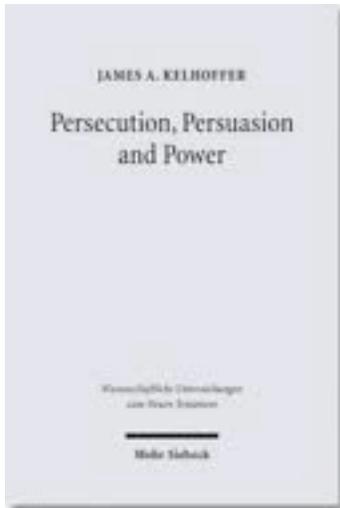


RBL 09/2012



Kelhoffer, James A.

Persecution, Persuasion and Power: Readiness to Withstand Hardship as a Corroboration of Legitimacy in the New Testament

Wissenschaftliche Untersuchungen zum Neuen Testament 270

Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2010. Pp. xxii + 443, Hardcover, \$197.50, ISBN 9783161506123.

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Persecution is a significant though sometimes underappreciated theme in the New Testament. In this important monograph James Kelhoffer offers a fresh contribution to our understanding of persecution and unjust suffering in the New Testament. He focuses on the New Testament's "use of persecution to legitimize the standing of believers, ecclesiastical authority, or both" (6). Building upon the conceptual framework developed by the late sociologist Pierre Bourdieu, Kelhoffer claims that "numerous NT passages construe the withstanding of persecution as a form of cultural capital convertible to power, authority, legitimacy, or standing within the Christian community" (16). His thesis is clearly stated: "*corroboration stemming from persecution plays a prominent and heretofore underappreciated role in NT constructions of legitimacy*" (361, emphasis original).

The heart of this monograph is nine cogently argued chapters that aim to demonstrate the author's thesis through exegetical and thematic analysis of many of the New Testament documents. Most of the chapters discuss introductory matters such as the authorship, dating, and occasion of a given New Testament text, synthesize the text's portrayal of the valuation of suffering, and offer in-depth exegesis of important passages. These chapters are arranged neither canonically nor chronologically, and it is unclear why 1 Peter (ch. 3), Hebrews (ch. 4), and Revelation (ch. 5) are treated before the Gospels and Acts (chs. 6–10). The study excludes James, Jude, 2 Peter, 1–3 John, and Philemon

and only minimally discusses Ephesians and Titus. The epilogue helpfully summarizes chapters 1–10 and discusses suggestive examples of how later Christian authors in the fourth and sixteenth centuries ascribe value to martyrdom and persecution.

Kelhoffer begins his exegetical analysis by analyzing the theme of persecution in the Pauline corpus (ch. 2). In section 1, focused on 1 Thessalonians, Philippians, and Romans, he concludes that “readiness to suffer offers an indispensable sign of a believer’s standing ‘in Christ’” (31). Next, Kelhoffer claims that Paul presents suffering as “a form of cultural capital that was a double-edged sword,” which undermines his persecutors’ standing while legitimating his own apostolic authority. This point is perhaps clearest in Galatians, where Paul asserts that his opponents avoid persecution (6:12), while he bears “the marks of Jesus” (6:17). Kelhoffer concludes the chapter with an analysis of how four “Deutero-Pauline” letters develop these two themes (2 Thessalonians, Colossians, and 1–2 Timothy). His substantial treatment of Colossians will be examined later.

In chapter 3 Kelhoffer claims, “The hope of convincing one’s oppressors, and thereby bringing about their conversion and furthering the Christian mission, comprises the main value of readiness to withstand persecution in First Peter” (94). He argues that 1 Pet 2:11–4:1a serves as a corrective to Rom 13:1–7, which had become “a problematic aspect of Paul’s theology” (104). First Peter does not appeal to suffering to corroborate the standing of the author or the church. Rather, Kelhoffer discerns “*two distinct valuations of the addressees’ suffering*” (101, emphasis original), that faithfulness in the midst of suffering will further the Christian mission (1 Pet 2:11–4:1a) and that suffering believers should hope confidently for eschatological vindication (4:1b–5:10). He does not discuss 1 Pet 1:6–7, which suggests a further emphasis on trials as having a necessary and purposeful role in proving the genuineness of people’s faith (cf. Jas 1:2–3).

Kelhoffer argues in chapter 4 that “*the author of Hebrews offers to the community a confirmation of their standing because they are prepared to endure suffering*” (127, emphasis original). He focuses on three positive examples of past suffering by the community (Heb 10:32–34), Moses and other Israelite sufferers (11:26, 33–38), and Jesus (12:1–4), which climax in the author’s appeal that his readers bear Christ’s reproach (13:13). Kelhoffer observes that the community’s experience of persecution is characterized by public criticism, affliction, imprisonment, and loss of property, and he notes that 12:4 implies both that no Christians were killed in the earlier persecution and that now the readers are loath to suffer.

The book of Revelation is considered in chapter 5, where Kelhoffer explains that faithfulness in suffering demonstrates believers’ authenticity and is necessary for final salvation. The book is dated to Trajan’s reign (98–117 C.E.), and the “general question of

assimilation to the surrounding polytheistic culture becomes concretely embodied in the challenge of the imperial cult” (156). Together with his revelations from Christ, John’s suffering for Christ (Rev 1:9) serves as “confirmation of his prophetic status” (148) over against other competing Christian leaders.

Kelhoffer devotes the next five chapters to examining the Gospels and Acts. Chapter 6 focuses on ten passages in Mark (4:17; 8:34–9:1; 9:38–41; 10:28–31, 35–40; 13:9–13; 14:3–9; 14:26–50; 15:20b–24, 39) as well as the endings of Mark, which address “the theme of readiness to suffer as a confirmation of discipleship” (191). Kelhoffer asserts, “Mark maintains that authentic discipleship entails not only recognition of Jesus as God’s suffering Messiah ... but also a readiness to suffer as Jesus did” (183). He observes that suffering in Mark works both positively and negatively, confirming the legitimacy of minor characters, while undermining the standing of the Twelve. He rightly connects Simon’s “cross-bearing” in 15:21 with Jesus’ earlier invitation to discipleship in 8:34 and notes the ironic absence of the Twelve in this scene (207). However, Kelhoffer’s interpretation of 10:39 as an example of James and John’s “promise of readiness ... to suffer like Jesus” (200) is unconvincing. More likely, their response indicates an ironic misunderstanding of Jesus’ reference to his cup and baptism in the context of his passion predictions (see the commentaries by Joel Marcus, Craig Evans, and William Lane).

Chapter 7 discusses the theme of persecution in Matthew in two parts. First, Kelhoffer examines Matthew’s redaction of eleven Markan texts discussed in chapter 6 and concludes that Matthew presents “an overall corroboration of the Twelve’s standing as Jesus’ followers and appointed heralds” (236). Unflattering portrayals of the apostles are shown to be temporary, as Matthew portrays the Twelve as suffering missionaries before and after Easter whose persecution is “an archetype for the later, oppressed Matthean community” (237). Next, Kelhoffer analyzes non-Markan passages that mention the persecution of Jesus’ followers (Matt 5:10–12, 10:16–23, 22:1–14, 23:29–39, and 24:9–14), and he asserts, “Matthew offers *a progressive revelation of the persecutors’ identity*” (236, emphasis original).

In the shortest chapter, Kelhoffer examines persecution in the Gospel of John. He focuses on 15:18–16:4, where Jesus warns his disciples of three forms of suffering, all of which have earlier antecedents in the Gospel: (1) hatred from the world and persecution (15:18, 20; cf. 5:16–18); (2) exclusion from the synagogue (16:2a; cf. 9:21–23; 12:42–43); and (3) death of certain disciples (16:2b; cf. 12:9–11) (253). Kelhoffer rightly observes, “For John, Jesus’ experiences of rejection and suffering are precedents for what the disciples will face” (263), and such persecution both confirms true followers’ legitimacy while casting doubt on the persecutors’ standing.

The exegetical portion of the monograph concludes with a substantial treatment of Luke-Acts (ch. 9). Again Kelhoffer begins with Luke's reception of the Markan depictions of suffering and discipleship. He reads *πειρασμός* in Luke 8:13 as "an *unspecified* reference to testing, hardship, or (possibly persecution)," which softens Mark 4:17 (267). In Luke 9:23, the inclusion of *καθ' ἡμέραν* in the cross-bearing saying "accentuates the ongoing relevance for a Lukan community that must be ready to follow, and possibly suffer for, Jesus 'daily'" (268). He claims "the Lukan passion narrative offers a thorough revision, if not a refutation, of Mark's portrayal of the Twelve" (273). Kelhoffer concludes by noting many points of continuity, as well as several contrasts, between depictions of suffering in the Third Gospel and Acts.

In chapter 10 Kelhoffer lucidly argues that in Acts "legitimation not only positively corroborates the standing of Jesus' followers but also negatively questions the legitimacy of the depicted persecutors, who are usually Jewish" (286). Further, he contends that the legitimacy of suffering Christians in the narrative is *transferred* to Luke's later community. Thus, "Whenever later Christians should face persecution, whether from Jews or Gentiles, they may claim to stand in the legacy of the suffering apostles and of Stephen and Paul" (361). Kelhoffer gives particular attention to Luke's "rehabilitation of Paul, the persecuted former persecutor" and to his "devaluation" of the Jews' standing because they persecuted Jesus' early followers (26). He concurs with Jack Sanders's assessment of Luke's "monolithic anti-Judaism," which is in large part motivated by later Jewish-Christian conflicts in Luke's time (350), though he does not interact with Jon Weatherly's substantial response to Sanders (*Jewish Responsibility for the Death of Jesus in Luke-Acts* [Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 1994]).

Kelhoffer convincingly shows that persecution frequently plays an important role in confirming the legitimacy and authority of Christian leaders in the New Testament. However, here are three points of constructive critique. First, while Kelhoffer devotes the vast portion of his study to the value of Christians' suffering, he gives insufficient attention to the value of *Jesus'* suffering in the New Testament. As scholars such as David Moessner and Scott Cunningham have shown, the "legacy of the suffering apostles and of Stephen and Paul" (361) is part of a larger pattern that includes the persecution of the Old Testament prophets and especially Jesus, whose crucifixion is surely the most important New Testament example of persecution. Kelhoffer also does not expound Mark 10:45 or Luke 22:25–27, which recast leadership and authority in terms of servanthood.

Second, in my judgment Kelhoffer's exegesis is sometimes unreliable. For example, he devotes one of his longest exegetical sections to Col 1:24 (70–78). Kelhoffer asserts, "Paul's suffering for the church's benefit undergirds the authority claimed by the letter's pseudonymous author" (78). However, he does not discuss *how* the authority of the

“pseudonymous author” is corroborated, particularly since the original readers probably would have assumed the letter’s Pauline origin. For Kelhoffer, the lack of reference to Christians’ suffering in Colossians departs from the Pauline tradition and is explicable by the letter’s already realized eschatology (Col 2:12–13; 3:1). Yet he does not discuss Col 3:4 and 3:6, which suggest a future eschatology. Additionally, Kelhoffer’s reading of the *present* tense verbs in Col 1:24 as referring to “Paul’s *past* suffering” following the apostle’s death is unlikely (75, emphasis original). There is also no discussion of the references to Paul’s imprisonment in Col 4:3 and 4:18.

Third, Kelhoffer’s assessment of the disciples in Mark seems overly critical yet overly positive in Luke. For example, he does not discuss Luke 9:45–46 and 22:24, 38, 45, which portray the disciples’ misunderstandings, failures, and divisions when faced with Jesus’ impending suffering. Some of alleged discontinuities are overstated, such as the claim that James’ death in Acts 12:2 serves as “a remarkable exception” to Jesus’ promise in Luke 21:18 (285), which must be read with Luke 21:16, “some of you they will put to death.”

In summary, Kelhoffer’s work is commendable for its scope, exegetical depth, and clear thesis that in the New Testament persecution frequently serves to corroborate the legitimacy and authority of Christian leaders and other believers. This monograph is surely an important and welcome contribution to the study of persecution in early Christianity and warrants careful reading and critical reflection.