

The Authorship of the Gospels (1)

We so easily take it for granted that the Gospels were written by Matthew, Mark, Luke and John that we probably don't spend much time wondering whether these were the actual authors, or whether their names were given to these texts in order to confirm their status and authority in the early church. If the latter, we need to bear in mind that this was a very common thing to do in a pre-print culture: there was no notion of copyright, and no established practice of an author naming himself or indicating the year of composition. So a tradition could easily grow up that a text, recognised as special, was written by a famous person, even if in reality it was not. The Gospels bear the name of two apostles – Matthew and John – and two others whose names we know from the New Testament: Mark named in the Acts of the Apostles and the Epistles, and Luke, named in the Epistles. But since no original manuscript survives for any of the Gospels, we don't know what information, if any, accompanied them when they first went into circulation. The most we can say, based on surviving evidence, is that the names of Matthew Mark, Luke and John were associated with the four Gospels fairly early on in the history of the church.

You might think that none of this matters – and in a way, of course, it doesn't, because what is important is what the texts say, not who wrote them. But the question of authorship isn't entirely irrelevant, just as the question of date is not. Are they, for example, based on first-hand witness? Or maybe not? And how we answer might affect the way we read them.

The difficulty of dating the gospels is something I wrote about some time ago, and I won't repeat the arguments here. But as an entry-point to the issue of authorship we need to remember that a common view of modern scholars is that Mark was written probably in the late 60s, Matthew and Luke possibly in the 80s, and John maybe around 90-110. So it is immediately obvious that the dates raise questions about the traditional assumptions regarding authorship: one could imagine that someone writing in the late 60s might have known Jesus in their adulthood, but it gets to be less imaginable for later decades.

Mark's gospel was written first because we can tell that it was used by Matthew and Luke. It's not too difficult to believe that he was the Mark/John Mark in the New Testament. Tradition has it that he was one of the Seventy (Luke 10) and maybe the follower who ran away from Gethsemane (Mark 14: 51-52). But the person we encounter by name was a close associate of Peter, Paul and Barnabas, from whom he could have got much of his information. Perhaps, too, the mere fact that he is not a major figure is another reason for accepting his authorship: it's unlikely that popular tradition would have fastened on his name as one to lend authority to the text when there were bigger names available. Additionally, he is named as the author very early on by Bishop Irenaeus (c.130-200), who claims to be quoting Bishop Papias (c. 60-130). All this adds up to a reasonable though not provable case for Mark being the author of the gospel bearing his name. The picture is more mixed for Matthew, Luke and John, however. I will deal with these next month,

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