

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 2: MAINTAINING THE TRUTH

As the Church grew, it was inevitable that problems would occur. We see strong hints of this in the New Testament. Different groups and individuals debated among themselves as to who and what Jesus did and expected. In the New Testament letters, leaders encourage and admonish Church members to maintain the truth that has been handed to them. It was paramount for the New Testament letter writers that the truth that Jesus taught should not be corrupted and lost in the process of change. The second programme explores these letters and particularly who and what kind of persons wrote them.

Discussion

- How important is it that we know who wrote the New Testament letters?
- Does their authority of these writings depend on the author having apostolic authority? What is apostolic authority (Read Acts 1.21-26)?
- How might the authority of the letters be affected by having several authors?

Reflect

It is important to remember that letters are written to address real situations and do not set out to give an account of history. With this in mind:

- How can letters that address a situation from two thousand years ago have relevance for us today?
- How can they help us understand the origins of the Church?
- What difficulties arise when the original situation letters respond to is unknown to us (see 2 Thessalonians 2.5–6)?

The letters of James and Jude

James: The letter is attributed to Jesus' brother. However, Jerome was uncomfortable with the idea of Jesus having a brother and so identified the author with Jesus' cousin. But the issue of whether Jesus had brothers and sisters is not disputed by scholars today. The letter states (James 1.1) that its author is James, a servant of God. This title assumes that readers will immediately recognise who this James is. It corroborates his stature and seems to support the author being Jesus' brother, the leader of the Church in Jerusalem. The letter's content suggests that the author was a devout Jew and erudite in his use of the Old Testament, another factor consistent with the author being James, the brother of Jesus.

Jude: The author is identified as "Jude, a servant of Jesus Christ and brother of James". The Greek is "Ioudas". Several people with this name are mentioned in the NT. However, the writer expects there to be no confusion in his readers' minds. Identifying oneself as someone's brother is an unusual custom and makes it likely that he was the brother of the famous James, brother of Jesus. The letter assumes a quite specific situation where the gospel is being corrupted by false teaching. Like James, the author was a devout and learned Jew.

Reflect

Why would James and Jude not write "brother of Jesus Christ?"

Paul: His letters or not his letters?

Paul's letters are the earliest recorded writings of the New Testament. He made many converts and travelled great distances to teach about Jesus. We learn a lot about Paul from the letters he sent to the churches. Moreover, we know of Paul from Luke's second volume the Acts of the Apostles. Keith Hopkins, however, undermines Luke as a historian:

When we deal with Paul we should make a clear distinction between Paul the letter writer and Luke's description of Paul's mission in Acts. Luke is a propagandist. Luke is writing history after Paul's death – 30 years afterwards. He's blown up out of all proportion in my view.

We need to ask the question why would Luke fabricate Paul's life when he claims to have followed his sources accurately? Secondly, some of Luke's readers might have remembered Paul and questioned the accuracy of Luke if his presentation of Paul was so wrong. In addition, scholars have shown that there is little in Acts that contradicts Paul's letters. For example, there are strong echoes of Paul's choice of language in Acts 20.18–35.

Yet the question remains: did Paul write all the letters that are attributed to him? In fact, as the programme points out, Paul only physically penned Philemon. We know that he would have dictated many of his letters to a

secretary. But, more importantly, scholars have questioned the Pauline authorship of Ephesians, Colossians, 2 Thessalonians, 1 and 2 Timothy and Titus, as well as parts of other letters. One example Bart D Ehrman picks up on is 1 Corinthians 11 and 14:

This passage says that women are to be silent – but just three chapters earlier Paul says that women are to pray and prophesy out loud in church so long as they have a veil over their head. So it appears this passage in Chapter 14 of I Corinthians contradicts the passage in Chapter 11 and so scholars commonly think that Paul did not write that.

Ehrman's view is probably accepted by most scholars today with some challenging it. Let's now consider in more detail the comments made about the dubious authorship of letters traditionally attributed to Paul.

2 Thessalonians:

Ehrman states:

According to 2 Thessalonians some people are so convinced that Jesus is returning right away that they quit their jobs...This doesn't sound like the same teachings you find in 1 Thessalonians where the end is coming immediately like a thief in the night and so this is one thing that's led people to suspect that Paul didn't write both books.

Despite this, other scholars argue that the differences between the two letters can be explained if the second letter is seen as correcting misapprehensions about the nearness of the coming of Christ that arose from a reading of the first letter.

Ephesians and Colossians:

Ehrman again expresses a skeptical view:

Paul didn't also write Ephesians and Colossians. Not just because of the writing style, although that's important, but also because of this different theological perspective.

The majority view is that Ephesians is the work of a later writer who has attempted to show what he knew of Paul's teaching in a form that would speak to the particular situation he addressed. He knew the letters of Paul and certainly Colossians and that is why the letters are so similar. He may well have written both. However, Paul was a versatile thinker and he was quite capable of being all things to all people. Is it not possible that Paul did write Ephesians and Colossians? Their theology differed from other of Paul's letters because he was in process of developing and adapting his theology in response to ever-new situations.

The Pastoral Epistles:

Scholars dispute whether Paul wrote 1 and 2 Timothy and Titus. The programme says: "This letter to Titus, like the two to Timothy, were written

decades after Paul's death. Are they blatant forgeries then?" Tradition has it that Paul was beheaded during Nero's persecution of Christians in Rome. Paul was under house arrest in the capital at this time. This is around 64 AD.

Bart D Ehrman says:

Scholars are reasonably convinced that these were written near the end of the first century by somebody who is writing them in Paul's name but not Paul himself.

Nevertheless, there are scholars who argue for Pauline authorship. They argue that Paul writes to colleagues rather than communities and that this accounts for some differences in style and vocabulary. Paul was also writing from prison and probably used a different scribe to help him. It has also been pointed out that the letters show similarities with Luke–Acts and suggested that Luke constructed them using rough drafts of a Pauline letter. But whoever the author was, the programme helpfully states: "Their intention was to answer the problems of the Church in their day in the way that they thought Paul would have advanced."

The letter to the Hebrews:

Origen (c.185–c.254) remarked: "Who wrote the letter is known only to God alone." So it seems we have little chance of establishing the writer. The letter does not name its author or the location of its audience. Paul's authorship was accepted in the Eastern Church and by some in the Western Church, but their arguments are not weighty. In other writings Paul always followed the normal practice of Greek letter-writers, in introducing himself. Moreover, those writings leave us in no doubt who their readers are. Hebrews does neither. The most we can know of the author is gleaned from our reading of the letter.

Significantly, the acceptance into the canon of a book by an unknown author demonstrates that authorship was not the only criteria the Church used when recognising a document's value.

Peter:

The programme says of Peter: "A giant of the Church, no doubt. And yet two comparatively short letters are the only compositions in the New Testament that carry his name..." Furthermore, the Petrine authorship of these two letters is challenged. Bart D Ehrman says:

1st Peter for example is allegedly written by Simon Peter the disciple of Jesus. In the Book of Acts though we're told that Peter was illiterate ... If he could read or write he would have been able to read or write Aramaic – his native language. But 1st Peter is written in Greek, in fact in very good Greek ...

But Acts states that James and Peter were uneducated and ordinary men, not that they were illiterate (see Acts 4.13). This probably means that Peter had no rabbinic training. However, we might expect that a man who ran a fishing

business and came from a Hellenised town would be able to communicate in Greek. Also, many have gone too far in stressing the refined and rhetorical character of the Greek. Semitic expressions are noticeable in the letter.

Reflect and discuss

We have seen that some New Testament letters were attributed to important men. The real author intentionally used the better known name to give the letter authority. Does this unsettle you, excite you, or, raise further questions?

Further reading

Dictionary of Paul and His Letters edited by G.F. Hawthorne, R.P Martin and D.G. Reid (Leicester: IVP, 1993).



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