

WHO WROTE THE NEW TESTAMENT? INVESTIGATIONS

Discussion and study notes for the *Who Wrote the New Testament?* DVD

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These notes also taken into account additional perspectives to those highlighted in the programme.

PROGRAMME 1: **WHAT IS TRUTH?**

Who wrote the various books and letters of the New Testament? This question has tantalised scholars and Christians from the earliest days of the Church. Yet there are an increasing number of thinkers who feel that the task of identifying the author of a 2000-year-old text is neither possible nor a worthwhile intellectual exercise.

It is true that we are only able to put forward tentative hypotheses concerning the various authors of the New Testament writings. But the question of authorship is important because it is tied up with establishing what the original author/editor of the text intended. Although texts can be infinite in their meaning, we dishonour the text when we show no interest in who wrote it or in what the original author wanted to say.

The question of authorship is also connected with how reliable the text is in its depiction of Jesus and the beginnings of the Early Church. If, for example, all the Gospels had come to us anonymously, what means would we have to establish their reliability? Indeed, if the authors of the Gospels only had second- or third-hand knowledge of the events, how accurate could their writings be? So in asking questions about who wrote the New Testament, we are also looking at what kind of authority we give to these books.

Earliest traditions

The programme states:

Oral traditions in a largely illiterate society were a powerful force behind the spread of the Jesus story ... "After the Ascension of Jesus, the disciples were left with their memories. So ... a whole collection of individual memories were combined and eventually formed the Gospels." (Father Jerry Murphy O'Connor)

Scholars often call these traditions "the Jesus Tradition". They formed the earliest sources about Jesus' life and teaching. Until the writing of the first

Gospels, such traditions were central in sustaining Christians in their discipleship.

So, it is perhaps better to think of the Gospel writers as editors and custodians as much as authors, but ones who worked with considerable skill. In acknowledging this skill, scholars compare the Gospels in order to see what is distinctive about each. As Mark is the earliest Gospel, and a major source for Matthew and Luke, scholars attempt to draw out the distinctive issues that concerned Matthew and Luke.

However, recent scholarship has urged more caution in making too much of the way Matthew and Luke edit Mark. This is particularly the case where scholars reconstruct the specific social setting (“communities”) of their first readers/hearers. The Gospels are not letters addressing specific issues and it seems methodologically flawed to reconstruct a Matthean or Lucan community simply on the basis of changes Matthew and Luke made to Mark.

However, we can compare Gospels to establish distinctive aspects of each Gospel to appreciate the rich message of the writer. Keith Hopkins in the programme says:

The opening of the Gospel of Matthew is very powerful – the Greek is, “The Book of Genesis” – it’s normally translated as “The book of the genealogy of Jesus Christ”. But “The Book of Genesis” is stating quite clearly that what the author is writing is an alternative to Genesis ... the Old Testament’s opening book ...

This observation is clearly important in understanding and appreciating the author of Matthew. Matthew clearly felt the need through his reflection to give a certain slant on Jesus as the initiator of a new creation story, comparable to that in Genesis.

Reflect and discuss

What right do Christians today have to interpret the life and teaching of Jesus for their own cultures/times/needs?

Earliest manuscripts

James Charlesworth makes the point that “scribes are adding and even deleting to what we call holy writing”. This may come as a surprise to many Christians and puts in question the authority they attribute to the New Testament today. However, in the manuscript evidence available to us – particular Codex Sinaiticus and Codex Vaticanus – we have a surprising amount of consistency between thousands of fragment manuscripts.

The Gospels

Mark: Dates from 65 to 75 have been put forward for this, the generally accepted earliest Gospel. Surprisingly, the Mark who wrote the first Gospel is not an apostle. We must assume, therefore, that he was nevertheless very well known in the Christian community.

We know a lot about Mark because he's mentioned several times in the Acts of the Apostles as a companion on Paul's missionary travels and in Colossians and Philemon as a prisoner later on. The historian Eusebius records that Bishop Papias, writing in the early second century, said that Mark knew Peter and recalled all that Peter told him. This Mark, according to tradition, is most likely the John Mark of Acts. Because the Church preferred to think that apostles of Jesus wrote the Gospels, and Mark was not one of them, this makes it unlikely that John Mark's name would be attached to it without good reason. There is no reason to believe that Papias' account is spurious and the connection between Peter and Mark may have contributed to the Gospel's inclusion in the early canon.

Yet some caution must be exercised in thinking it is the Mark of Acts. Mark was a very common name at the time of the Early Church and it is likely that there was more than one Mark in the Christian community and who knew Peter. It is improbable that Mark was from Galilee because, as Murphy O'Connor points out in the programme, the writer does not seem to have a good knowledge of the geography of the Holy Land. But Peter could have known a Mark while he was in Rome; a Mark who did not know Palestine. Or, more likely, Mark knew his area of Galilee well but was less sure on other parts of the region. The first century dweller did not travel as easily as we do and neither did they have maps. In sum, at best all we can say is that a Mark who knew Peter was instructed to write down an account of Jesus life somewhere in the Roman Empire.

Matthew: The consensus is that Matthew was written between AD 80 and 100. It has been associated with the name Mathew since the early second century. The Gospel itself identifies a Matthew as a tax collector (Matt 10.3) who became a follower of Jesus (Matt 9.9). Against this, the programme asks, "Well over half of Matthew is borrowed from Mark: why should an eyewitness be so dependent on someone else?" Indeed, why would Matthew, the apostle use Mark to tell us about his own calling? On the other hand, an eyewitness may indeed appropriate sources to fit with his eyewitness account.

The Gospel is clearly from a Jewish Christian perspective and this would fit with Matthew the tax collector. Such a person would also be fluent in Greek, a necessary qualification for writing the Gospel. The Gospel also shows a particularly strong interest in money matters and to tax collectors. However, due to its late dating, it is likely that at best Matthew the apostle contributed significantly at an early stage in the composition of the Gospel. The final edition was completed by others.

Luke: The author of this Gospel is identified with the writer of Acts. Early traditions affirm the author to be Luke, the companion of Paul (Philemon 24; Col 4.14; 2 Tim 4.11). This Luke was not an apostle or prominent person in the Early Church so it is difficult to see why it would invent this connection unless it had a large grain of truth to it. It has also been suggested that because the Gospel was addressed to one person – Theophilus – it follows that it would also have had the author's name attached. The opening four verses of the Gospel states that the author was not an eyewitness and this again is consistent with the author being Paul's companion.

Luke is said to be a physician in Colossians 4.14 and many scholars have argued that a physician author fits with Luke–Acts because of the numerous medical terms that we encounter. But this is much disputed and the question remains unresolved.

John: We know that John's Gospel was certainly written not much after AD 100 because the earliest papyrus fragments of any part of the New Testament contains a few verses from John 18. Irenaeus in the second century tells us that the author of the Gospel was John, son of Zebedee, and that he received this tradition from Polycarp who was an acquaintance of the apostles. This soon became the bedrock of early tradition in the Early Church.

One argument in favour of this is that John, unlike some of the other disciples, is only mentioned in 21.20 and we would not expect the author to be constantly mentioning himself. Another is that John was a member of the inner-most circle of Jesus' followers and well-placed to write an intimate account: the Gospel of John states in 21.20 that the one who writes is "the beloved disciple". The traditional argument supports the connection between John, son of Zebedee and this disciple. This view carries some force, though it is not possible to be certain about it. The consensus among scholars supports the view that the Gospel was not the product of one person but that it grew out of the corporate life of an ongoing Christian community in which John was a specially honoured figure.

Bart Ehrman in the programme points out that:

There are good reasons for thinking that the Gospel of John was written late in the first century – it appears to be our theologically most sophisticated Gospel; whoever wrote it had thought for a long time about Jesus and his theological significance.

Further, he says:

This Gospel wasn't written by an Aramaic-speaking fisherman. It was written by a well educated Greek-speaking Christian.

This view is not generally accepted. John is a Jewish text with simple Greek and not the work of one who is classically trained. The argument that the theology needed time to develop uses an evolutionary model for the history of Christian doctrine and this argument has many flaws.

Discussion

We can be confident that people who had good information about the life of Jesus wrote the Gospels. But we certainly cannot be sure of the exact identities of any of the writers. This leads us to consider the view that all we can say of any author of the Gospels is what that author/s have chosen to show us through their books.

- List what you believe the Gospel texts tell us about their writers, e.g. their interests and intentions.
- In what ways do you expect the Bible to speak with authority and why? How important is the question of knowing an author's identity to this?
- What other factors are as or more important in establishing the value and authority of the New Testament?

For further reference

Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospels edited by J.B. Green, S. McKnight and I.H. Marshall (Leicester: IVP, 1992).

See Mark Goodacre's web site: <http://NTGateway.com>.



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