CHAPTER TWO

HISTORY OF INTERPRETATION

The previous chapter established a historical background against which one may read the dream-visions in Luke-Acts. Before embarking on a discussion of Paul’s vision at Troas, or of the broader relationship between dream-visions and the perception of God’s will in Luke-Acts, it will be helpful to see what scholars have written on these topics. The present chapter, therefore, will review scholarship in two categories. The first section will offer a survey of scholarly commentary on Acts 16:6–10. The second will treat studies that have examined Luke’s use of dream-visions. The material in both sections will be presented in roughly chronological order.

Interpretation of Acts 16:6–10

As one might expect, the interpretations of this passage in the history of scholarship often reflect the more general exegetical climate of the time. Some of the early material reflects the ongoing debate in the 19th century over the historicity of Acts. Likewise, the later studies reflect the changing concerns marked by the turn towards literary criticism. Aside from discussions of the “we” passages, there have been remarkably few article-length studies of Acts 16:6–10. The segments that follow, therefore, are culled mostly from commentaries and passing references in prominent works on Acts.

Before discussing these studies, it may be helpful to reiterate the place of this discussion in the larger agenda of the present examination. In the Troas passage, one finds the only dream-vision in Luke-Acts that does not feature a divine intermediary. Nevertheless, the characters in Luke’s story automatically interpret Paul’s dream-vision at Troas as a message from God. In chapter three I will argue that this character-filtered interpretation is strangely at odds with the narrative that follows. As a way of setting the context for that discussion, I will be concerned here especially with the way that modern interpreters understand the characters’ reaction to Paul’s dream-vision.
Pre-Critical Period

Calvin

Despite coming from the so-called “pre-critical” period, Calvin’s discussion of the Troas episode is an interesting place to begin this examination.\(^1\) This treatment is not meant to favor one Reformation figure over others, but simply to note some significant observations that were not maintained in the subsequent scholarship of Acts. Of the many scholars to comment on Acts in the past half-millenium, Calvin was one of the few who noticed some rather strange elements in 16:6–10. Like many after him, Calvin assumed the divine origin of Paul’s vision at Troas.\(^2\) His unique contribution can be found in the way he follows up on this part of the narrative. Where so many others will simply note the importance of 16:6–10 for the beginning of Paul’s mission to “Europe,” Calvin observes:

This story shows, as if in a mirror, how sharply the Lord exercised the faith and patience of His men, presenting arduous difficulties, which only extraordinary steadfastness could be a match to overcoming. For Paul’s introduction to Macedonia is described as such as could have taken away confidence in the vision. Abandoning the work that they had in hand, the holy men quickly cross the sea, as if the whole Macedonian nation was going to come and meet them, eager to ask for help. Now the outcome corresponds to their expectation so little that nearly all doors are closed for them to speak… . Therefore they are forced to go out into the open country, to speak in an unfrequented and out-of-the-way spot. There they cannot meet even with a single man, to listen to their teaching. They only obtain one woman as a disciple of Christ, and a foreigner at that. Who would not have said that this journey had been undertaken foolishly, and most inauspiciously, when it was turning out to be so unfruitful?\(^3\)

Despite having every reason to be discouraged, Paul must take encouragement from the faith of his one convert, Lydia.\(^4\) Calvin was right.

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\(^2\) “The Lord did not wish Paul to put off any more time in Asia, because His purpose was to bring him to Macedonia. But Luke describes the way he was led there, that a man of Macedonia appeared to him by night. We must observe from that that the Lord does not always keep to the same method of revelation, because different kinds are better suited for confirmation” (Calvin, *Acts 14–28*, 69).

\(^3\) Ibid., 70–71.

\(^4\) Ibid., 74.