Book Review: Who Chose the Gospels?

Ched E. Spellman
Cedarville University, cspellman@cedarville.edu

Follow this and additional works at: http://digitalcommons.cedarville.edu/biblical_and_ministry_studies_publications

Part of the Biblical Studies Commons

Recommended Citation
In defense of Dunn, some of the criticisms expressed in *Memories of Jesus* seem to be something less than substantial. One example is the question posed by more than one critic about how new Dunn’s new perspective really is. One might envision critics quibbling with Jesus over how “new” his “new commandment” really was. In a few other cases, Dunn’s critics seemed to miss the point; for example, one scholar challenges Dunn on the grounds that Jesus did not inspire faith in all of his hearers. It also seems that some of Dunn’s critics expect him to address adequately and solve all possible problems or issues raised by his proposal. Good scholarship often raises as many questions as it solves; so, while it is entirely valid to ask such questions, it seems unfair to criticize Dunn for not having addressed all of them in a single book.

Other issues are much more substantial. For example, more than one scholar questioned the gulf between the Jesus of history and the remembered Jesus, and whether it was possible to move from the latter to the former—as Dunn himself occasionally appears to do—all the while insisting that *all we have* is the remembered Jesus. Even more substantial is the question about the relationship between eyewitness testimony and the corporate memories of early Christian communities. Dunn acknowledges the importance of eyewitnesses in developing the tradition but insists that he did not want to “make the authority and value of the Jesus tradition dependent on being able to trace it back to specific eyewitnesses.” Dunn’s point is well taken, but the criticism remains valid. A future edition of *Jesus Remembered* would be improved by exploring this connection further. Much more serious is Dunn’s view of the resurrection. Both Davis and Habermas rightly take issue with Dunn’s view that Paul did not believe in the physical resurrection of Jesus as well as the fact that Dunn believes that Paul had a different view than that of the Evangelists. Dunn responds by saying that he believes in a bodily resurrection but says it does not follow that the bodily resurrection was physical. Dunn would do well to clarify his clarification.

All of the respondents express appreciation for the enormous contribution of Dunn’s *Jesus Remembered*. Overall, the essays in *Memories of Jesus* not only provide excellent support, correction, and balance to the discussion, but they also point toward stimulating avenues for further research.

Dennis Ingolfsland
Crown College, St. Bonifacius, MN

---


Popular accounts of biblical canon formation are often fraught with intrigue and marked by persistent rumbles of conspiracy. Since the fourfold Gospel corpus of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John came to function as the foundational unit of the NT canon, the following questions naturally arise: “Why these four?” and “Why these four?” Many scholars of early Christianity argue that the early church was “drowning in a sea of Gospels” and that “Christianity’s early centuries were something of a free-for-all with regard to Gospel literature” (p. 1). If there were a multitude of competing accounts of Jesus’ life and all Gospels were created equal, then the narrow selection of the canonical Gospels would be a matter of coercion, with a particular faction of the church choosing which Gospels would belong in the church’s authoritative Bible. Accordingly, many agree that the selection of the Gospels was a late, controversial, and arbitrary development that was only achieved through the methodical suppression of rival voices.
In this volume, Charles E. Hill seeks to present the historiographical minority report to this scholarly consensus. Through an investigation of the relevant historical data, Hill aims “to examine critically some of the foundational scholarship used to support and promote this now popular narrative of how the church ended up with four, and only four, Gospels” (p. 4). Hill serves as professor of New Testament at Reformed Theological Seminary in Orlando, Florida, and this volume draws on a substantive body of work dealing with the formation of the Gospels and early Christianity.

In his attempt to debunk the “conspiracy theory” of a late and coercively established Gospel corpus, Hill revisits the major figures in the debate and tells a different story about what they perceived and what they received. After a chapter on recent manuscript discoveries in Egypt, Hill begins with Irenaeus of Lyons in the late second century. In his writings, Irenaeus mentions each of the Gospels and provides a creative defense of why there are four of them. In order to render Irenaeus’s witness to a Gospel collection insignificant and “silence the Bishop,” some scholars portray Irenaeus as a lone ranger, almost totally isolated from the rest of his contemporaries. To counter this portrait of a “lonely Irenaeus,” Hill notes that Irenaeus wrote confidently “as if the church had been nurtured by these four Gospels from the time of the apostles” (p. 41). In this sense, “he simply wrecks the popular paradigm,” because he seems to assume rather than establish this section of the NT (p. 41). Hill next surveys a number of figures that followed Irenaeus (e.g. Tertullian, Origen) and shows from their writings that the acceptance of the four Gospels was relatively widespread.

In the rest of the book, Hill digs deeper into church history in search of a figure capable of choosing the Gospels. Hill proceeds to implicate Clement of Alexandria, Serapion of Antioch, and the author of the Muratorian Fragment as “co-conspirators” along with Irenaeus in granting the four Gospels authoritative status. These figures “at points far distant from each another [sic] on the map, are all saying or implying that the church has the same four acknowledged Gospels” (p. 99). The presence of Gospel harmonies (e.g. Tatian’s Diatessaron), works of synopsis, and liturgical pulpit editions also assume the existence and circulation of the Gospels in the late second century. These works are “all significant literary-technological ‘packaging’ projects which presuppose the primacy of the four” (p. 121).

Pushing back further, Hill engages the mid-second century teaching of Justin Martyr. In his apologetic work, Justin appeals to the “Memoirs of the Apostles,” which were written by “Jesus’ apostles and their followers” and were utilized in the worship of the churches (p. 132). When Justin cites these memoirs, the content is drawn from Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. Consequently, Hill concludes that “Justin knew all four canonical Gospels and knew them as an already standard grouping” (p. 143). As was the case with Irenaeus, Hill argues that Justin was not necessarily out of step with his contemporaries in his view of the Gospels. Justin too had “co-conspirators” that indicate the public and widespread usage of this collection. A number of works among the Apostolic Fathers (e.g. Polycarp of Smyrna, Ignatius) also exhibit an awareness of “the gospel” not only as an oral proclamation but also as a written entity. Though these early precursors are by no means definitive, they do suggest that the “religious apparatus” that “made the reception of the four Gospels, as well as the rest of the New Testament, possible (if not inevitable), was in place already in the late first century” (p. 204).

In his last presentation of evidence, Hill entertains the possibility that there was an “arch-conspirator” in the first century who had a hand in choosing the Gospels. He suggests that an important, and perhaps the earliest, testimony to a four-Gospel collection is embedded in the writings of church historian Eusebius. In his work Ecclesiastical History, Eusebius records a selection of comments from Papias, bishop of Hierapolis in the early second century. In these selections, Papias recounts the testimony of a figure named John the elder, who gives witness to all four Gospels and even asserts that the apostle John wrote his Gospel in order to complement and complete the Synoptics. Even
if this account is “legendary,” the fact that Papias recounts it means that he was aware of the close relationship between the four Gospels. Papias, then, represents “the earliest first-hand source for a recognition of all four Gospels” (p. 222).

After this extensive survey, Hill returns in a concluding chapter to the book’s central concern. If his survey of evidence is plausible, then the question of who chose the Gospels at least predates the fourth century. Each step taken back into the history of the church has a signpost pointing to an earlier generation. The evidence for an authoritative moment of selection by a “primal chooser” is “embarrassingly lacking” and “we simply know of no councils or synods from this period which deliberated on the matter” (p. 230). Even the attempt to formulate possible criteria of canonicity that the church used misses the point, because “the church essentially did not believe it had a choice in the matter!” (p. 231). According to Hill, the question would not have made sense to the churches of the second century, because these writings “had been in the family as long as anyone could remember” (p. 233). In this context, the internal textual properties of the Gospels themselves are what commended them. These were the Gospels that presented Jesus as the Messiah of the Hebrew Scriptures and the ones in which the church “encountered the real Jesus and divine power” (p. 239). The competing Gospels, if they were true rivals at all, paled in comparison. In other words, recognition of the four canonical Gospels was actually not much of a choice.

One helpful aspect of Hill’s volume is his emphasis on manuscript evidence and relevant archeological discoveries (e.g. chap. 1). In canon studies, external historical evidence that has a bearing on the canon formation process is often scant and fragmentary. This reality makes the careful investigation of biblical manuscripts crucial and means that an interpreter’s presuppositions will play an important role in an analysis of the data. Hill is aware of this problem, and a vital part of his critique of those who downplay the existence of early forms of canonical texts rests squarely upon the assumptions that are made in the process (e.g. see Hill’s discussion of “minimalism,” pp. 185–89). Further, Hill helpfully delineates between clear and tentative conclusions that can be drawn from the historical evidence. His case for an early establishment of the four Gospels is cumulative and moves from certain to plausible cases (e.g. p. 206). Hill also provides a historical context for various points of conflict that affect the interpretation of the manuscript evidence (e.g. “Do Christians read other books?” pp. 75–78). In this way, Hill presents the “other side” of the argumentation used by the scholarly consensus.

Much of the ink spilled in the canon debate revolves around how “canon” is defined. Is it only a closed list, or does it also involve authority and use? Hill raises this question in the introduction (pp. 5–6), but he does not return to it formally. This definitional issue might have been traced throughout his discussion or at least revisited directly in conclusion. Part of the burden of Hill’s study, though, is in fact to demonstrate the connection between authoritative usage in the churches and what it means for a work to be “canonical.” Also, because of the nature of the sources under investigation, sometimes Hill’s connections are thin and more difficult to follow (e.g. Papias’s nested quotations). However, as noted above, Hill recognizes this ambiguity and revises the tenor of his conclusions accordingly. In these areas, Hill might have strengthened his argument by interacting with the work of David Trobisch in The First Edition of the New Testament (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000).

Although Hill discusses many technical details and messy historical issues, he manages to keep his prose accessible and stimulating throughout. He also frequently engages the arguments of figures who have popularized the current secular paradigm of canon formation (e.g. Bart Ehrman, Elaine Pagels, Dan Brown). Rather than a conspiracy plot marked by malevolent skulduggery, Hill’s narrative uncovers “the less sensational truth” (p. 101) involving an early and natural recognition of a four-fold Gospel collection in the early church. This apologetic aspect makes this book a helpful resource for evangelicals who are interested in careful and reasoned responses to these claims about
the Bible and early Christianity. Hill also provides helpful introductions to a number of key issues in the canon debate and includes a brief glossary of unfamiliar terms. Thus, among the many competing accounts of Gospel selection, Hill’s volume would be a good choice.

Ched Spellman
Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary, Fort Worth, TX


Elliott and Reasoner have provided a much welcomed resource containing invaluable insight into the social, political, and religious world of Paul. Inspired in part by David Cartlidge and David Dungan’s Documents for the Study of the Gospels (2d ed.; Minneapolis: Fortress, 1994), Documents and Images for the Study of Paul provides the reader with a firsthand look into a generous portion of texts and other materials from early Christianity. Interest in the first-century world in which Paul ministered, of course, is hardly new. As Elliott and Reasoner briefly discuss, several works have been published during the last century that examine the social, religious, and political world of the NT writers in general or the world of Paul in particular. What is especially unique and helpful about this present work is its accessibility and scope. Many of the previous studies of the world of Paul have either focused primarily upon one particular aspect of the first-century world (e.g. women’s place within society or the early church) or required the reader to locate a number of obscure sources on their own. In welcome contrast, this volume provides the reader with a fairly balanced treatment of a number of subjects relevant to the study of the first-century world of Paul in an accessible and convenient format. While certainly not comprehensive in all subjects addressed (a most daunting task!), the volume provides the reader with a fresh and firsthand introduction to many important aspects of the world of Paul without the cumbersome and challenging task of locating a number of obscure texts that in many cases have not been translated into English.

Following a brief introduction, the volume includes six thematically arranged chapters on topics relating in some way to Paul’s life and ministry. Each chapter begins with a helpful introduction that typically emphasizes the importance or uniqueness of a specific aspect of Paul’s ministry or message and any insights that might be gleaned from the Pauline corpus. Each chapter concludes with a “questions for reflection” section designed for review and further reflection and a short bibliography of some of the more notable works students may wish to consult. A number of black-and-white photographs of important archeological sites, manuscripts, paintings, pottery, inscriptions, sculpture, artifacts, and other related sources are scattered throughout the book. In addition, several helpful indices are included, furthering the book’s accessibility and ease of use.

In the first chapter, the authors provide an insightful introduction into how various aspects of Paul’s self-presentation may have been perceived during his lifetime. As the material provided in the chapter reveals, Paul often presented himself in ways that would likely have been perceived as either unfavorable or unconventional. Among other things, Paul frequently portrayed himself as a slave and apostle of Christ. How these roles would have been perceived by various parties during the time of Paul is discussed in light of a sampling of several ancient writings. The chapter also provides valuable insight into the typical practices, functions, and lifestyles of philosophers during the time of Paul as well as some of the virtues that they held in high esteem. Common at-