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Who Chose the Gospels? Probing the Great Gospel Conspiracy

Lincoln H. Blumell

C. E. Hill

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C. E. Hill. *Who Chose the Gospels? Probing the Great Gospel Conspiracy*.
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Reviewed by Lincoln H. Blumell

In *Who Chose the Gospels? Probing the Great Gospel Conspiracy*, C. E. Hill, professor of New Testament at Reformed Theological Seminary in Orlando, challenges the seemingly pervasive view in scholarship that it was not until the fourth century, when Christian “orthodoxy” began to be firmly entrenched, that the four canonical Gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John were selected by the church and raised to a status above all other competing Gospels. Hill argues that while this paradigm has become increasingly widespread in scholarship and is often propagated by the media or in popular culture (as in Dan Brown’s *The Da Vinci Code*) because it presupposes conspiracies and cover-ups by the early church, it is flawed and belies the actual evidence. Hill argues that when one looks at the evidence for the use of the four Gospels, it is clear that Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John had already achieved an unrivaled position of prominence among early Christian texts prior to the fourth century. Consequently, their inclusion in the New Testament canon was not the result of ecclesiastical politics or the imposition of emerging Christian orthodoxy but simply the natural end of a process.

To establish this claim, Hill systematically marshals a diverse array of evidence that ranges from the use of various Gospels as they are borne out in the papyri from the second and third centuries to the evidence supplied by different Christian authors for the use of the four canonical Gospels in the same period. Throughout his investigation, Hill engages contemporary scholarship, and it is clear from the start that he is addressing (and trying to refute) scholarship from the likes of Bart Ehrman, James M. Robinson, Robert W. Funk, Elaine Pagels, and Helmut Koester, who have all argued in various forms that the four canonical Gospels did not attain a status of supremacy until the fourth century. Though the book is primarily written for a general audience and is not overly technical, it is neither superficial nor sensational

and makes some genuine contributions to the ongoing debate over the status of the four canonical Gospels in the period before the fourth century.

In chapter 1, “The Proof Is in the Papyri,” Hill surveys the extant papyrological remains from the second and third centuries to determine what they might reveal about which Gospels Christians were reading. This investigation is prompted in part by a statement of James M. Robinson (quoted on page 10), who asserts that in the second century, “Gospels that were later to lose out, as non-canonical, were about as common as Gospels that were later to win out, as canonical.” Through a detailed examination of the papyri, Hill contests this claim by showing that the extant papyrological remains reveal that, in the second century, fragments belonging to canonical Gospels currently outnumber those belonging to noncanonical Gospels by a ratio of 7 to 2. While admitting that precise dating of manuscripts is difficult and allowing for the possibility that some dates may be off, Hill also includes fragments currently dated to the early third century; however, the evidence is still markedly in favor of the canonical Gospels by a ratio of 13 to 5. Raw counting of manuscripts is not necessarily sensitive to the breadth or depth of meaning placed on various texts by early Christians. Yet Hill points out (23–25) that these numbers are especially significant because Egypt, where all these fragments were found, was noted for its heterodoxy in the second century, so it is possible that if fragments from a broader geographic region could be surveyed, then the ratio in favor of the use of canonical to noncanonical Gospels might be even larger in the second century.

Here Hill creates a useful analogy that will certainly catch the attention of any LDS reader. To graphically articulate the significance of these statistics for the nonspecialist, Hill asks the reader to imagine that at some point in the future, the United States is completely wiped out by a disaster and the only archaeological remains available for analysis are in Salt Lake City. If these archaeologists believe that Salt Lake City is normative for the rest of the United States and find a number of fragments of the Book of Mormon, they would conclude that the Book of Mormon was just as popular as the Bible in the United States as a whole. Hill argues that we would certainly be right to question their conclusion. The point of this analogy is to show that Egypt (apparently like Salt Lake City) represents somewhat of an aberration—the evidence produced by it cannot be generalized and automatically applied to other regions. Hill is not trying to overtly attack either Mormonism or the Book of Mormon, but it is difficult not to interpret this analogy as a subtle jab at Mormonism since Hill implicitly associates “heterodox” forms of Christianity in the second century with Mormonism and heterodox Gospels with the Book of Mormon.

In chapters 2 and 3, Hill examines the role that Irenaeus (circa AD 130–200), an early church father from Lugdunum (Roman city in Gaul, modern-day Lyon), played in promoting the canonical Gospels in the second century since he is the first Christian author to unambiguously refer to the fourfold Gospel collection (Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John). For Irenaeus, there were only four authoritative Gospels, and Hill convincingly shows that on this point Irenaeus was no innovator but was merely transmitting an established tradition that preceded him. Hill also argues, against any would-be conspiracy theorist, that no second-century church father like Irenaeus had the power to impose his fourfold Gospel collection widely and would have hardly had the power to seek out and burn different Gospels (58–62). Additionally, Hill argues that Irenaeus was not alone in adhering to the four canonical Gospels. Later Christian writers like Hippolytus (circa AD 170–236), Origen (circa AD 185–254), Dionysius (died circa AD 264), and Cyprian (died AD 258) also adhered to the four-Gospel canon to the exclusion of other Gospels.

In chapter 4, wittily titled “Irenaeus’ ‘Co-Conspirators’: A Teacher, a Preacher, and a Canon-List Maker,” Hill examines the evidence provided by Clement of Alexandria (circa AD 150–215), Serapion (died circa AD 211), and the Muratorian Canon (late second century AD) to see what they collectively reveal about the status of the four canonical Gospels at the end of the second century. During his survey of Clement, Hill points out that while Clement makes reference to noncanonical Gospels, such as the Gospel of the Egyptians, he never refers to the Gospel of Thomas, the Gospel of Peter, or the Gospel of Judas. Also, Clement overwhelmingly prefers the canonical Gospels, as is evidenced by the number of times he references them in his writings: Matthew, 757 references; Mark, 182 references; Luke, 402 references; John, 331 references; and noncanonical Gospels (total), 14 references. Furthermore, Hill notes that when Clement discusses the Gospels “that have been handed down to us” (73), he mentions only Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. In his examination of Serapion, Hill makes the point that Serapion, and a number of other early Christians, believed that the Gospel of Peter was a forgery that lacked apostolic authority and was not one of the Gospels that was “received by tradition,” as the four canonical Gospels had been (89). At the end of the chapter, Hill briefly discusses the Muratorian Canon because it seems to list the four canonical Gospels as the ones preferred by at least one early church.

In chapter 5, “Packaging the Gospels,” Hill makes the argument that in the second and third centuries, the four Gospels were often seen as four parts composing a whole and that select papyrus codices even contained

all four Gospels. Likewise, Tatian's second-century harmony of the four Gospels, known as the Diatessaron, was never intended to supersede the four Gospels but actually reflects the preeminence these texts had already obtained in the second century. In chapters 6 and 7, Hill moves on to the writings of Justin Martyr (circa AD 100–165) and others in an attempt to show that early in the second century the four Gospels had already achieved a preeminent status among Christian texts. Hill argues that Justin definitely knew of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and probably John (136–40), and that he believed these Gospels were composed by “the apostles of Jesus and their followers” (Justin, *Dial.* 103.8 cited on page 132). Hill also makes the point that because Trypho and Celsus, two non-Christians from the second century, knew about Christianity primarily from reading these four Gospels, the four accounts must have carried a certain authority as “the” Christian texts even outside the church.

In chapter 8, various other sources such as the Apocryphon of James, the *Epistula Apostolorum*, the *Infancy Gospel of Thomas*, Marcion, and Aristides are surveyed to see what they might reveal about the four Gospels. Hill notes that all of these sources were aware of the four Gospels and that this is significant because it presupposes the normative status of the four Gospels “both inside and outside of the mainstream church” (182).

In chapters 9 and 10, Hill looks at evidence from the writings known together as the Apostolic Fathers (*Epistle to Diognetus*, Barnabas, Polycarp, Ignatius, the *Didache*, Clement of Rome, and Papias). Hill concludes that the authors of all the texts that make up the Apostolic Fathers knew of at least one of the four Gospels, and there is no indication that they were aware of or relied on any other Gospels. Furthermore, Papias definitely knew the Gospels of Matthew and Mark, as he mentions them by name, and connects these two directly to the Apostles (Mark via Peter). Given the very early date of Papias's testimony, Hill imbues this evidence with significance.

Overall, Hill makes a convincing case that the fourfold Gospel canon of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John was neither the result of fourth-century ecclesiastical politics nor the result of some conspiracy among the church's hierarchy to suppress alternative Gospels that did not conform to emerging orthodoxy. From Hill's study, it is apparent that at least some of these Gospels had clearly attained an authoritative status among Christians as early as the second century and that by the middle of the second century all four Gospels were very widely regarded as the authoritative texts on the life of Christ. This position of ascendancy was natural, according to Hill, because whatever one thinks about the dates of the four Gospels, there is

solid evidence that they were the earliest Gospels produced and there was a widespread feeling among early Christians that these Gospels were directly connected to either the Apostles of Jesus (Matthew and John) or to early disciples of the Apostles (Mark and Luke).

While Hill's general argument is cogent and his case is compelling, there are some definite problems with the work. While these do not undermine his central thesis, they do detract from certain arguments, causing the overall credibility of the work to diminish slightly. There is a tendency in Hill, just as there is in the scholarship he is seeking to refute, to push the evidence too far in one direction to the dismissal of contrary evidence and to make significant claims on the slightest piece of evidence. On page 8, for example, Hill notes that besides the four canonical Gospels, there were nine other known Gospels in circulation in the second century. He then makes the following statement: "It is not unlikely that more Gospels might have circulated before 175. But if they once existed they have left no record, even in later lists of books to be avoided." This statement is not entirely accurate as there are later lists of noncanonical Gospels that contain many more than just nine Gospels. In fact, if one were to count them all up, then one would be dealing with thirty or forty texts. While this does not undermine Hill's overall argument, this count should have been noted. Likewise, in Hill's general discussion of second-century sources, he has a predisposition to read them in such a way that he can usually find some evidence for the use of one or all of the four canonical Gospels. However, at times the evidence is so slight that it seems almost nonexistent, and Hill is relying on special pleading to make his case. In chapter 7, Crescens and "The Emperor and the Senate" can hardly be used as evidence, even indirectly, for the popularity of the four Gospels in the second century. Similarly, in chapter 10, despite Hill's claims, there is no convincing evidence in the extant fragments of Papias that he knew the Gospels of either Luke or John.

Notwithstanding Hill's implicit comparison of heterodox forms of Christianity with modern Mormonism, and the fact that Hill's evangelical biases at times color his conclusions, LDS readers will find much in this book both interesting and appealing. Keep in mind, however, that when difficulty arises between evangelical and LDS scholars, it is often because the latter are generally more welcoming of the idea that other gospels are important, beneficial, and even scriptural in various passages.

In conclusion, Hill's presentation of early Christian sources is informative, easy to follow for the layman, and offers a much needed counterbalance in scholarship. It cogently argues for the early ascendancy of the

four canonical Gospels and lacks the sensationalism that pervades many recent studies of early Christianity. While Latter-day Saints might not see the development of the Christian canon in the first few centuries as providentially as Hill presents it, there may be some general agreement on a number of fronts.

Lincoln H. Blumell (who can be reached via email at byustudies@byu.edu) is Assistant Professor of Ancient Scripture, Brigham Young University.