



Martin Hengel. Between Jesus and Paul

I was never an outstanding student – like my blood group, I was always a solid B+. So perhaps it's not surprising that I found this book challenging. It's a 'proper' academic book with quotations not only in Latin, but also Greek (un-transliterated!) and Hebrew. Thanks to my age and schooling I could cope with at least recognizing the first two; but the other thing that made this harder than it needed to be was the referencing of biblical texts without telling you what the text said.

When starting a new book, I usually see how many pages it is (220) and was delighted to see that 'Notes' began from p. 129. This joy was offset by the fact that I had to read every sentence (or 'paragraphs' as we call them in English – the ongoing problem with reading translated German books!) at least twice to understand what was going on.

That said.

It was rewarding. In an academic sort of way.

This was not a romp like the Tsiolkas I reviewed last year. It was solidly informative about the period.

So, we learn that the Greek Christians in the Book of Acts, centering around Stephen and Philip (and perhaps Luke, himself), form part of the initial group who start to believe a new age has dawned as they develop ideas about the implications of who Jesus is. Teaching about Jesus in Greek was the first necessary step to allowing the message of Jesus to move beyond Galilee and even beyond Jerusalem and the People of Israel. Hymns, inspired by the Spirit, performed a central role in teaching and reveal that treating Jesus 'as God' was a very early development, pre-dating Paul's involvement. All this meant that by the time Paul was writing in c.AD50 he can refer Jesus simply as 'Christ' and to ideas about him without needing to explain them. Hengel notes, with a degree of regret, that we only have Paul's theological work and don't get a real sense of what Paul was like as a missionary and a preacher – or indeed as a person – but that, for Luke, he is definitely the pioneer who gets the church on the international map.

Speaking of maps, Hengel believes traditional criticism that Luke has no sense of geography or history in his double-volume story is unfair. He claims that Luke is no less accurate than his contemporaries and that, unless you were a senior officer in the army, almost nobody would have seen a physical map anyway. Luke clearly does not know a lot of the area where Jesus lived but he is more sure-footed in describing Paul's missionary journeys – partly as he accompanied him for some of them.

But Luke's aim is not to produce a biography – of either Jesus or Paul. It is to reveal the story of salvation which starts with Jesus in Galilee, it goes through the first disciples to Jerusalem and from there, through the heroic action of Paul – standing on the shoulders of those first Greek Christians, to all the known world.

This was one of those books I would have to say I'm glad "to have read". I found it hard work and it didn't bring the period 'alive' for me, but it is a reminder of how early most of our fundamental ideas about Jesus really are and a reminder also that, unlike some modern English translations of German, the New Testament writers were some truly talented interpreters of life and joy.