungen zum Neuen Testament, Reihe 2/112
Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr (Paul Siebeck), 2000
Pp. xix + 530. $99.50.

This published dissertation comes from a promising young scholar of New Testament (= NT) and early patristic literature whose interests and subsequent publications are oriented toward the development of second-century Gospel traditions. Directed by Adela Yarbro Collins and defended at the University of Chicago (1998), the study provides an examination of the origins and nature of the longer ending of the Gospel of Mark (= LE). Unlike much doctoral work, this study is readable and clear. At the same time, the subject matter and its presentation are likely to be beyond the abilities of most undergraduates and non-specialists in the field.

The manuscript contains seven chapters and an epilogue with key arguments in chapters 2–5. Chapter 1 summarizes representative research on the question of the LE from 1801–1993 (5–46). Kelhoffer’s primary goal is stated here: to explore and explain the origins of Mark 16.9–20 and the author’s distinctive views about the Christian mission (46).

In chapter 2, Kelhoffer argues against previous efforts to attribute the LE to a hypothetical tradition, and he endorses the view that the LE uses ("imitates") the New Testament (= NT) as its source. This stance challenges Helmut Koester’s preference for oral traditions, a position which is virtually a "school of thought" for most students. After comparing numerous literary parallels, Kelhoffer also rejects Joseph Hug’s belief that a non-canonical source lies behind the LE (65). Instead, he asserts that, "the LE’s author composed this passage to improve Mark’s ending in conscious imitation of the NT Gospels" (65).

Chapter 3 defines the type of tradition that the author of the LE used. Kelhoffer rejects Koester’s view that the burden of proof is on scholars to show that the ancients drew from written texts instead of oral traditions, and he believes that Hug’s thesis concerning the use of independent motifs is speculative and unconvincing. Instead, Kelhoffer proposes that the author of the LE finished the earlier work of Mark through an imaginative effort (137). The author possibly knew a version of John that included chapter 21, but he certainly was
familiar with the Synoptic Gospels and perhaps also with Acts. Thus, he probably did not write before 120 C.E. Comparable “forgeries” from Christian antiquity (Epistle to the Laodiceans, 5 Ezra, 3 Corinthians, etc.) are reviewed to show that this trend in LE was not unique. Indeed, knowledge of such a wide array of texts runs counter to Koester's view that the Gospels did not circulate together as scripture before 200 C.E.

The remainder of the book seeks a context for the composition of the LE. Chapter 4 insists “that the LE is a novel, unified composition written for the purpose of completing the narrative left off at Mark 16:8” (158) and is not borrowed from a canonical text. A probable date of ca. 120–150 C.E. is offered with the observations that Justin Martyr (First Apology 1.45) is the earliest external attestation to the text and that Justin’s knowledge of the Acts of Pilate (which reflects this segment of Mark) may help to date the fragment no later than ca. 140 C.E. Kelhoffer reviews various literary forms that appear within the LE, and he provides a long discourse on Mark 16:17–18 and the presence of “miracle lists” in late Jewish and early Christian literature (199–228). Literary analogies to the LE are found in the Gospel of Peter, John 20:11–29, materials in Luke-Acts, and Matthew 28.

The primary purpose of chapters 5–7 is “to place the LE in relation to other texts which touch upon both miracles and missionary activity” (246). These include NT materials, apocryphal acts, and selected writings from later apologists. Kelhoffer concludes that the author of the LE wrote after the NT, closer to the time of Justin. The final two chapters contain explorations of snake handling and poisonous liquids within a history-of-religions context. These studies are carefully written and well documented from Greek, Latin, and Jewish literature.

The epilogue (470–80) serves as a succinct summary of the book’s arguments and conclusions. Here there is an admission that ultimately we can never know the author of the LE but must be content to recognize this individual as the very sort of corruptor of the text about whom Celsus once complained. Indeed, one must agree with Kelhoffer that even after all of the fine research that he offers, the answer to the riddle of Mark 16:9–20 may lie beyond our knowledge. While his particular attempt is well done, I doubt that it brings closure on the subject. At the same time, the volume adds a worthy chapter to studies on the expansion of early Christian Gospels.

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Stephen J. Davis
The Cult of Thecla: A Tradition of Women’s Piety in Late Antiquity
Oxford Early Christian Studies
New York: Oxford University Press, 2001
Pp. xiv + 288. $70.

This is a welcome study in English of a widespread early Church tradition, most of whose scholarship is in German. Without a doubt, Thecla was the most popular female saint for the first several centuries of the Church. The study is divided into two parts which chart the material and literary evidence for the Thecla cult in Asia Minor, where Thecla’s major shrine was located at Seleucia, and the surprising amount of evidence in Egypt.

Chapter one lays out the characterization of Thecla in the Acts of Paul and Thecla. As confessor, charismatic ascetic, and transvestite, she provides a model for the ascetic life of women who became popular in the ensuing centuries. Legends abound of ascetic women who lived like men and were discovered to be female only after death. The condemnation of cross-dressing at the Council of Gangra in 340 testifies to how widespread the practice or at least the ideal. While Thecla was the model of the independent ascetic woman, the many tales and legends that proliferated about her often retained typical patriarchal attitudes.

The second chapter discusses the archaeological history of the famous site at Seleucia where a very large complex of churches and monastic cells surrounded the central basilica and cave venerated as the place of Thecla’s habitation. The original location of the main church was up the hill from the cave at a place not yet identified. In the second half of the fifth century, it was relocated over the cave, where a piece of the apse still stands. The narratives of pilgrimage to her shrine and to others suggest a fourfold pattern of prayer, reading, prayer/eucharist, and departure.

Meanwhile, in Alexandria Athanasius’ use of the Acts of Thecla in his spiritual guidance to groups of virgins responded to the interests of ascetic women and shows that the cult was already popular there in his day. Outside the city, the cult of Saint Menas at Abu Minas in the Mareotis became entwined, perhaps in competition, with that of Thecla in a shrine to her in the same region. Sixteen surviving amphiapulae have Saint Menas on one side and Thecla on the other. Necropolis wall paintings at the Kharga oasis in the Western Desert feature Thecla as a major character, either as the only Christian saint represented or in the company of Paul writing in a book to which he gestures. Davis offers the credible explanation that these remotely located commemorations of Thecla were done by Alexandrian virgins exiled in 337 for their support of Athanasius and by their monastic successors.

Soon a new Coptic Thecla was invented, sister of a martyr named Paeon from rural Egypt. The earliest manuscript of the Martyrdom of Saints Paeon and Thecla at Antinoopolis is from the fifth–sixth century. Here Davis’ argument for deliberate parallels between the earlier Acts and this document is not persuasive, for the elements of similarity are common to many romances and martyrdom accounts.

Appendix A is a catalog of published amphiapulae featuring Thecla. Appendix B charts the frequency of occurrences of her name in late antique Egypt. While it seems that the name became more popular in the fourth and fifth centuries than earlier, the databases are too small to draw definite conclusions. Maps, photos of twenty-six devotional objects, an extensive bibliography, and a subject index complete the volume.

This is a fascinating addition to our knowledge of the Thecla cult. Its major new contribution is documentation of the surprising extent of artwork supporting the cult, especially in upper Egypt. The development of the cult in Syria also