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A Review Article

THE ROOTS OF THE SYNOPTIC GOSPELS. By Bo Reicke.
Fortress Press, Philadelphia, 1986. Cloth, 191 pages.

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The late Professor Emeritus Bo Reicke of the University of Basel had been scheduled to offer two weeks of lectures during the seminary's first summer session in May 1987 on the Pauline epistles and the synoptic gospels. A week before they were scheduled he sent his lectures on the Pauline epistles with the disappointing news that his physician was advising him against traveling to America. The day before he was to begin his seminary lectures, he passed away peacefully. The lectures on the synoptic gospels were to come from the same material which had evolved into his book, *The Roots of the Synoptic Gospels*. Though we had this material, the course was canceled since his positions were so uniquely his.

Professor Reicke had begun his career at Lund in Sweden and turned down a call to the University of Marburg as the successor of Rudolph Bultmann. Subsequently he did succeed Karl Ludwig Schmidt as Professor of New Testament at the University of Basel, Switzerland. He held that chair until his retirement in 1986. An ordained clergyman in the Church of Sweden, he founded the only Lutheran congregation in Basel and assisted in gathering the handful of Swiss congregations of the Unaltered Augsburg Confession into a loose confederation as a confessional witness in the land of Zwingli, Bullinger, and Calvin. Recognized as a scholar for *The New Testament Era* and honored for his scholarship by his election to the presidency of the Society of New Testament Studies, he was a churchman interested in upholding the confession in which he was raised. This churchmanship becomes evident in *The Roots of the Synoptic Gospels*, where he places the origin of the synoptic gospels within the worship services of the earliest Christians.

Fortress Press has established a reputation of producing books on the cutting edge of New Testament scholarship which are challenging the orthodoxy of majority opinion. Fortress authors include not only Reicke, but also William R. Farmer and Martin Hengel. Farmer's *Jesus and the Gospels*, in opposing the two-

documentary hypothesis, restates the Griesbach hypothesis that Matthew and Luke were the first two gospels and Mark the third. Hengel's *Studies in the Gospel of Mark* defends the old church theory that Peter was the source behind Mark. Reicke's book, which appeared about the same time as Hengel's, agrees with it in seeing Peter as the source for Mark. It agrees with Farmer in challenging the two-documentary hypothesis, which sees Mark and the Q document as fundamental for Matthew and Luke. These are only cosmetic similarities.

Essentially different in Reicke's approach is his view that Matthew, Mark, and Luke appeared at the same time and there is no direct interdependency among them. To come to this opinion Reicke has proposed a firm and well-established tradition which each of the writers had at his disposal. The most popular theories of gospel origins assume that all of the gospel writers, with the exception of the first (Mark), wrote with knowledge of at least one other prior gospel. Reicke has circumvented the debate in proposing that each evangelist came to his decision to write independently of the others and that all of them did it within the same time frame of the early 60s.

Fundamental to Reicke's position is his view that the place of the imprisonment mentioned in Philemon and other Pauline epistles is Caesarea and not Rome. According to Philemon 24, both Mark and Luke were with Paul in Caesarea for a period of about two years. Caesarea's proximity to the places of the Lord's life gave them the opportunity to assemble the traditions for their gospels. The witness of Philemon 24 is very strong and perhaps has not been allowed to enter the debate on dating the New Testament documents; but the real problem is whether this fact alone is sufficiently determinative in explaining the similarities and origins of Mark and Luke. Minimally, it does allow and suggest a strong Pauline influence in them, a point which was suggested to this reader but not developed.

Since Reicke is blazing a new trail in gospel studies, his first chapter, "History of the Synoptic Discussion" (pp. 1-23), presents as background several theories: the utilization hypothesis (one evangelist is dependent on another); the Griesbach hypothesis propounded by Farmer; the proto-gospel theory (one unknown document is common to all four); the tradition hypothesis (the gospels come from the common tradition of the apostles), the one which Reicke revives; and the multiple source hypothesis, of which the now popular two-source theory of Mark and Q is a form.

The next step is to organize the data of the gospels into twelve blocks. Reicke's hypothesis rests on the recognized similarity of those blocks which contain the baptism of Jesus by John and the events of the last week. The data converges on the baptism of Jesus and the final events of His life and is more likely to diverge on the intervening data. The similarity of data is explained by the early church worship with its practice of baptizing and its celebration of the Lord's death. Paul states that the Lord's Supper is the manifestation of the Lord's death at each celebration. In connection with baptism and the Lord's Supper, the early churches rehearsed Jesus' own baptism by John and the account of His suffering. At this point Reicke has made a real contribution, regardless of how the reader will react to his hypothesis that the gospels emerged virtually independent of the other. One only has to think of Luther's baptismal hymn, "To Jordan Came the Christ, Our Lord" [*Lutheran Worship*, 223] to realize how the reformer saw the baptism of Jesus by John as the source of Christian baptism. One could hardly object on doctrinal grounds! How much more appropriate is the study of Reicke, who has demonstrated this point not from Luther but from an historical-critical study of the gospel documents themselves. The sacraments of baptism and the Lord's Supper are not isolated rituals, but manifestations both derived from and demonstrating the life and death of Jesus. Obviously this idea is Pauline! Reicke does not arrive at his opinion doctrinally, but his approach does have doctrinal and liturgical significances, not that these are really two separate significances.

While in our circles little attention is given to the period of oral tradition from the time of Jesus to the writing of the gospels, it will hardly do to deny it through studied ignorance. Bultmann's multiplicity of forms from scattered communities may have given oral tradition a bad name for those who are committed to the biblical documents as Sacred Scriptures. Still, the matter of oral tradition must be addressed. This Reicke does by seeing the oral tradition as so fixed that it provided writers working independently of each other with similar beginnings and endings for their gospels in regard to the baptism and suffering of Jesus. The different material between the baptism of Jesus and His entry into Jerusalem is accounted for by the different communities from which the evangelists gathered their materials. Luke is connected with the Hellenistic community in Jerusalem, where Philip, Stephen, and Silvanus were active. Mark's

Galilean interest is derived from Peter, who lived in Capernaum. Behind Matthew stands the disciple of Jesus by the same name, though he may not have done the actual writing. Though Matthew is closer to the original source, the similarities between it and Mark and Luke are explained by the conformity to the common tradition which was accessible to all three (p. 160). Matthew, like Mark, shows a certain dependence on Peter. Whereas Reicke can provide an historical connection between Mark and Paul in Caesarea, none is provided for Mark and Peter. The latter problem would be resolved if Mark were placed in Rome with Peter, for which early church attestation is not lacking. This connection is slipped over and Mark's Latinisms are found to be quite common in Palestine. Professor Reicke has produced elaborate chartings detailing his twelve blocks of material, and the reader will have to judge the weight of his argument on its own merits.

Reicke's greatest contribution in offering a more firmed-up rather than a scattered tradition may be his most vulnerable point. It is true that the Galilean churches (Mark's source) preserved data from the Lord's life that happened in their towns and the same could be said about the Judean churches (Luke's source). Still, Palestine is so small that within a period of thirty years, the year 30 (in which Jesus' ministry came to an end) and the 60s (when the gospels were written), the oral traditions would have already been shared among all these churches. By the year 60 the Galilean churches would have known some events of the Lord's birth. These were not the private possessions of the Jerusalem communities. A preferred solution is not that Mark's sources did not know of these events, but that the evangelist for deliberate purposes chose to exclude them from his account. The evangelists were at the mercy, so to speak, of their sources, so far as the extent of their gospels was concerned, but they were hardly hostages to their sources so that they were compelled to include everything which they knew. They were, after all, writers in every sense of the word.

What is striking in Reicke's approach is that the evangelists worked independently. There is no problem as regards their dissimilarities. The problem is with the similarities, which are accounted for by having all the evangelists ploughing the same field (Palestine) at the same time (the 60s) and harvesting the same crop (the gospels) and two of them from the same place (Caesarea). As the Lucan prologue is used by other scholars to demonstrate the existence of other

documents prior to its being written, Reicke uses the passage to support his claim of simultaneous gospel writing. Luke is making a claim that other gospel writings are being produced at the same time (p. 45). Some might find the exegesis a bit forced at this point, but this verdict might be directed at anyone who used this passage to defend his own theory of gospel origins. A seventh and final chapter looks at the gospels in regard to authorship and names from the post-apostolic period.

Though Professor Reicke had reached the biblical three score and ten, his death was untimely. After a career in university lecturing, he was in a position to share his views to a wider circle through writing. Six months before his death and before either of us had seen his *Roots of the Synoptic Gospels* published, we discussed his ideas. Now that I have seen the completed work, I shall not have the privilege of a further in-depth conversation with him. In conversation with him I discussed frankly his view of a virtually simultaneous production of the synoptic gospels. During periods of literary productivity it is not unlikely that certain geniuses produce their works within a short period of time. Even in these cases one spurs the other on and the later ones are taught by the pioneers. The gospel form is so unique, without denying that it is a recognizable form of ancient literature, that it seems unlikely that three men independently "uncovered" it at the same time. The argument requires that the heaviest burden be carried by the similarity of the oral tradition. Editorial decisions by the evangelists as theologians are minimalized. Whether or not one agrees with Reicke in seeing all three gospels evolving at the same time from the worship of the church, he is certainly right in seeing that the first one did come into existence in this way and that the others who followed him had their origins in and purposes for the worshiping church. Since the gospels are studied and dissected in seminary and university lecture halls, the scholars may falsely believe that they originated from the desks of scholars. Wrong! They came from the word about Jesus preached in and for the church. The old church custom of requiring sermons to be preached from gospel, and not epistle, texts maintained that tradition. Professor Reicke was a scholar who belonged to that church tradition. Through his death the horizons of what we could have learned about the gospels will be a little lower. A fitting memorial would be the publication of his *History of the Pauline Correspondence*. Both book and manuscript will reveal a man who was at home in the New Testament era.