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Review

Reviewed Work(s): *A Modest Apostle: Thecla and the History of Women in the Early Church* by SUSAN E. HYLEN

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Step 1, “The Historical Context of the Gospels and Jesus,” discusses prophetic and messianic movements of renewal in Roman Palestine. In chap. 1, “Division in Roman Palestine,” the authors distinguish scribal from popular religiosity, analyzing the struggles that led to the Jewish Revolt (66–72 C.E.). In chap. 2, “Regional Histories, Shared Traditions, and the Renewal of Israel,” they consider the variegated interests of different regional-ethnic groups (Samaritan, Galilean, Judean) within Israel. This historical material substantially repeats matters discussed in H.’s works.

Step 2, “The Gospels as Stories and Sources,” makes a case for recovering the Gospels as “historical stories” shaped by their aural-oral ancient context. In chap. 3, “Taking the Gospels Whole,” H. and T. differentiate the literary approach proposed here from both historical and narrative criticisms. There follows an exegesis of Mark, read as a “historical story” (p. 99) about the renewal of Israel. In chap. 4, “Hearing the Whole Story,” the authors elaborate on the notion of “oral communications” and consider the social-political functions of writing in antiquity.

Step 3, “John’s Story in Historical Context,” gives a reading of John’s Gospel that synthesizes the historical and literary insights expounded earlier. In chap. 5, “John’s Story of Jesus,” the authors present the Johannine Jesus as the leader of a renewal movement in Israel against the status quo. Chapter 6, “Verisimilitude vs. Verification,” illustrates intra-Jewish tensions in the story among Samaritans, Galileans, and Judeans.

Step 4, “The Historical Johannine Jesus,” continues the exegesis of step 3 without discernibly advancing the larger argument of the book. In chap. 7, “John’s Jesus and the Renewal of Israel,” and chap. 8, “The Prophet/Messiah and the Rulers of Israel,” H. and T. add thematic and historical detail. In the introduction, “Reclaiming John as a Source for Jesus,” and the epilogue, “The Gospel of John and the Jesus of History,” they argue that the Fourth Gospel amounts to a historical source of its own.

Horsley’s work on messianic and prophetic movements in first-century Roman Palestine and Thatcher’s literary-critical insights are brought to bear, in this volume, on the Gospel of John in a manner that will be intelligible to nonspecialists or advanced students. The literary-critical points here would be worth developing more systematically in another format. Although repetitive, the essays drive home the pertinence of Roman imperial politics to John’s Gospel, thus complementing postcolonial studies.

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SUSAN E. HYLEN, *A Modest Apostle: Thecla and the History of Women in the Early Church* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015). Pp. xii + 182. \$74.

In *A Modest Apostle*, Susan Hylene challenges the consensus widely held by feminist scholars that women in the earliest churches held positions of leadership only to be suppressed in subsequent generations as the churches became increasingly institutionalized and expressive of dominant societal norms of male authority and female subordination. H. adopts the hypothesis that early Christian women consistently exercised leadership and agency within the constraints of cultural codes of female shame/modesty (*pudicitia*) and male honor, and that key texts that have been interpreted as illustrating the decline in

women's ecclesial status were written not in order to constrain women's activity but to uphold accepted cultural norms of women's modesty and due submission (e.g., Col 3:18–4:1; Eph 5:21–6:9; 1 Tim 2:9–15; 1 Pet 3:1–7). Women, she argues, exercised ecclesial power *within* these norms rather than defying them, much as other ancient women exerted influence and earned public approval while maintaining their reputations as chaste, discreet, and virtuous. As she puts it, “From within Roman culture . . . there are indications that the leadership of women was not experienced as being in tension with social norms of modesty” (p. 19).

Helen is well aware that other feminist biblical scholars have “moved toward understanding Christian women as reflections of the larger culture” (p. 8; she cites the work of scholars such as Lynn Cohick, Carolyn Osiek, and Margaret MacDonald, who “have sought to situate Christian women within a cultural framework of expectations that include leadership” [p. 9]). Her distinctive contribution is to concentrate on two texts, 1 Timothy and the *Acts of Thecla*, which have often been interpreted as portraying women in contradictory ways. The *Acts of Thecla*, it is commonly held, portrays the exploits of a countercultural heroine who defies social expectations of domesticity and passivity to pursue the mandate to spread the gospel. 1 Timothy, in contrast, aims to suppress women's teaching and leadership by insisting on female silence and wifely submission, and by curtailing the activities of women deacons and widows. H. raises the possibility that the teachings of 1 Timothy regarding women's dress, behavior, and speech were not prompted by women's perceived misbehavior; instead, “the language of the letter reflects and reproduces conventional social values and advocates virtues like modesty and industry” (p. 51). Women's practice of these values and virtues would not have prevented their leadership but enabled it, especially for the women deacons and widows. Similarly, the dynamic Thecla is admirable not because of her bold unconventionality but because she embodies modesty, piety, chastity, leadership, and, at the beginning of the story, even silence (p. 78). Her status is upheld by her relationship with prestigious women: she is the daughter of a powerful elite woman, Theocleia; she benefits from the patronage of the wealthy and influential Tryphaena.

The acceptability of a figure like Thecla within the complex cultural expectations of women in antiquity is illustrated by the high regard in which she was held as late as the fourth and fifth centuries: “instead of Thecla's story disappearing, quite the opposite occurs” (p. 91). Rather than being suppressed by later generations of patriarchal church authorities, her popularity only increased: “Writers and artists portray her story, and churches celebrate her name day. Both women and churches are named in her honor. Pilgrims flock to her shrines. These devotees are not easily dismissed as heretics, but include many of the illustrious church fathers: Ambrose, Gregory of Nazianzus, John Chrysostom, Augustine” (p. 91). Rather than her being “domesticated” by later generations of church authorities, it is Thecla's reputation for feminine virtue that helps to motivate and validate the activities of later generations of prominent Christian women like Macrina, Melania, and Olympias (p. 112).

Although the scope of *A Modest Apostle* is, indeed, modest, focusing as it does on two main texts, its implications are important in that it challenges the scholarly consensus that such writings emanate from communities with competing gender ideologies—1 Timothy proto-orthodox, patriarchal, and oppressive, *Acts of Thecla* countercultural and liberative. In general, H. has persuasively argued, with ample documentation from ancient sources, that women like Thecla, the widows, and the female deacons were expected to be modest

and subordinate but also to speak wisely and advance the interests of their communities. This does not mean that H.'s arguments are uniformly unassailable. As she admits, Thecla's venturing out at night to meet with Paul in prison is hardly the act of a modest virgin (p. 75); her argument that objections to Thecla's manifestly shameful behavior are obviated by the establishment of her impeccable character earlier in the narrative seems forced. With regard to 1 Timothy, it is difficult to imagine that the Pastor's lengthy, detailed, and highly restrictive instructions on the qualifications of widows for community support (5:3-16), juxtaposed with his relatively generous and lenient teachings concerning elders (5:17-19), were not meant to constrain the women and empower the men. Another concern is that H. tends to conflate women's "leadership" with activities that may well have been acceptable for well-bred women in antiquity—providing financial support, exercising influence, modeling piety, speaking wisely, engaging in ministry—that would not necessarily have been regarded as leadership *per se*.

Helen rightly observes that history is written for the sake of the present, and the narrative of "women's participation in early church circles that was later squelched in the church's bid for decorum and social acceptability" (p. 121) has inspired generations of Christian feminists. It is probable that some early Christian women adroitly used expectations of modesty and discretion to advance their interests while others chafed at these boundaries. Helen's model of an early church in which women exercised agency and power within the constraints of the complex cultural expectations of their times will resonate with the experience of many women readers who engage in Christian ministry while navigating the competing expectations of family, church, and society.

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JOHN S. KLOPPENBORG and RICHARD S. ASCOUGH, *Greco-Roman Associations: Texts, Translations, and Commentary*. Vol. 1, *Attica, Central Greece, Macedonia, Thrace* (BZNV 181; Berlin: de Gruyter, 2011). Pp. xxxvi + 488. €112.10.

This is the first volume of a projected three-volume project to collect, translate, and provide commentary for the known corpus of association inscriptions. The volumes are organized according to regions of the Mediterranean world in the Greek and Roman periods. Though the collection was not intended to be comprehensive, nevertheless it is impressively massive. The goal is to "provide a representative selection which illustrates the variety of types of associations, their activities, leadership structure, membership profiles, recruitment strategies, and finances" (p. vii). As explained in the preface, this project developed out of a Greek reading seminar at the University of Toronto that began in the 1990s. The collection and commentaries are "designed principally to provide a 'thick' context for the study of the associative practices of the Christ-groups in the cities of the empire" (p. vi).

This is an impressive project and the editors are clearly up to the task. They have immersed themselves in the history of scholarship on associations and their interpretation. They have provided new translations, an updated collection, and an up-to-date discussion that is unrivaled in recent scholarly publication; indeed, this type of comprehensive