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Finding the Elect Lady

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Finding the Elect Lady

Spencer Kraus

Review of Lincoln H. Blumell, Lady Eclecte: The Lost Woman of the New Testament (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2025). 314 pages. \$48.00 (hardcover).

Abstract: *For centuries, the consensus reading of 2 John 1 maintained that the epistle was written to a local church, metaphorically addressed as an “elect lady.” This has most especially been the case over the last 150 years of scholarship. However, new findings from Lincoln Blumell challenge the consensus reading, restoring the elect lady to her proper place as an actual individual in the early Christian world. This lady, moreover, can be identified by name, and it is only through haplography that confusion over her identity has been introduced at all. Blumell’s restoration of the text of 2 John 1, based on papyrological and manuscript evidence, is groundbreaking work that will shape scholarship on the New Testament and early Christianity for years to come.*

Before my review formally begins, a disclosure is needed. During my studies at Brigham Young University, I was fortunate to work as a research assistant for Lincoln Blumell. During this time, he came across his findings that would eventually be published as *Lady Eclecte: The Lost Woman of the New Testament*.¹ I reviewed and read each chapter of the book at various stages of the writing process, often multiple times. Aware of any bias I may have, I nonetheless

1. Lincoln H. Blumell, *Lady Eclecte: The Lost Woman of the New Testament* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2025).

highly encourage any and all readers interested in the New Testament to read this book.

Blumell's work revisits an often-overlooked epistle in the New Testament, 2 John. Moreover, it focuses almost entirely on a single verse—in fact, it could be more accurate to say that it focuses almost entirely on the first four words in the Greek text of 2 John 1, typically translated as “The elder, to the elect lady” (Ὁ πρεσβύτερος ἐκλεκτῇ κυρίᾳ). The opening address to this letter has been so securely steeped in tradition that various attempts to understand the irregular Greek formula (and otherwise unattested form of address) have been presented over the years, without considering the possibility that the received reading is incorrect. Blumell, however, argues precisely that—and provides plenty of evidence for why the received reading should be emended (p. 83–84).

Utilizing his training in papyrology and the New Testament, Blumell is uniquely qualified to address this letter. This letter, after all, notes that it was originally written on papyrus: “Although I have much to write to you, I would rather not use papyrus and ink” (2 John 1:12; translation found on p. 59). Indeed, Blumell shows many correspondences between 2 John and other Greco-Roman papyri that have been preserved, showing that it is a typical letter of the first century AD, rather than an imagined “literary fiction” as other scholars have attempted to argue (pp. 58–70). And, as this epistle matches other papyri in length, style, and phraseology, so too did its original address: “The elder, *to the lady Eclecte*” (Ἐκλέκτη τῇ κυρίᾳ), meaning this epistle was written to an actual woman in the early Christian church (p. 83).

By emending the address in this way, the word *elect* is translated as a name, followed by the definite article (τῇ), followed by the word *lady* in the dative as a modifier. This address “conforms to the typical pattern of address in Roman-period letters that is also attested in 3 John 1,” with the definite article having been lost in a simple case of haplography (pp. 70, 83). This reading does, however, result in a few questions: 1) How does this reading make sense of the epistolary evidence? 2) Is this reading even attested in the manuscript evidence? And 3) Is the name *Eclecte* even attested?

Blumell answers each of these questions in full, providing plenty of evidence to defend his assertion. First, Blumell demonstrates that the emended opening to 2 John would make perfect sense in light of other Greco-Roman papyri written around the same time as 2 John. For example, the address's utilization of the modifier *lady* is typical of other

papyri, which (alongside the masculine *lord*) "are often a courteous form of address irrespective of status" in the papyri, and "were often used for family, friends, and social equals and not just for superiors" (p. 73). To demonstrate this, some papyri even paired the terms *lord* or *lady* with familial addresses such as brother or sister (pp. 74–75). Furthermore, like all other addresses, the modifier follows the name of the recipient, suggesting that (like other letters), a dative definite article should precede the modifier. As summarized by Blumell, "The problem with the reading in 2 John 1 is the missing definite article τῇ between the name (Ἐκλέκτη) and the modifier (κυρία); all the papyrological examples . . . contain the definite article" (p. 81).

This form of address would also fit in with John's other epistle in the New Testament, which also uses this exact same form of address: "The elder to the beloved Gaius" (Ὁ πρεσβύτερος Γαῖῳ τῷ ἀγαπητῷ). Indeed, based on a shared authorship between these two letters, both 2 John and 3 John should be expected to "contain numerous structural, stylistic, and phraseological parallels," which they indeed do (p. 76). This also goes for the form of address, as ancient authors typically employed the same form of address across multiple letters. This tendency has allowed scholars to reconstruct entire lines of text missing from other papyri (pp. 76–79). Thus, just as John here employs the form "A to B the [modifier]," so too should we expect a similar address in 2 John. A solid defense for the shared authorship of 2 and 3 John is found especially on pp. 47–54, but generally throughout chapter 3 as well, and the papyrological evidence presented by Blumell will be important for future biblical commentators to discuss.

By understanding that an early scribe (if not the author himself) simply dropped the article due to haplography by seeing the letter string τῇ twice in a row, the restoration of this article makes more sense. It is also not uncommon among the epistolary evidence, which has led scholars transcribing the papyri to often note where the article should be expected (pp. 80–84). In short, this is such a typical phenomenon that no one should be surprised to see it happen to an epistolary address in the New Testament as well. The restoration of the epistolary address also clarifies that only Eclecte can be rendered as a personal name, and not Kyria as some interpreters in the past have done (pp. 75–76, 98, 144–50). Blumell provides an in-depth discussion on all of the scholarship that has previously been done surrounding this matter, making a close reading of the book invaluable to fully appreciate his argument.

Second, Blumell examines the manuscript evidence for 2 John to see if this reading is otherwise attested. While most early manuscript evidence simply offers the received text, “a case for Ἐκλέκτη τῇ κυρίῳ can be made on textual grounds, and not just papyrological grounds, as this reading is evinced in multiple manuscripts” (p. 87). To make this case, Blumell examines virtually every printed edition of the Greek New Testament from the Middle Ages to the present day, showing that multiple individuals early on believed *Eclecte* should be rendered as a proper name (pp. 87–98). This is not only fascinating from a textual standpoint, but it provides critical information to demonstrate how this verse has been understood through the years and how we have come to the point where this verse has almost universally been interpreted as a metaphor rather than a personal address.

Blumell also discusses manuscript evidence from papyri, majuscules, and minuscules of the New Testament up to about the year AD 1500. Furthermore, through a close examination of much of the early manuscript evidence, Blumell shows that many papyri and majuscules are missing the opening address to this verse, so “one cannot conclusively determine the exact reading of the address” in most attestations of this verse (p. 103). In the minuscule evidence, Blumell’s emended reading does occur in some important manuscripts, with the earliest dating to the eleventh century AD. Many of the manuscripts that contain this reading are closely related in textual tradition and context (pp. 104–9). Furthermore, despite their later composition, many scholars have noted that minuscule manuscripts can be helpful in text-critical matters, and their pedigree is more important than their date (p. 109). They have even proven to contain authentic readings known to church fathers that are otherwise unattested in the earlier papyri—at least one of which has since been included in twenty-first century printings of the Greek New Testament and English translations of the Bible (pp. 109–13). In like manner, the name *Eclecte* was known to Clement of Alexandria (whose writings initially spurred Blumell’s investigation, as described in chapter 1) and is found in important minuscule manuscripts.

Blumell’s analysis of the manuscript evidence is important and fresh. As each important manuscript is discussed, Blumell offers insights to why this reading has not been challenged despite the uncertainty that can be found in the earliest manuscript evidence. It is also critical for his demonstration that sometimes those who transcribe the Greek text from important manuscripts let tradition shape

the way they interpret missing letters or lines. Rather than note where extra letters could be included, for instance, sometimes transcriptions make the text appear more secure than it actually is. By going to the manuscripts himself, Blumell is able to provide better transcriptions while also dealing with how others have transcribed this in the past. In these instances, Blumell shows a deep familiarity with both the manuscripts and the scholarly debate surrounding those manuscripts.

Third, through a lengthy overview of the epistolary evidence, Blumell shows that the name *Eclecte* is not only attested, but it is more attested than other women's names in the New Testament. Other scholars who claim that it is not attested in the ancient world are simply parroting older studies that did not benefit from the treasure trove of papyrological and epistolary evidence that has since come to light (pp. 115–50). This also explains another point of contention that scholars have wrongly used to say *Eclecte* cannot be a personal name: the use of the adjective *elect* in verse 13. Despite being a completely different part of speech with no way to possibly be read as a personal name, Blumell responds to this argument by showing how puns on people's names were typical in papyri (pp. 142–44). In this case, verse 13 ends the epistle by referring to *Eclecte*'s "elect sister" — *elect* being a clear pun on *Eclecte*'s name. Thus, while not only reflecting familiarity between the addressee and the sender, this pun may "reflect back and reciprocally highlight that *Eclecte* is true to her name" (p. 144). That is, *Eclecte* is herself "elect" — or, we could say, "an elect lady."²

Ultimately, there is little reason to reject this reading, as Blumell shows through a detailed analysis how this reading is not only attested, but it is the best (and perhaps only) way to make sense of this letter in

2. Latter-day Saints may be aware that 2 John 1 was used by Joseph Smith when organizing the Relief Society in 1842, with the understanding that 2 John was 1) written to an actual woman and 2) this woman was called "elect" because she was "elected to preside" over the women of this ancient congregation. Lincoln Blumell and I will discuss how this can be understood in light of the reading "the lady *Eclecte*" and the pun in verse 13 in our forthcoming commentary on the Johannine Epistles in the *BYU New Testament Commentary*. For Joseph Smith's remarks at the organization of the Relief Society, see Jill Mulvey Derr et al., eds., *The First Fifty Years of Relief Society: Key Documents in Latter-day Saint Women's History* (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 2016), 32–34, <https://www.churchhistorianspress.org/the-first-fifty-years-of-relief-society/part-1/1-2/1-2-1>.

light of the papyrological and textual evidence available to us. Only tradition has kept the received text of 2 John 1 from being challenged.

Two other important discussions in the book can easily justify buying the volume. First, in chapter 2, Blumell discusses the past 150 years of scholarship surrounding 2 John 1 in a concise manner, showing how scholars have almost universally concluded that 2 John 1 should be understood as a metaphor. This assumption has, in turn, only limited the scholarly discussion surrounding this epistle, and has often led others to grapple with it in almost comedic ways to assert that this must be a fictitious letter. This is also a warning for those who delve into biblical studies: while relying on the consensus understanding of a particular verse may be helpful, in some cases the consensus is just wrong. Works such as Blumell's can effectively push back against the consensus and reshape how we understand a passage of the New Testament. This is not the first time some influential work has done this, either. A similar treatment by Eldon Jay Knapp in 2005 likewise demonstrated that a consensus reading of Romans 16:7 was wrong, and the male name *Junius* should properly be rendered as the female name *Junia*.³

The second discussion comes in chapter 6, which provides a detailed commentary of 2 John as *an epistle written on papyrus*. Understanding this context (which is explicitly named in 2 John 1:12) can be critical to properly understanding the epistle itself. This epistle was written to an actual woman, and the children mentioned in this epistle appear to be other Christians meeting in Eclecte's house-church (similar to other cases in the New Testament where women hosted Christian worship services in their homes). By restoring the lady Eclecte to her proper place in 2 John as an actual woman, many of the issues surrounding various textual issues (such as the singular and plural second person pronouns) are likewise resolved, as John is writing to an actual woman *and* those meeting in her house.

In short, Blumell notes, "If 2 John did not have an interpretive tradition that promoted the received reading ἐκλεκτῇ κυρίῳ, which sees in this unattested form of address a metaphorical personification of a church, and this letter had been discovered in the last century among the papyri, this traditional reading and interpretation would have never emerged," but rather would have naturally "been restored and articulated as ὁ πρεσβύτερος Ἐκλέκτη <τῇ> κυρίῳ . . . because of all the

3. See Eldon Jay Knapp, *Junia: The First Woman Apostle* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2005).

papyrological parallels for this form of address and because the loss of the definite article immediately following a word terminating with the same two letters is a well-attested phenomenon" (p. 83). Furthermore, by restoring Eclecte to this letter,

[Second] John is precisely what it presents itself to be: a genuine personal letter sent between parties. . . . The principal recipient is a named woman who is known to the elder and, based on the content of the letter, holds a prominent place within the Christian community where the letter is sent. She is personally known to the elder, is a trusted confidant, and is regarded as wielding enough influence and authority to help ensure that his directives are carried out. (p. 178)

This brings to light an important figure and an important woman in early Christianity while highlighting her prominence in the early Christian community.

I cannot recommend this book enough and believe that it is a groundbreaking piece of scholarship that will shape how 2 John is read by future interpreters for years to come.



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