



**Hengel, Martin.**

*The Four Gospels and the One Gospel of Jesus Christ: An Investigation of the Collection and Origin of the Canonical Gospels*

Translated by John Bowden

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As reported this past Thursday (July 2, 2009), the world of Biblical studies lost one of its best and brightest scholars in Martin Hengel. It is in honor of his life and work and in dedication to his memory that I offer this brief and admittedly inadequate review of his book *The Four Gospels and the One Gospel of Jesus Christ: An Investigation of the Collection and Origin of the Canonical Gospels*.

In the preface Hengel states his purpose saying:

In this book I have attempted, starting from Irenaeus and Clement of Alexandria and applying all the references from the early church and the New Testament textual tradition, to give a plausible historical account of the development of this collection and to evaluate its historical and theological significance. (xi)

Chapter 1 introduces an aporia as well as two questions that are to be taken up throughout the course of the book. Hengel examines how the early Christians could speak of one Gospel, i.e., the one "message of salvation through Jesus Christ" (5) while at the same time this one Gospel was presented in four different, sometimes contradictory Gospels. The questions that drive his investigation are:

1. "What is the relationship between what is systematically and doctrinally the one Gospel that Paul preached and the narrative, biographical, written report about Jesus' life, teaching and death, and how, after Mark, could the two, the earlier preaching of Paul and the later 'kerygmatic biography of Jesus', be given the same designation?" (5)
2. "How is it that we have the narrative of Jesus' activity in a fourfold and often contradictory form in the canon of the New Testament, and how old are these four Gospels?" (6)

Chapter 2 takes up the second question first as Hengel discusses the importance of historical narrative in the NT, the witness to the four Gospels in Irenaeus, Clement of Alexandria, and Justin Martyr, and two extremes that apparently tried to solve the problem of four different, divergent accounts of the one Gospel: the harmonization of Tatian and the excising of books by Marcion.

Chapter 3 is by far the most substantial portion of the book making up about 40% of Hengel's presentation (82 of 207 pages!) and a lengthy review could be written of this section alone, but in the interest of brevity I'll note what I feel are the most important points made. Here Hengel makes a case for the traditional order and authorship of the four Gospels. "Irenaeus, Origen, Eusebius, Athanasius, and the later church fathers" all bear witness to "[t]his matching order of the four Gospels" (41) which is significant because each Gospel was still circulated as an individual codex indicating that the order mentioned in Irenaeus, et al. was based on an earlier tradition. The superscriptions of the Gospels are quite important and have been "completely neglected in recent scholarship," (48) says Hengel. That they took the form "The Gospel *in the version of*..." [εὐαγγέλιον κατὰ...] is notable because "this goes against the form customary in ancient book titles, in which the name of the author is put first in the genitive and followed by the title of the work." (p. 48) The customary form wouldn't work for the four Gospels because they're the Gospel of Jesus Christ *according to* (or *in the version of*) the four evangelists. Hengel believes that these titles were not later additions but were part of the Gospels from their earliest stages, noting an early interest in authorship and apostolic authority dating back to the NT time itself.

He also argues that the Gospels never circulated anonymously and that the Church didn't later append authors to them in the interest of adding apostolic authority. He sees such reconstructions of history as anachronistic. Hengel also has a strong opinion about hypothetical gospel communities standing behind the composition of the Gospels, he says: "nothing has led research into the Gospels so astray as the romantic superstition involving anonymous theologically creative community collectives, which are supposed to have drafted whole writings," and the significance of apostolic authority "cannot be explained by the completely vague and therefore inadequate term 'community tradition', a word which is particularly appropriate for disseminating obscurity." (81) All in all I feel that Hengel makes a strong, even if not entirely

convincing, argument for traditional authorship. It certainly merits several readings and serious reflection. I do however believe that he dates the Synoptics too late (A.D. 70-100) and doesn't offer any sustained argument for these dates, opting rather to take them for granted in the course of his presentation.

Chapter 4 discusses the use of the four Gospels in early Christian worship settings. Hengel maintains that they were "primarily written for liturgical reading and not so much for private interests or for the theological reading of individual prominent theological teachers, and... they made a claim to truth which applied to the whole church." (116) Again highlighting the use of the codex among early Christians Hengel suggests that the Gospels (among the other NT writings) were housed in book cupboards, something of a mini-library, in the various believing communities, and that this practice "emanated from Rome." (139) This perhaps explains the tradition from which Irenaeus derived his "historical order of the Gospels." (138)

Chapter 5 answers the first question asked in chapter 1 by first noting that Luke is the "only evangelist to speak explicitly in his prologue about the traditions of the Gospel tradition." (141) Paul's Gospel in 1Corinthians 15:1-11 is examined and Hengel notes that his presentation can be distilled in the summary that Christ died, was buried, and raised on the third day, and that he appeared to Cephas and the twelve, but this could be whittled down further into Paul simply speaking of "Christ crucified." Hengel rightly notes the presuppositional nature of the 'historical Jesus' for Paul. Paul wrote to communities who had already accepted the reality of Jesus and his work and thus recounting his history would be quite beside the point for Paul's purposes. He also correctly points out that while Paul describes his mission as to the Gentiles and Peter's to the Jews, in practice there wasn't so neat a division as Luke bears witness to in the book of Acts. Hengel sees Mark as probably the most important source because it preserves Peter's testimony. Hengel says:

In my view, the connection between the term 'Gospel' and Jesus' ministry, preaching and passion as a narration of Jesus, which appears clearly for the first time in Mark, goes back to the Petrine origin of his work, because Peter, the leading 'eyewitness' (1 Cor. 15.5), and the communities which he founded and influenced, could already sum up in the word 'Gospel', 'saving message', the messianic activity of Jesus in words and actions, which was completed in his passion. (156)

Chapter 6 diverges from the generally focused treatment throughout the book in that it begins by recounting allusions to "the Exodus event" in Mark's Gospel. While fascinating in its own right (and it certainly has me anxious to read Rikki Watts' book on the subject), I struggled to see its connection with the overall theme of the book. I suppose his major point was that the events of Jesus' life merited narration in much the same way that the "Exodus event" did. That being said,

Hengel goes on to discuss "unity in multiplicity" where he says that what appears to be an aporia should be reflected on positively. The four different and often contradictory accounts that we have in the Gospels all point to one Lord and one message of salvation. Hengel said it best when he said:

The work of Christ and the message which goes out from it cannot adequately be summarized in the theological outline of a single Christian teacher. From the beginning the difference between the Gospels was necessary and was not only tolerated by the church but willed in this form. (167)

I've opted not to summarize Hengel's postscript due to the present length of this review. The book is rounded out with a chronological table (208-9) beginning with the death of Christ and ending with Origen's *Contra Celsum*, 113 pages of end notes (210-323 – why Lord, why?!), and three indices: Scripture/early Christian writings (324-44), modern authors (345-50), and general (351-54).

Hengel's knowledge of early Christianity and his handling of primary source material is nothing short of amazing. While I'm very sympathetic to traditional Christian beliefs (being quite conservative in my own right), I wasn't quite convinced that we can be as sure of the Synoptic Gospels' authorship as Hengel seemed to be. I also believe that he used the term "contradictory" too frequently and perhaps too loosely, although he states it rather than arguing it. One needn't be an inerrantist to recognize that the vast majority of charges of contradiction in the Gospels are anything but. And if I had to level one last criticism it would be that I think the Fourth Gospel was shortchanged a bit in this book. Hengel by no means overlooks it, but it doesn't get near the attention that the Synoptics get. All in all this is a fine piece of scholarship and one that I recommend wholeheartedly to every student of the New Testament and early Christian history.