

Die johanneische Frage. By Martin Hengel. WUNT 67. Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr (Paul Siebeck), 1993, xiv + 485 pp., n.p.*

Hengel, one of the foremost Biblical scholars of our day, has produced a massive assault on the "Johannine community hypothesis" that currently dominates the landscape of Johannine studies. English-speaking readers have received a foretaste of Hengel's views in *The Johannine Question* (SCM/Trinity, 1989), a work based on the five Stone Lectures given at Princeton Theological Seminary in the fall of 1987. In the foreword to that edition Hengel had already alluded to the publication of a more extensive German manuscript, which is now available in the book under review.

Hengel is convinced that the testimony of the early fathers must again be given proper attention. Consequently the lion's share of Hengel's work is devoted to a painstaking analysis of the second-century evidence. Hengel's fundamental contention is that "the Gospel and the letters are not the expression of a community with many voices, but above all the voice of a towering theologian, the founder and head of the Johannine school." According to Hengel, collectives, such as the alleged "Johannine community," seldom create such profound theological works as John's gospel. Great individual thinkers do.

The power in Hengel's assault on the prevailing paradigm lies in the fact that this eminent historian attacks the "Johannine community hypothesis" on historical grounds. According to Hengel there is no independent historical evidence for the "history" of a Johannine community. But while Hengel is conservative when measured against the increasingly speculative mood in North American Johannine scholarship, he does not conclude that John the son of Zebedee wrote the fourth gospel, as has traditionally been held. He rather attributes authorship to "John the elder," referred to by Papias, distancing himself from either side of the issue, conservative or otherwise.

This rejection of the identification of the fourth gospel's "beloved disciple" with John the son of Zebedee is based on the argument that the editors of the fourth gospel could easily have made that identification but refrained from doing so. Hengel appears to presuppose here that the figure of the "beloved disciple" is a creation of the fourth gospel's editors or of an author other than the apostle John. This, however, is the very question that is at issue. What if the apostle John himself created the literary figure of the "beloved disciple" and refrained from identifying himself explicitly with this person in order to remain anonymous?

Hengel himself believes that there was an aging founder figure named John whose death gave occasion to the gospel's publication by his disciples. He even contends that the fourth evangelist and the editor/redactor of the fourth gospel are one and the same person — i.e., that the fourth evangelist himself edited his own work. Hengel does, however, refrain from taking the final step — i.e., concluding that the fourth gospel's author was in fact John the son of Zebedee. This reluctance may be due to Hengel's negative evaluation of the gospel's historical reliability in general (p. 230; cf. also his "Aufgaben der neutestamentlichen Wissenschaft," *NTS* 40 [1994] 321–357, esp. 334–337).

In place of the traditional identification, Hengel prefers to postulate the rather complicated theory of a *Doppelantlitz* (dual face) of the fourth gospel's author in the form of "two different Johannine figures" — i.e., John the son of Zebedee and an "elder John,"

the founder and head of a school who allegedly came from a Jewish aristocratic milieu (p. 317). The latter figure, according to Hengel, was the fourth evangelist, who invented the literary but not necessarily "unhistorical" figure of the "beloved disciple" in order to establish a connection between himself and John the son of Zebedee. Once again, however, there appears to be nothing in Hengel's work that speaks against an identification of the "beloved disciple" and of the fourth evangelist with John the son of Zebedee. One may legitimately ask whether it would not be more appropriate to consider John the son of Zebedee, the aging apostle, as the fourth gospel's author who, for whatever reason, hid behind the literary pseudonym of the "beloved disciple."

Such a case cannot and need not be made here (but see L. Morris, *Studies in the Fourth Gospel*, drawing on Westcott, and the work of D. A. Carson). Dare we suggest that Hengel's unquestioned erudition might have complicated matters unnecessarily (cf. Acts 26:24)? Nevertheless, while one may not agree entirely with Hengel's particular reconstruction, and while his contribution may not erode the modern consensus due to scholars' commitment to the prevailing paradigm, the evidence and argument he presents should cause a serious reevaluation of recent trends in Johannine studies.

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