

Book Reviews

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The Gospel of the Lord: How the Early Church Wrote the Story of Jesus. By Michael F. Bird. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2014. Pp. xiv + 394. \$30.

The author's theological inclinations are revealed in the subtitle, which posits a unified, if loosely organized, "early church." Bird is an evangelical Scripture scholar who brings to his work a rather high Christology, while maintaining a rather low ecclesiology. He appeals therefore to a different range of readers than would a similar work by a Catholic or a liberal Protestant. The book's footnotes and 33-page bibliography suggest a thorough familiarity with his sources, both mainstream and evangelical.

After a brief introductory chapter, B. discusses the decades that preceded the written Gospels, the possibility that the oral tradition had some formal controls analogous to rabbinic models for passing teachings from instructors to pupils, and the notion of social memory introduced by James D. G. Dunn, after which the "sociology and psychology of memory have been increasingly mapped onto the fields of Gospel studies" (98).

B. examines the synoptic problem using multiple English and Greek comparisons, with presentations of five theories ranging in time from Augustine to Austin Farrer, including the pros and cons of the well-known two-source theory which postulates that Matthew and Luke depended on Mark and Q, a lost collection of Jesus sayings. This chapter discloses B.'s interest in doing more than reporting on the scholarship of others; it concludes with a detailed argument showing why he believes that Luke depended on Matthew, Mark, and Q. B.'s examination of the Johannine question is equally methodical, concluding that the writer of the Fourth Gospel was familiar with the synoptic tradition but not necessarily with the other three Gospel texts.

The literary genre of the Gospels is discussed extensively. B. concludes that they are "a subtype of Greco-Roman biography," which he calls "biographical kerygma" (270). He agrees with David Aune that the Gospels are "Christian literary propaganda" (276) meant to "provide Jesus' followers with mimesis by which they could imitate Jesus' life and obey his teachings" (274). In this respect, the Gospels are similar to the *Didache*, a text concerned with the way of life Jesus engenders rather than an analysis of who Jesus is. B. takes exception to the notion that each Gospel focused on a specific community in order to address its internal problems, arguing instead that the Evangelists always had a deeper purpose and a wider audience in mind.

Fairly late in the book (254–69), B. reverts to the Greek *euangelion* when he discusses its literary genre, but it would have been more appropriate to introduce the Greek word at the outset. (Oral tradition might have been more properly called “good news” rather than “gospel.”) For example, did the author of Mark intend his work to be understood as the good news of Jesus the anointed one or as the Gospel of Jesus Christ? By referring to both the oral precedents and the written texts as developments of the Gospel (with a capital G), B. reveals the evangelical assumption that what we have in the New Testament is in faithful continuity with the earliest preaching and, indeed, with the words and deeds of the historical Jesus. However, there is room for believing that *euangelion* did not designate a literary form until the second or third century when gnostic and other gospels appropriated the title even though they had little in common with the genre of Greco-Roman biography.

Despite some minor shortcomings, B.’s book is a thorough introduction to the Gospels, suitable for theologically conservative graduate students, or for older academics and ministers who can use a refresher course on the subject, regardless of their theological bent.

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The Roman Army and the Expansion of the Gospel: The Role of the Centurion in Luke–Acts. By Alexander Kyrychenko. Beihefte zur Zeitschrift für die neutestamentliche Wissenschaft. Berlin: De Gruyter, 2014. Pp. ix + 228. \$126.

This volume is based on Kyrychenko’s revised dissertation defended at Emory University in 2013. His methodological goal is to “analyze, compare, and contrast the treatment of the Roman soldiers in general and Roman centurions . . . in the Greco-Roman and Jewish sources” in order to “provide the context and insight for explicating the role of the centurion in Luke’s writings” (7).

The goal of K.’s analysis is to demonstrate that “(1) contemporary evidence reveals a common perception of the Roman centurion as a principal representative of the Roman imperial power, and that (2) based on that perception, Luke–Acts employs centurions in the role of prototypical Gentile believers in anticipation of the Christian mission to the Empire” (8). The former has been demonstrated previously by H. M. D. Parker (*The Roman Legions* [1928]); Brian Campbell (*The Roman Army, 31 BC–AD 337* [1984]); J. E. Lendon (*Soldiers and Ghosts: A History of Battle in Classical Antiquity* [2006]); and more recently, J. R. Howell (“The Imperial Authority and Benefaction of Centurions and Acts 10:34–43: A Response to C. Kavin Rowe,” *JSNT* 31 [2008] 25–51). The latter is also the conclusion of my own work (“Unmet Expectations: The Literary Portrayal of Soldiers in Luke–Acts” (PhD diss., 2009); and *Soldiers in Luke–Acts: Engaging, Contradicting, and Transcending the Stereotypes* (2014). K. attends broadly to primary sources, particularly the Jewish pseudepigraphic literature, and includes nonliterary evidence where available.