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RETHINKING THE APOSTLE PETER'S ROLE IN THE EARLY CHURCH

Noel B. Reynolds

Review of Martin Hengel, *Saint Peter: The Underestimated Apostle*. English translation by Thomas H. Trapp. Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 2010. 161 pp., with indices. \$18.00.

This posthumously published translation of Martin Hengel's last work brings together his pet project on the apostle Peter and a study of the role apostles' families played in providing homes for the establishment and growth of the early Christian movement.

In retrospect, Martin Hengel can be appreciated as one of the most influential scholars of early Christianity over the last half century. He will be remembered for his passionate commitment to both the critical historical approach to scholarly work and to the Christian gospel, a combination that has been seen to be contradictory by so many scholars and laymen, but which now inspires a growing cadre of Bible scholars.

Hengel wrote in German, but arranged for most of his work to be quickly translated into English, a strategy which many believe contributed to his rapid emergence as an internationally recognized scholar. His emphasis from the beginning was on Hellenic Judaism. While today many of his strongest supporters take somewhat softer positions than those that made Hengel famous, his basic insight about the importance of recognizing the deep inroads made by Hellenistic culture into pre-Christian Judaism, and subsequently into Judaic Christianity,

has become the standard assumption of scholars who work in those periods.

Hengel's main contributions include: (1) his rigorous use of chronology to demonstrate the remarkably rapid flowering of the Christian movement with its claims for Christ's divine mission and its focus on meetings of the faithful for joint worship, (2) the realization that Greek-speaking Christians assembled first at Jerusalem, (3) the possibility that Q—the hypothetical collection of Jesus's sayings in Greek that may have been used by the authors of the gospels—was also produced in the Jerusalem community, (4) that early Christian accounts of the atonement were drawn from Greek culture, and (5) that early Christianity can only be understood properly in the context of the Judaism of its day.

These themes return in various ways in this new study of Peter, the apostle that Hengel finds to be underestimated, in spite of the reverence given to him by both Catholics and Protestants. Hengel relies on a comprehensive assemblage of all early references to Peter, and his own interpretations of what these do and do not say, to paint a stronger picture of this first leader among the apostles. In the process, he develops a richer and in many ways a more convincing account of the relationships of Peter to James and to Paul, the two early Christians most often seen as his competitors.

While Hengel does not believe that Peter ever became a skilled writer, and especially not in Greek, he does believe that he was one of the most powerful and widely respected *witnesses* of Jesus Christ. Although he did not have Richard Bauckham's path-breaking study of the eyewitnesses behind the New Testament gospels¹ available when he wrote this little book on Peter, he would agree strongly with Bauckham's conclusion

1. Richard Bauckham, *Jesus and the Eyewitnesses: The Gospels as Eyewitness Testimony* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2006). See my review in *Mormon Studies Review* 23/1 (2011): 155–56.

that Mark was the first gospel, that it was based on Peter's accounts, and that this was a principal reason why Matthew and Luke relied so heavily on Mark and respected Peter so highly.

Hengel begins his study with a recognition of the authoritative position assigned to Peter in Matthew 16:17–19 as first among the disciples. However, the traditional Catholic argument that sees the Roman bishop as inheritor of this authority seems to him to be without basis, though this is only implied and not spelled out, because the Christian community in Rome was organized decades before Peter's visit there, and derived originally from the Christian congregations in Jerusalem itself, and not from missionary efforts. Virtually all historians today recognize that Rome only came to pre-eminence in the fourth century after the emperor Constantine took a leadership role in Christian affairs.

Hengel also offers a powerful linguistic analysis to show that the nickname of Kepha was given to Peter by Jesus himself and that it should be best translated as "rock" or "rock fragment" rather than as "stone"—the translation that has been widely favored of late. On Hengel's account, Peter served as the foundation or rock for the church for thirty-five years before his martyrdom in Rome.

Hengel finds in Peter the effective organizer, theological thinker, and effective proclaimer of the faith that made the first decades of successful establishment and propagation possible. He even sees Peter as a superior missionary to the Gentiles in comparison to Paul. He finds much of the perceived conflict between Peter and Paul on the one hand, and Peter and James on the other, to be overblown. James is described as head of the church in Jerusalem—the largest and most important Christian congregation in Peter's lifetime—and as the first of the monarchical bishops, who established an organizational pattern that was then imitated in other large urban settings

where the Christian movement had taken hold and had outgrown a few house churches.

The situation with Paul is more complex. Hengel believes Paul was deeply hurt when Peter, who had been living with Gentiles in Antioch, went over to eat with the Jerusalem delegation that continued to observe ritual purity laws. But in Peter's defense, Hengel points out that the Jerusalem Christians were wisely continuing this adherence to traditional Judaism as a policy matter—to protect themselves from persecution from zealous Jewish parties that ruled in Jerusalem in those decades. By showing support for them, Peter was protecting Palestinian Christians from persecution, and not deserting the theological acceptance of Gentiles that he had already endorsed. Paul's troubles with Petrine delegates in Corinth are seen by Hengel as disputes arising between their respective disciples that would not necessarily have occurred between the principals in person. Hengel further hypothesizes that Luke lets Peter drop out of his account after the 48/49 council in Jerusalem, even though he continues to be the principal figure in the church in those years—to avoid featuring the ongoing dispute between these two church leaders. Hengel further agrees with those interpreters who find some bits of evidence that Peter and Paul did eventually reconcile themselves, including that they were in Rome at the same time when they were martyred.

These conflicts between the disciples are treated with great care and detail in Hengel's analysis, but the nuances are far too complex for summary here. LDS readers will be forcibly reminded of the revelation received by Joseph Smith which confirmed that Jesus's "disciples, in days of old, sought occasion against one another and forgave not one another in their hearts; and for this evil they were afflicted and sorely chastened" (Doctrine and Covenants 64:8).

Referring to the witness of Christ provided in the writings of Paul and the four evangelists, Hengel concludes his analysis with the following:

This *common* “*apostolic witness*,” in spite of the apparent tensions that are preserved therein, is *unique* for the church and—in the full sense of the word—*foundational*. Appropriate explication of it is the central task for all Christian confessions. Ecumenical discussion can go forward in a meaningful way only on the basis of this foundation, which is held in common by all. This original witness does not continue to develop *ad infinitum* in terms of content, but it seeks rather *to call back to itself* each generation anew. Through such turning back and returning, Christ, according to Matthew, builds his community upon the “rock,” Peter.²

The second part of the book is a study entitled “The Family of Peter and Other Apostolic Families.” I will not review this in any detail here, but I merely point out that Hengel has assembled considerable evidence to show that the families and homes of the early apostles and other disciples played a key role in the way the Christian movement was organized and propagated. Two interesting conclusions he reaches are (1) that apostolic families and missionary couples played an essential role in establishing the new church throughout the empire, and (2) that later Christian demotion of marriage was a rejection of first-century belief and practice.

Noel Reynolds (PhD, Harvard University) is an emeritus professor of political science at Brigham Young University, where he taught a broad range of courses in legal and political philosophy, American Heritage, and the Book of Mormon. His research and publications are based in these fields and several others, including authorship studies, Mormon history, Christian history and theology, and the Dead Sea Scrolls.

2 Hengel, *Saint Peter*, 102.

