I have now gotten to a point where I can discuss why the four Gospels were specifically given the names of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. Recall the most important points of my preceding posts on the blog so far: the Gospels were all written anonymously and they circulated anonymously, for years and decades; we have no certain evidence that they — these particular Gospels — were called by their familiar names until around 180 CE, in sources connected with Rome (Irenaeus and the Muratorian Fragment); my hypothesis is that an edition of these four Gospels was published in Rome sometime between Justin in 150-60 CE (he quotes the Gospels but does not name them) and Irenaeus in 180-85 CE. That edition gave these Gospels their now-familiar names.

If all that is correct, then there is no reason to think that people widely associated them with their familiar names before that. The reason this became a widespread tradition is that it was started by a single editor – possibly based, of course, on things being said in his church or the wider Christian community (on that we have no evidence); once this edition took root, its views proved completely amenable to Christians in Rome, and the tradition spread from there.

So why call the books “according to Matthew,” “according to Mark,” “according to Luke,” and “according to John”? The first point to note is the obvious one. Two of these books are assigned to disciples of Jesus, and two to companions of the apostles who are then ‘representatives’ of these apostles – strikingly, Peter and Paul, the two most important figures in the early church (Mark was thought to be Peter’s companion and secretary; Luke was Paul’s traveling companion), and thought, by tradition, to be the principal apostles precisely of Rome, where this edition was created. And so, in these two Gospels, we have the witness of Jesus’ disciples and of Peter and Paul.

But what more can we say? First I’ll talk about the two disciples, Matthew and John.

In my view ...

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