

REVIEW–DISCUSSION

Charles E. Hill, *Who Chose the Gospels? Probing the Great Gospel Conspiracy*. Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2010. Pp. xi + 295. Hardcover, £14.99/\$27.95. ISBN 978-0-19-955123-1.

Note: The Table of Contents of this book appears at the end of the review.

The 20th and 21st centuries were rich in the discovery of early Christian texts which inflamed the imagination of many novelists, such as Dan Brown to cite only the most popular, but also of many scholars. The long-time controversy regarding the dating of the ‘canonisation’¹ of the Gospels has recently been brought back into the spotlight by the publication in 2006 of the *Gospel of Judas*. The publication of all these so-called ‘Gnostic’² Gospels has indeed aroused new questions about the formation of the New Testament as we know it, and many influential scholars, such as Elaine Pagels,³ William Petersen⁴ and Bart D. Ehrman,⁵ have often concluded that the ‘Great Church’ conspired to impose a fourfold Gospel, composed solely of *Mark*, *Matthew*, *Luke* and *John*. Indeed, these scholars tend to attribute the

¹ The practice of producing canons is often believed to be inherited from pagan and Jewish traditions. The term canon (from the Greek *kavōv*) has at least eleven different meanings, but the most important ones here are: a) a rule, a norm or a guide; and b) a list, a catalogue or a register. ‘Scripture’ is sometimes mixed up with ‘canon’ but as Holmes (2008) notes: ‘Canonicity is a matter of list making, not scriptural status.’ Hill does not enter this debate in detail, which might be regrettable as it is not always clear which meaning prevails in his study. The dating of the ‘canonisation’ of the Gospels partially relies on the definition of ‘canon’, as, according to the meaning scholars give to this term, it can be variously dated to the 4th century (Sundberg took ‘canonical’ as meaning ‘a closed authoritative list’), or c. 200 for Harnack (for whom ‘canonical’ meant ‘regarded as scripture’) or c. 100, for Zahn, who understood ‘canonical’ as ‘authoritative’, which seems to be Hill’s position as well. On these debates see Holmes (2008).

² The term ‘Gnostic’ is also controversial and Hill, although he does not mention the current debate on the term, uses it sparingly. Some scholars, such as Michael Williams for example, consider that the categorisation of a text as ‘Gnostic’ obstructs an objective analysis of its content. On this debate see Marjanen (2008).

³ Pagels (2003).

⁴ Petersen (2004).

⁵ Ehrman (2003a).

formation of the New Testament to Athanasius, bishop of Alexandria, who, in a letter written in 367 CE, gives a complete and definitive list of the twenty-seven books as the official Christian Scripture.⁶

On the other hand, in 1930 Burnett H. Streeter⁷ dated the canonisation of the Gospels to c. 180 CE, supported more recently by modern NT scholars such as Francis Watson who claims that: 'If the individual canonical gospels are all the products of the first Christian century, their gathering into a four-fold canonical form is the work of the [latter half of the] second century'.⁸ C. E. Hill is here expounding a third alternative dating for the canonisation of the Gospels.

With *Who Chose the Gospels? Probing the Great Gospel Conspiracy*, Hill embarks on a quest to counterattack the Christian conspiracy theory and unravel the mystery surrounding the Christian sacred books. In a very skilful and enjoyable way, Hill dissects one ancient source after another in search of hints of knowledge of the four Gospels and their usage by the Christian communities at the early stage of the Church's birth. Following a more traditional view, Hill boldly reasserts Metzger's theory,⁹ according to which the fourfold Gospel actually imposed itself on the basis of its apostolic origins very early in Christian history, far before Athanasius or even Irenaeus of Lyons. In his well-argued treatment of ancient sources, Hill rather convincingly shows that the fourfold Gospel was already widely used and authoritative amongst the various Christian communities as early as the end of the first century/beginning of the second century.

Hill begins his investigation by dealing with the 'sea of multiple gospels', which according to Petersen 'were breeding like rabbits' (p. 2). As noted by Hill, Petersen indulges in considerable rhetorical exaggeration in this statement as his own list reveals only nine gospels.¹⁰ Hill takes only eight of these into account, putting aside *The Infancy Gospel of James* because of its genre. Thanks to a brief and clear papyrology lesson, Hill shows us that the ratio of canonical gospels to non-canonical gospels is highly significant. While between thirty and thirty-six fragments of the four canonical Gospels dating around 200 CE were found in Egypt, only ten to thirteen fragments representing seven different non-canonical gospels of this time are known to us. Hill arrives at the ratio of four to one and he adds that, as the papyri were

⁶ See for example, Ehrman (2003b) 3.

⁷ Streeter (1930) 1.

⁸ Watson (2006) 35. In 2013, Prof. Watson will be publishing a book entitled *Gospel Writing: A Canonical Perspective*, which will be relevant to this discussion.

⁹ See Metzger (1987).

¹⁰ Petersen (2004) 51–2.

discovered in Egypt, where, according to some scholars,¹¹ heretics and their writings were prevailing, the ‘Gnostic’ Gospels might well have been less represented in the rest of the Empire. While Hill’s general point is a strong one, he himself minimises the number of ‘non-canonical’ Gospels. As mentioned by P. M. Head in his review of Hill’s book,¹² the number of non-canonical Gospels is debatable as later lists of non-canonical Gospels exist. Indeed, Head refers to a Samaritan list of 35 non-canonical Gospels.¹³ Moreover, as suggested by *Luke* 1.1—‘Since many have undertaken to set down an orderly account of the events ...’—many Gospels already existed in the first century.

In the two next chapters, Hill undertakes to defend Irenaeus, bishop of Lyons, whose vehement writings against heretics and sometimes imperious style make him rather unpopular amongst some modern scholars. Indeed, Irenaeus is considered by scholars such as Elaine Pagels,¹⁴ Lee McDonald¹⁵ and Arthur Bellinzoni¹⁶ to be the creator of the New Testament canon and the predecessor of Athanasius who, inspired by Irenaeus’ work, defined the Church canon in the late fourth century. Hill summarises their view in these words: ‘Like an axe-happy frontiersman of bygone days, blind to ecological realities, Irenaeus destroyed a perfectly good stand of Gospel trees in order to create his four-Gospel canon’ (p. 42). However, as Hill acutely notes, when Irenaeus declares in his *Against Heresies* (3.11.8) that ‘It is not possible that the Gospels can be either more or fewer in number than they are, for, since there are four zones of the world in which we live, and four principal winds, while the Church is scattered throughout all the world [...] it is fitting that she should have four pillars ...’, he is merely explaining *why* there are four Gospels, referring to a tradition already established as ‘handed down to us in the Scriptures’. Another modern allegation against Irenaeus is that although his view was followed later on, the bishop of Lyons was quite an isolated case in his time (c. 180 CE). Hill shows the contrary, citing Hippolytus of Rome, Tertullian, Origen, Dionysius of Alexandria, and Cyprian amongst others as examples of early Christian sources which also accepted and recognised the four-fold Gospel as the only authoritative Scripture. Hill adds that, contrary to Pagels’ assertion¹⁷ that Irenaeus instructed the Chris-

¹¹ See Ehrman (2003a) 174; Aland (1995) 59; and Epp (1989).

¹² Head (2010).

¹³ See MacDonald and Higgins (1971), esp. 66–9.

¹⁴ Pagels (2003) 111.

¹⁵ McDonald (2004).

¹⁶ Bellinzoni (2005) 49 n. 17.

¹⁷ Pagels (2003) 142.

tian communities to destroy the non-canonical Gospels, the bishop actually never did so. Despite his advice to Victor, bishop of Rome, to expel Florinus' books (which contained Valentinian material),¹⁸ Hill remains certain that no church or bishop at that time 'had anything resembling the kind of imperial power [...] to search out private copies of a detested book, seize them, and destroy them' (p. 62).

Chapter 4 is dedicated to Irenaeus' 'co-conspirators' as Hill facetiously names them. Hill considers first Clement of Alexandria's work, in which he compares the usage of the canonical Gospels to the non-canonical ones. We here learn that Clement refers to *Matthew* 757 times, *Luke* 402 times, *John* 331 times and *Mark* 182 times while there are references to the *Gospel of the Egyptians* only 8 times, 3 times for the *Gospel of the Hebrews* and 3 times as well for the *Traditions of Matthias*. No references to the *Gospel of Peter*, the *Gospel of Judas*, the *Gospel of Mary*, the *Gospel of Thomas* or the *Egerton Gospel* are found anywhere in Clement's work.¹⁹ Clement also alludes to *Matthew*, *Mark*, *Luke* and *John* as 'the four Gospels that have been handed down to us' (*Stromateis*, 3.13.93), which shows that Clement who was writing at approximately the same time as Irenaeus, agreed with the bishop of Lyons on this point. Hill then turns to Serapion, patriarch of Antioch, and reports the problem Serapion had to deal with in Rhossus concerning the *Gospel of Peter*. The congregation in Rhossus had asked Serapion for permission to read this Gospel in the church, permission which he granted at first, but after reading the work himself, the bishop of Antioch changed his mind, seeing the heretical content of the *Gospel of Peter*. Hill draws several interesting conclusions from Serapion's reaction towards this 'Gnostic' Gospel: Serapion knew of a category of books 'received by tradition', the same 'hand-me-down' books of Clement and Irenaeus. Serapion also knew of the existence of Gospels falsely attributed to one of Jesus' apostles and did not recognise them as those 'handed down by tradition'. Moreover, Serapion acknowledged apostolic authority as 'tantamount to the authority of Christ himself', such authority being possessed only by certain books, either because they were writ-

¹⁸ The Valentinian sect was a 'Gnostic' movement created by Valentinus c. 136–140 which, although they considered themselves Christians, differed on many points. For example, they did not recognise Jesus' humanity. They also had a polytheist theology composed of thirty gods, including Sophia, a fallen *aeon* and the lesser of all, who gave birth to Yahweh and abandoned him. Influenced by Neo-Platonic philosophy and Hellenic cosmology, the Valentinians tried to reconcile Plato's theory of *Pleroma* and Christianity.

¹⁹ As Hill remarks in his answer to Head's critique of these numbers, they include allusions as well as direct quotations, which explains why the numbers given by Mutschler (here cited by Hill) are significantly higher than those given by Cossaert. See Head (2010) for more detail.

ten by the apostles themselves or approved by them (p. 89). The analysis of the work of Theophilus (Serapion's predecessor) and of the *Muratorian Fragment* complements Hill's conclusion that, at the end of the second century, in all parts of the Empire, the four Gospels were already established as authoritative Scripture and that Irenaeus was not the 'solitary individual with no predecessors, no peers' (p. 42) Pagels, McDonald and Bellinzoni think him to be.

In Chapter 5, Hill examines the different forms of 'packaging' the Gospels took: the harmonies, synopses and codices. Hill shows that Tatian's *Diatessaron*, a harmony of the four Gospels written c. 170–175 CE, was not 'an attempt to create a single, definitive gospel, a "super-gospel", superseding all other gospels' as Petersen²⁰ suggests, but on the contrary, was intended as an aid to Christian teachers, who would have needed an easier access to Scripture. Ammonius' Synopsis (mid-third century) had the same aim. The binding of the Gospels into codices also shows this concern of providing easy access to the texts, especially for public reading. Hill here notices that in none of the papyri fragments discovered so far have we found 'Gnostic' Gospels bound together with the canonical Gospels; neither are they mentioned in the other 'packaging' forms mentioned above. This material evidence thus reinforces greatly Hill's point and leads him to the conclusion that 'the prominence of these Gospels, the perception of their overall unity, and even their sacred status must have originated from a time even earlier in the second century' (p. 122).

From Chapter 6 on, Hill's task becomes more difficult owing to the sources he exploits, and while the first half of the book is very convincing and clear, the second half might seem more speculative, with arguments that sometimes appear a little far-stretched. But, in Hill's defence, dealing with Justin Martyr's work can indeed be rather challenging, as Justin never identifies clearly the Gospels he is referring to. After justifying Justin's lack of reference to the Gospels with what he calls the 'Hoist with his Own Petard'²¹ theory, Hill proceeds to examine Justin's references to the 'Memoirs of the Apostles', that is, the Gospels. Justin declares in his *First Apology* (66.3): 'For the apostles, in the memoirs which have come about by their agency, which are called Gospels, have thus delivered unto us ...', and in his *Dialogue with Trypho* (103.8), Justin adds that the Gospels were composed by 'Jesus' apostles and his followers'. Hill deduces from these two statements that Justin is referring here to 'at least two gospels written by apostles and at least two

²⁰ Petersen (2004) 67.

²¹ Justin, in accordance with the apologetical style he writes in, does not refer to his sources by name because he writes to non-Christians and uses his opponents' own sources to refute their arguments. See the *Dialogue with Trypho, the Jew*.

others written by followers of the apostles' (p. 132). Hill then undertakes the task of analysing the subtle hints left by Justin in his work and shows that the evidence tends to prove that Justin indeed had knowledge of all four Gospels and held only these four as authoritative Scripture.

Hill's next chapter might come as a surprise as he investigates sources from 'the ranks of unbelievers'. Those whom Hill qualifies, again facetiously, as Justin's 'co-conspirators' are Trypho, the Emperor and the Senate, Crescens, and Celsus,²² who, like Justin on the other side, used his opponents' own sources to refute them and to show the inconsistencies present in the Christian texts. Hill's bold approach to the problem here is laudable but is not as convincing as his previous arguments and could have been skipped.

Chapter 8 deals with the fictional texts of the *Apocryphon of James*, the *Epistula Apostolorum* as well as the *Infancy Gospel of Thomas*, Marcion and Aristides of Athens. Hill, following his investigation of these texts, concludes that these early texts 'reflect in the first half of the second century something of the normative influence already being exercised by the four canonical Gospels both inside and outside the mainstream church' (p. 182).

Hill reaches the same conclusion in the next chapter dedicated to the Apostolic Fathers (Clement of Rome, Ignatius of Antioch, Polycarp of Smyrna, etc.) by showing that each one of them knew at least one of the Gospels and considered this writing as authoritative as having been handed down by the apostles. But Hill keeps the best for last.

Hill turns his attention finally to Papias, bishop of Hierapolis writing c. 120 CE, whose work we know through Eusebius' *Ecclesiastical History*. Not only does the evidence show clearly that Papias knew the four Gospels, but his claim of being the depositor of earlier teachings revealed to him by 'John the Elder' pushes this tradition back to c. 100 CE, around the time at which John's Gospel was published and started to circulate.

Who chose the Gospels then? Hill's answer to this central question might seem disappointing and much less exciting than those offered by the supporters of the conspiracy theory, but the provocative way in which he reasserts this traditional, very conservative view makes it nonetheless very interesting and appealing. Indeed, evoking the Darwinist theory of 'natural selection', Hill concludes that no one chose the Gospels but that they imposed themselves²³ on the Christians simply by their (alleged) apostolic ori-

²² See also the *Gospel of Truth* and the *Gospel of Judas*.

²³ Watson's view on this point (Watson (2006) 35) is radically different: 'Yet, in spite of Irenaeus, the fourfoldness of the church's canonical gospel is not a natural phenomenon. This fourfoldness was established by the collective decision of the most influential Christian communities of both east and west in the latter half of the second century'.

gins,²⁴ their apparent unity in content and the rightness of the message they conveyed.

In brief, in response to the recent publication of ‘popular’ works on the ‘Gnostic’ Gospels, by Ehrman among others, which have attracted a large audience of lay readers, Hill similarly provides us here with a ‘popular’ but well argued and well documented book. His highly enjoyable style makes this book easy to read, and the clear argumentation, as well as the technical background knowledge so adroitly provided in some chapters (especially on papyrology), render Hill’s scholarship accessible to all. It is regrettable that Hill chose endnotes rather than footnotes but the general format of the book is clear and agreeable. This book can be heartily recommended to anyone, scholar or lay readers alike, who ever wondered ‘Who Chose the Gospels?’²⁵

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²⁴ Hill actually does not enter the debate about the authorship of the Gospels but it is worth noticing here that very few modern scholars accept the apostolic origins of *John* in particular, but also of *Mark* and *Matthew*. The authorship and dating of the *Gospel of Luke* and *Acts* also remain much debated.

²⁵ I thank Professor John Moles for advice and Mr Thilo Rising for scrupulous copy-editing.

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