

Why Are the Gospels Anonymous?

In my previous posts I have tried to establish that the four Gospels circulated anonymously for decades after they were written. To some modern readers that seems surprising. Why wouldn't the authors name themselves? Surely they named themselves. Didn't they?

The clear answer is, no, they did not. But why?

There have been a number of theories put forth over the years. Possibly the most popular one (at least it's the one I've heard most often) is that the Gospel writers thought that what was most important was the message they wanted to convey about the life, teachings, deeds, death, and resurrection of Jesus. The authors did not want their own persons to "get in the way" of the message, and so they wrote their Gospels anonymously.

In rough outline I suppose that might be true, but I would refine the idea a bit myself – as I will in a moment. Before doing so, I should respond to an objection to this view. Most of the *other* books of the New Testament identify their authors (Paul, Peter, James, Jude, etc.). And most of the *later* Gospels have names attached to them (The Gospel of Peter; the Gospel of Thomas; the Gospel of Philip; the Gospel of Nicodemus; etc.). Those authors were not afraid of having their person get in the way of the message. So why were the Gospel writers?

Several points need to be made on this score:

1. The writings of the New Testament that in which the authors *do* identify themselves are genres in which this is typically done – letters (e.g., of Paul, of Peter) and apocalypses (John). I will be arguing below

that the Gospel writers saw themselves as writing in a genre that did not require a self-identification of an author.

2. Then why did *later* writers of later Gospels identify their authors (falsely, as it turns out)? The answer is fairly clear and straightforward. Later Gospel writers were very intent indeed on showing that *their* message, as opposed to the message of other Gospels, was the right, true, and apostolic message to be believed as authoritative. To provide an authoritative account for their own book, in light of the fact that there were other books with other messages floating around, the later authors produced forgeries, *claiming* to be an apostle (Peter, James, Thomas, Philip, etc.) when in fact they were not. That wasn't a problem with the earlier Gospels. When Mark wrote his Gospel, he felt no need to establish that *his* book, as opposed to others, was apostolic. There *were* no others. So too Matthew and Luke: they were continuing a Gospel tradition, started with Mark, that was widely seen in their circles as authoritative, and so did not need to authorize their message by pretending to be an apostle when they were not. In John's case the text *is* authorized: the author claims to be basing his account on the traditions passed on by "the disciple Jesus loved." The author's own identity doesn't matter – only that of his source does.
3. I should stress that many of the New Testament writings outside the Gospels that do name the author do so pseudonymously – that is, these are forged writings, authors claiming to be a famous (apostolic) person when in fact they were not. This is true of six of Paul's letters – 2 Thessalonians, Colossians, Ephesians, 1 and 2 Timothy, and Titus – both of the letters that go under Peter's name, James, and Jude.
4. Four other books, along with the Gospels, are anonymous: Hebrews (later church fathers said it was written by

Paul; but the author does not claim so); 1, 2, 3 John (anonymous, but later attributed to John the Son of Zebedee).

So, now I'm back to the question, why would the Gospel writers not identify themselves? Again, I think the popular answer is in essence right: they saw no need to do so. Their point had to do with the message they wanted to deliver, not with their own identity as authorities who could deliver it. There was no need to establish their authority. The authority lay in what Jesus said and did. It was only later when Christians had lots of Gospel accounts before them, with varieties of perspectives represented, that it was important to stress that this, that, or the other Gospel was the one that got it RIGHT.

And to do that, readers, editors, and scribes assigned names to earlier Gospels to show that the person delivering the teaching knew what he was talking about. And later Gospel writers made these claims for themselves, maintaining that they were relatives of Jesus (his brother James or his brother Thomas) or disciples (Peter, Philip, and so on).

But I think there may be one other thing going on with the NT Gospels that led their authors to write their accounts anonymously. I've never seen this suggested in the scholarly literature before, which either means I came up with it myself (in which case, caveat lector!) or I haven't read enough scholarly literature. It is this. I think when Mark was writing his Gospel, he was imagining that he was continuing the story that he inherited from the Hebrew Bible. As you know, the final prophet of the Hebrew Bible, Malachi, ends by promising that Elijah would be coming before the "day of the Lord." And how does Mark begin? By describing the coming of John the Baptist in the guise of Elijah. Mark is a continuation of the narrative of the Hebrew Bible.

But as you probably know, the Hebrew Bible – in the sequence

of books given in the original Hebrew – does not end with Malachi, the final prophet, the way the English Old Testament does. It ends with 2 Chronicles, a narrative book that describes, at the very end, the fall of Jerusalem to the Babylonians and then the promise to rebuild the city by the Persian king Cyrus. There has been sin, and destruction, and the promise of restoration – told in a historical narrative. And Mark picks up the story at that point, with the coming then of the Savior, Jesus.

The historical books of the Hebrew Bible (Joshua, Judges, 1 and 2 Samuel, 1 and 2 Kings, 1 and 2 Chronicles) are anonymous. They are telling the history of the people of God, not based on the authority of the author but as a holy narrative of how God worked among his people. The names of the authors are unimportant and irrelevant in this kind of sacred history. Mark continues the sacred history, and like his predecessors, tells his story anonymously. Matthew and Luke and even John do it in their own ways, and also, as a result, tell their sacred history in the person of Jesus anonymously. I don't think it's surprising at all that they did not reveal their names.