



Hengel, Martin.

Saint Peter: The Underestimated Apostle

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Rightly Dividing the Word of Truth

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There are few scholars as in tune with the ancient world as the late Martin Hengel was. He seemed at home in the Græco-Roman literature of antiquity as he was in the Jewish (Palestinian or Hellenistic) literature of the same periods. What's more is that he was incomparably well-versed in scholarly secondary literature ranging from the nineteenth to twenty-first century. This can be seen when considering a few numbers taken from Hengel's posthumously published *Saint Peter: The Underestimated Apostle* (hereafter *Saint Peter*): 5, 464, 11, 3, 134... I know your first instinct (at least if you're from the US) might be to think of this as a football snap count, but it's not. It's the number of pages dedicated to listing abbreviations of works referenced, the number of footnotes, the number of pages of ancient sources cited, the number of pages of modern authors cited, and the number of pages that comprise the main text in *Saint Peter*. Those numbers are a testament to Hengel's erudition if nothing else.

Saint Peter is divided into two sections, the first of which is an expansion of material that "originates in a lecture that was presented in November 2005 at a joint meeting of the Collegium Germanicum et Hungaricum and the Melanchthon Center in Rome." (ix) It's here that Hengel takes us into the world of first century Palestine and Peter's interaction with Jesus and the other apostles; his missionary activity; his conflict with Paul; and his subsequent importance to the Church. Hengel recounts events as if he were there when they happened; he probes the psyches

of the characters in the NT and comments on motives and motivations. He tells not only the story already told in the NT but also the story that can only be read when reading in between the lines. And we're poised to trust Hengel because we know that he's done the research. We know that those numbers mentioned above don't lie. We know that there are few who are as familiar with the ancient world as Hengel was, and yet, Hengel wasn't there; he couldn't possibly know some of the things he claims; and sometimes things can be found between the lines because we put them there.

Now I don't mean to sound overly critical, especially of a scholar whom I greatly admired, but it seems to me that at times throughout this book Hengel put the proverbial cart before the horse. For example, Hengel sees Matthew 16:17-19 as a later insertion of Matthew who is working with developed traditions; Jesus' response to Peter's confession is simply a reflection on Peter's importance placed on the lips of Jesus for posterity (see e.g., 3, 14). One reason that we can be reasonably confident of this is because Matthew uses the term *ἐκκλησία* twice in his Gospel (16:18; 18:17) and they happen to be the exact ways that the term would be used by the early Church. But perhaps the Church used the term in these ways based on Jesus' use of the term in these ways; this is a legitimate possibility, is it not? Likewise, Hengel claims that Peter's "special level of importance" was a development of the postapostolic age and then retrofit back into Scripture. (32) Perhaps his importance, as indicated by Jesus in history, was the impetus for what was written about him in Scripture. I know it's not a popular idea in critical scholarship, but it's a legitimate option nonetheless.

Hengel's confidence comes across strongly on every page of this book, especially regarding issues of date and authorship of the NT books. Mark was the first Gospel, written just before AD 70 (33) by John Mark, a companion of Peter; Luke-Acts was written sometime between AD 75-85 (33) by Luke, a companion of Paul; Matthew was written between AD 90-100 (5) by Matthew; 1 Peter was written between AD 95-100 (12) and definitely not by Peter (who consequently didn't write 2 Peter either); the Pastoral Letters were probably written "about the same time as Ignatius (ca. 110-114)" (52, n. 174) and not by Paul but "one could almost conclude that the author of the Pastoral Letters was a student of Luke." (98, n. 327) It's not the issues of date and authorship that bother me so much as it is Hengel's surety on such issues. I'd personally date every writing earlier than Hengel and profess agnosticism concerning authorship of all non-Pauline material while attributing Pauline authorship to every letter that bears his name, but again, the problem is in the overconfidence, not the disagreement.

I also think that Hengel overplays the dispute between Peter and Paul (48-79), especially when he says, “*The deep divide that was signified by the dramatic, public, drawn-out dispute between Peter and Paul is something we cannot portray deeply enough.*” (63, emphasis his) So while it may be true that the conflict between the two and its effects are “often downplayed” (57), Hengel seems to go to the other extreme even to the point where he has Luke serving as an apologist for Paul, presenting him as a “successor to Peter” which means “unfairly in terms of history” that Luke “allows Peter to be pushed aside by Paul.” (78) Luke harmonizes and reconciles things in Acts for Paul’s benefit and here is where Hengel plays mind reader in asserting that “Luke knows much more about what happened here than he writes.” (79) It’s not out of the realm of possibility that Luke knows more than he writes, but the motivation for leaving out certain material is anyone’s guess, and anyone’s guess is still just a guess.

The second section is an expanded and revised version of Hengel’s article “Apostolische Ehen und Familien,” *INTAMS Review* 3.1 (1997): 62-74. Even though Hengel said he revised this section to focus more on Peter than the original article did, I didn’t see the payoff. It still ends up reading like an essay on apostolic families and their functions. Peter doesn’t seem to enjoy any pride of place and I questioned how or why this material made it into this book. It’s good in its own right but it seemed out of place.

Now don’t take these critical remarks as a sign that this book has no value. Hengel is still as erudite as they come and even if one ends up disagreeing with him on some points, as I have, they will inevitably agree with him on others. He’s correct to highlight Peter’s extreme importance as the Rock (Hengel employs the curious term “Man of Rock” throughout the book). He recognizes that Jesus’ words in Matthew 16:17-19 (even if not really *Jesus’* words) refer to the man Peter and not his confession. He’s correct to challenge the idea that a Petrine theology cannot be discerned from the NT, although I think his case would be bolstered significantly if he’d allow for the Petrine Letters (at the very least 1 Peter) to actually have been authored by Peter. But I’m on board with his drawing Peter’s theology from Mark’s Gospel since I think the tradition that Mark was Peter’s companion and relates Peter’s teaching is reliable for the most part. I can’t be sure that Mark wrote the Gospel that bears his name but I’d need a great reason to reject this belief wholesale. I also think Hengel’s question concerning the significance of Peter’s role in pre-Markan tradition (see 38-39) is one worthy of exploration. He’s correct to emphasize Peter’s missionary activity to both Jews and Gentiles, which was much more successful and prominent than one might think from reading other literature.

But as with any book, agreements and disagreements could be multiplied in a review; let me just say that I think students of the NT cannot help but benefit from Hengel's work in some way. It's a relatively short and easy read so I'd recommend it to students at the college level and above.