

THE FOUR CANONICAL GOSPELS WERE NEVER ANONYMOUS

Mark Jokinen
Peterborough, ON, Canada

Were the four canonical Gospels originally anonymous, as suggested by Bart Ehrman and other scholars?¹ They believe that the four were not written by Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John, and that the traditional authorships were assigned or guessed at by the early church, probably in the second century CE. This suggestion tends to be put forward as the alternative, after casting doubt on the traditional authors, without much examination of its own merits. But the two arguments are not opposites, as they have different assumptions (an argument against traditional authorship is not automatically an argument for anonymity). This idea of Gospel anonymity is likely rooted in the use by form critics of the folklore model for transmission of the early Gospel traditions.² Here we will look at the evidence and assumptions in the anonymity argument. I believe the evidence is limited and the assumptions many, and that original anonymity is much less likely than authorship by the traditionally held authors.

It is true that the five texts in question are formally anonymous. (I include Acts of the Apostles. Scholars almost universally consider Luke and Acts to be by the same author.) The four authors do not identify themselves within the text, as for example Paul does in his letters (e.g., Rom 1:1; 1 Cor 1:1; 16:21). But Ehrman and other scholars claim that the four Gospels and Acts spread and were copied in the early church with their

1. Ehrman, *Forged*, 220–21, 223–28; Ehrman, *Jesus, Interrupted*, 104–7; Mack, *Who Wrote the New Testament*, 43–47; McDonald, *Biblical Canon*, 252.

2. Bauckham, *Jesus and the Eyewitnesses*, 300; Hengel, *Four Gospels*, 143.

authorship being unknown at the time. There is no way now to prove or disprove authorship, almost two thousand years later; one can only make a likely case for or against an assertion. The same is true for the anonymity argument.

I present four arguments questioning the theory of early anonymity of the Gospels:

1. Many assumptions are necessary, violating the principle of Occam's Razor³ when compared with the theory of traditional authorship.

2. The evidence for anonymity is, at best, negative evidence, that is, an argument from silence. There is no positive evidence for anonymity, and the negative evidence can be interpreted otherwise.

3. Many texts from the classical world are formally anonymous in the same manner as the Gospels, yet their authorships tend not to be seriously questioned by classical scholars. For example, no one doubts Plato wrote the *Republic*.

4. Christian testimony is based on witnessing, whether individually in person, in personal letters and accounts, or in histories or records of earlier witnesses. This has been true for two thousand years. The four Gospels were written to preserve the testimony of the earliest eyewitnesses by later witnesses. Anonymous witnessing to that truth would have been at best unconvincing, more likely ignored and not passed on.

Before going into these arguments in detail, it would be good to determine some boundaries. First, can we determine when this period of anonymity would have been? The beginning of it would be near the time of composition: Mark about 70 CE, Matthew, Luke, and Acts about 80 CE, John about 95 CE. Thus, the start of the anonymity period is about 70–95 CE. The end, at the very latest, would be with Irenaeus, writing about 190 CE. He clearly discusses the four Gospels as by Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John, and his tradition is old, that is, “having been handed

3. Occam's Razor is a principle set forth by William of Occam/Ockham, ca. 1287–1347, stating that among competing hypotheses, the hypothesis with the fewest assumptions needed should be selected.

down to him.”⁴ He does not question their authorship, or claim it to be uncertain.

Justin Martyr, writing about 150 CE, mentions the “memoirs of the apostles” and “memoirs composed by the apostles of Christ and by those who followed with them” (in this case he was quoting Luke).⁵

Earlier, Papias, about 130 CE, as quoted by Eusebius,⁶ tells of the composition of Matthew and Mark. Whether the stories are true or not, authorship of these Gospels was attributed to the traditional authors then or earlier (Papias was an old man at the time, and likely learned this tradition as a younger man). Other early Apostolic Father writings (Clement of Rome, Ignatius of Antioch, the *Didache*, Polycarp, *Shepherd of Hermas*) show evidence of the existence and use of the Gospels, but this does not help in the question of authorship.

Therefore, I would take 120–130 CE as the ending of the anonymity period. From 70–95 CE to 120–130 CE, the time span of possible anonymity is no more than 25 to 60 years; about two generations, perhaps less.

How many Christians were there in the world at this time? According to Rodney Stark, likely less than 10,000 by about 100 CE.⁷ Many or most were likely in several major centers (Antioch, Rome, Alexandria, Ephesus), the rest in many small communities. It is clear these people knew each other, or knew of each other, in an empire-wide web of communication and contacts. This is seen earlier in Paul’s letters (Romans 16; 1 Corinthians 16; Philemon), as well as in the letters of Ignatius,⁸ Polycarp, Clement of Rome, and Papias. They were in contact with other communities either by travel or by letter, and this during the Pax Romana (second century CE), with travel and contact safer than during most other periods in ancient history.

4. Irenaeus, *Haer.* 3.1.1.

5. Metzger, *Canon*, 145.

6. Eusebius, *Hist. eccl.* 3.39.1.

7. Stark, *Rise of Christianity*, 7.

8. Jefford, *Reading the Apostolic Fathers*, 55.

Copies of the Gospels could have been spread easily within this web of contacts.⁹

How easily could copies of them have been made? How long would it take for someone to copy out one of the Gospels? As an approximate test, I printed out by hand half a page of John (13:11 to 13:21) from my pocket New Testament several times. I averaged 8 minutes, 15 seconds printing (not writing) steadily. One page would be 16.5 minutes.

Our five texts (in my pocket New Testament) comprise the following: Matthew, 54 pages; Mark 33 pages; Luke, 57 pages; John, 42 pages; Acts, 53 pages; or an average of 48 pages.

Printing with reed stylus and ink on papyrus would likely be slower than with ballpoint pen on paper. Assuming 30 minutes per page, it would take 24 hours to copy one text. If this is about how fast someone could copy in the first century, and if we assume a non-professional scribe working on his or her own time, one hour per day, five days a week, a Gospel could be copied in five weeks, ten copies in a year, or the whole New Testament (though none of it was yet considered canonical), 416 pages, could be copied in 42 weeks, i.e., less than a year. One person in a major Christian community could make ten copies of a Gospel in a year, a hundred copies in ten years. This would be a radiation from one point, not a long chain link sequence of copying and copyists. If the author of that text was known, so would be the author of each of those copies made from it, sent out with title, tag, or label, and the knowledge of the person carrying it.

If copying of important texts was a community-supported project, the cost of materials (papyrus, pen, ink etc.) would likely be less of an issue than it would be for an individual Christian.

In any case, we know the letters of Paul were written a generation or two earlier than the anonymity period, and were preserved, copied, and distributed, either individually or as a collection of letters, at about the same time as the Gospels.¹⁰ Romans and 1 Corinthians are each about half the size of a Gospel; the

9. Hengel, *Four Gospels*, 112.

10. McDonald, *Biblical Canon*, 265–68.

whole collection of thirteen traditional letters is about twice the length of a Gospel. Let us now turn to my four arguments.

Needed Assumptions

One must make a large number of assumptions in order to believe that the four Gospels and Acts were originally anonymous, but each of these assumptions has problems:

1. Each book was written by someone. One must assume that either all the writers intended to remain anonymous, or community knowledge of their identities was quickly lost, perhaps within less than a generation. This would be unusual.

2. One must assume that the Gospels were considered to be important testimony without their authorship being an issue. They were obviously copied and passed around because they were known to be important testimony. Their importance could have been recognized by the material in the text alone, as in the *Didache*. However, it is also possible that the books remained in their authors' communities until the traditional authorships were assigned in the communities most likely to remember who the original authors were (i.e., the books were never anonymous in the first place) and the books were circulated on the basis of the knowledge that the authors were credible witnesses.

3. At some point (120–130 CE?) authorship of the five texts did become an issue. (It is often suggested that this was perhaps due to the appearance of other writings claiming apostolic authorship, such as the *Gospel of Thomas*).¹¹ One must assume that the early church guessed at or assigned the authorships quickly (within a generation), universally (among all Christian communities), without confusion (there is no evidence of any of the canonical Gospels or Acts being attributed to other writers),¹² and with no surviving evidence of any discussion or disagreement.

11. Though why would gnostic Christians feel the need to attribute their new writings to apostles if the four Gospels were anonymous? It makes more sense that Gnostics claimed apostolic authorship because Matthew, Mark, Luke, John, and Acts were already of known authorship.

12. Hengel, *Four Gospels*, 53–55.

This would also be very unusual. There is a New Testament text that evidences early anonymity and later disputed attribution, the Letter to the Hebrews, and disagreement over whether it was by Paul is documented.¹³

4. One must assume that knowledge that the five texts were anonymous was quickly lost, to be rediscovered by modern scholars 1800 years later. It seems strange that those closest to the composition of these works would not realize the authors were unknown. For example, one must assume that statements by Papias about the origin of Mark and Matthew are wrong,¹⁴ and the story in the Muratorian Fragment about the composition of John is false, not just apocryphal.¹⁵

5. One must assume that there was an unknown reason why two of the Gospels (Mark and Luke) were assigned to non-apostles, when it would have made more sense to assign them to apostles (Peter? Philip? James?) to give them greater authority.

6. If the two-document solution to the Synoptic problem is correct, one must assume that the first anonymous Gospel to be written (Mark) somehow survived as a separate text and continued to be copied after being used as a source for the second and third anonymous Gospels (Matthew and Luke), while anonymous text Q did not survive and its independent existence was completely forgotten for 1800 years. Early anonymity would have made harmonization of the Gospels likelier, and the harmonized version more likely to be preserved.¹⁶ A harmonization did occur, but one must assume then that there is some unknown reason why a community would preserve and pass on the earlier anonymous documents along with the harmonized anonymous one. How would they keep them straight, and why would they bother?

7. If the author of Acts was not Luke, the traveling companion of Paul, then the “we” passages in Acts (Acts 16:10–17; 20:5–21:18; 27:1—28:16) were likely some sort of travel diary

13. Hughes, “Hebrews,” 275.

14. Hengel, *Four Gospels*, 65–72.

15. Metzger, *Canon*, 306.

16. Hengel, *Four Gospels*, 106.

inserted into the text at four places, or were a fictional addition. If a diary, the author could have changed each “we” to “they,” and we would never have known. Or he could have referred to it honestly in the text as another’s diary. In any case, the assumption is that he is not as careful a writer and historian as he claims in Luke 1:1–4 and Acts 1:1.

8. One must assume that Theophilus is a fictional character (Luke 1:3; Acts 1:1). A real Theophilus, likely an important person, would have known the real author of Luke–Acts.

9. One must assume that early citations and allusions to the four Gospels in 1 Clement, Ignatius, and Polycarp, are to anonymous works, because the Gospels were anonymous at that point.

10. One must assume that no one was available or willing to attest to the authorship of the Gospels and Acts. The Gospels likely had to have been written by others of the same generation as the apostles. If written by others younger, those writers could have lived later, and testified to their own authorship during the period of assigning (if the author of John was 40 in the 90s CE, he would have been 70 in the 120s CE).

This is a large number of assumptions that need to be made to hold the anonymity hypothesis. There are many fewer assumptions if we agree with church tradition that Mark and Luke wrote their books, Matthew was in some way associated with Matthew (perhaps as the author of Q), and John son of Zebedee with John. Occam’s Razor is only an empirical rule of thumb, but it does help to clarify issues or questions of greater or lesser likelihood.¹⁷

Positive versus Negative Evidence

There is a complete lack of positive evidence that the four Gospels and Acts were originally anonymous. An example of positive evidence would be an Apostolic Father saying he

17. Church tradition does have some contradictions in it about Gospel authorship. For example, Irenaeus states that Mark wrote his Gospel after the death of Peter, and Clement of Alexandria that he wrote it before Peter’s death. But both agree on Mark’s authorship.

wished he knew who had written them. What evidence there is, is negative, i.e., an argument from silence.¹⁸

The earliest Apostolic Fathers, Clement of Rome, Ignatius of Antioch, and Polycarp, have writings from our period of interest (90–130 CE). (It is important to remember, though, that later Apostolic Fathers, such as Papias and Justin Martyr, would have been alive during this time as younger men.) For both Clement and Ignatius, Scripture is the Old Testament, referred to as “Scripture” or “as it is written.” In Clement’s *First Corinthians* especially, these references and allusions are very common (more than 100). New Testament books are used very much less, and the majority of these allusions are to Paul’s letters and the Letter to the Hebrews. Paul is referred to only once by name, with his First Letter to the Corinthians as being directly relevant to the addressees.¹⁹ Gospel quotations are few, and cited as “remember the words of the Lord Jesus,” not “remember what Matthew wrote Jesus said” or some such. Ignatius certainly knew a collection of the letters of Paul, and probably knew the Gospels of Matthew and John,²⁰ but he referred to none of them by name, and there is no evidence he regarded any of them as Scripture. He used the formula “it is written” three times, all referring to passages from the Old Testament, but again, was not more specific than that.

Polycarp, Bishop of Smyrna and friend of Ignatius, wrote to the Christians in Philippi concerning him. He quotes from or alludes to most of the books in the New Testament, including sayings found in Matthew and Luke,²¹ but again without naming them.

What kind of evidence for Gospel anonymity is this? It is consistent with the early Apostolic Fathers not knowing who wrote the Gospels, but not proof of it. It is also consistent with the way people used texts or authorities in letters, for which the

18. For a contradiction in church tradition to be, at best, negative evidence for anonymity, both contradictory statements would have to be shown to be wrong.

19. Metzger, *Canon*, 40–43.

20. *Ibid.*, 43–49.

21. *Ibid.*, 62.

evidence is more positive. They were writing letters to other Christians, who would understand the allusions they were making. The evidence is also consistent with authorship being so thoroughly known and accepted in the Christian community that the author need not be mentioned.

Clement and Ignatius both refer to the Old Testament, but only as “the Writings,” “the Scriptures,” or “as it is written”; in other words, anonymously. They do not cite the books by specific name, e.g., “as Moses wrote in Genesis,” or “as Daniel says in the Scriptures,” though they would have known those attributed authors. (Of course they would not have cited chapter and verse as we do, because those divisions were not made until medieval times.)²²

If Clement, Polycarp, and Ignatius did not cite the Gospels by name because they did not know who wrote them, we can expect the Gospels to be cited by name by later writers after authorship had been attributed. If writers did not cite authors by name because they felt it unnecessary (the recipients picking up the allusions), the Gospel writers would still not be cited by name in later letters when authorship of the Gospels was common knowledge. The latter is what we find.

The letter on the martyrs of Vienne and Lyons was written about 180 CE, contemporary with Irenaeus; in fact, it was from his own community (presumably he was absent during the persecution, probably in Rome).²³ The letter is replete with New Testament quotations and allusions, both of the Gospels and other books. None are specifically attributed to authors; all are cited in the same manner as in Clement and Ignatius.

Several generations later (mid-third century), Cyprian of Carthage wrote many letters that have survived.²⁴ It is clear that he considers the New Testament to be Scripture equal to the Old Testament, yet he quotes or alludes to Paul as “the Apostle,” and the four Gospels as the “the Gospel” or “the words of the Lord

22. Specht, “Chapter and Verse Divisions,” 106–7.

23. Metzger, *Canon*, 151–53. The letter is preserved in Eusebius, *Hist. eccl.* 5.1.

24. Metzger, *Canon*, 160–63.

Jesus,” often without being specific as to which letter or Gospel. Again, it likely means he expected that the recipients of his letters would know the particulars. It is similar to the earlier Apostolic Fathers’ references to the Old Testament as “the Scriptures” or “as it is written.”

Thus, the non-specific allusions in the early Apostolic Fathers are more likely due to style of usage than to the texts being at that time anonymous.

Formal Anonymity of Ancient Texts

Many non-epistolary books from the classical world are formally anonymous in the same way as the Gospels and Acts.²⁵ No one today doubts that Plato is the author of the *Dialogues* and *Republic*,²⁶ yet this knowledge was preserved and passed on in manuscript form only through tags, labels, titles, and knowledge of the possessor, preserved through the process of copying and recopying. In the case of Plato, this process went on for about 1800 years (fourth century BCE to fifteenth century CE, at the invention of printing), about 30 times longer than the suggested anonymity period of the Gospels (which is 60 years or less). It is very unlikely that knowledge of the four Gospel authors would have been lost in transmission in 60 years, as the chain of copying was likely only two or three copyings long. In any case, if a particular copy did lose its tag, label, or title page, someone with a known copy could compare the two and identify it.

25. Some other formally anonymous classical authors are Arrian, Lucan, Pausanias, Apuleius, Lucretius, Sallust, Vitruvius, Juvenal, Persius, and Caesar. Caesar’s *Galic Wars* and *Civil Wars* are written in the third person. Scholars explain this as a style choice by Caesar, and not that these works were written by some anonymous secretary.

26. A better historical case can be made for Plato as author of his work than that for traditional authorship of the Gospels. For example, there is contemporary confirmation of Socrates in Xenophon and Aristophanes. But each historical case still needs to be made, and we are looking here at that for original anonymity of the Gospels, not the (weaker than for Plato but still historical) case for traditional authorship of the Gospels.

The Gospels as Recognized Testimony

The key assumption in the theory of anonymity is that these anonymous Gospels would have been convincing in the early spread of the Christian faith. Picture a small early Christian community in Lyons, Carthage, or Ephesus receiving a traveler who brings to them one of the anonymous Gospels: “Who wrote this?” “I don’t know.” “Where did you get it?” “In Rome. The church there had it, and gave me a copy. They don’t know who wrote it either. They got it from the church in Antioch, who say it is a faithful and true account.” “Wait a minute. We already have this other different Gospel. But we don’t know who wrote it either...” And so on.

The Gospels were written as intentional witnesses to what happened and its meaning, written by Christians as records for subsequent Christians, at a time when eyewitnesses of Jesus in the early church were quickly becoming fewer. They were not written as folk tales or fictions, entertaining, but not expected to be believed and accepted. They were life-changing, life-risking testimonies (consider the consequences of possessing one during a time of persecution). The issue of who wrote them would have been an integral part of their authority right from day one.

This period of anonymity, perhaps two generations, may have had a few people still alive who remembered the historical Jesus, but there certainly would have been many more people alive who remembered the time of the apostles and of Gospel compositions. These people could have witnessed to the authorship of the Gospels and historical accuracy of Acts.

When one considers transmission of a tradition by teachers, a direct personal link of transmission was considered very important in witnessing or claiming authority. Paul claimed to have been a student of Gamaliel (Acts 22:3), Peter claimed Mark as a student (1 Pet 5:13) and Papias said he learned from those who had heard directly from the apostles and elders, whom he names.²⁷ Irenaeus claimed direct transmission from John to

27. Eusebius, *Hist. eccl.* 3.39.15.

Polycarp to himself.²⁸ The Gnostic Basilides was said to have claimed his authority was from Peter to Glaucias to himself, and the Gnostic Valentinus that his was Paul to Theudas to himself.²⁹ Note that, whether true or not, these chains of transmission are very short, a maximum of two links from Apostolic times (50–70 CE) to mid-second century CE. These are likely examples of oral transmission, though it is worth remembering that oral transmission is never anonymous, in the sense that the listeners or students know the identity of the teacher speaking to them. The origin of an oral tradition transmitted may become anonymous if sufficient time has passed, but that likely requires more than a couple links.

If the Gospels and Acts were written primarily to preserve and pass on early Christian witness and testimony, their provenance (i.e., their authorship) would have been crucial from the beginning. Even today we look askance at anonymous writings. Newspaper editors state they will not publish anonymous letters submitted to them; they must know who the author is. A scholarly journal would be very unlikely to publish anonymous research from someone of unknown credentials. We tend to ignore or delete anonymous emails. People in the ancient world were no different. The Emperor Trajan, in his reply to Pliny regarding the troublesome Christians, tells Pliny specifically to disregard anonymous testimony against them.³⁰

It stretches credulity to believe that, at any time, the Gospels would have been considered important Christian testimony, while at the same time who wrote them would be unimportant. The anonymous Letter to the Hebrews was widely attributed to Paul in the early church. It may be that, without that attribution, it would not have made it into the Canon.³¹

Perhaps the books were kept anonymous deliberately, maybe to protect their authors from persecution while alive. The timing is right (authorship revealed one or two generations after

28. Irenaeus, *Haer.* 3.3.4.

29. Clement of Alexandria, *Strom.* 7.17.

30. Pliny, *Ep.* 10.97.

31. McDonald, *Biblical Canon*, 394.

composition, and after the death of the authors), but the anonymity hypothesis requires genuine complete anonymity, not secret knowledge of true authorship among select Christians, revealed subsequently.

If Gospel authorships were assigned later on (100–130 CE), the people doing the assigning could have added statements to the text self-identifying the authors, making the Gospels pseudonymous rather than anonymous, and shoring up their authority. But if, by this time, the Gospels were already widely distributed and accepted, perhaps their authority did not need shoring up, and any additions would have been detected and repudiated.

No, the burden of proof for early anonymity is on those advocating it.³² The better and simpler explanation for authorship of the Gospels and Acts is still that the people whose names they bear were the authors directly (Mark and Luke), or were associated in some way with the writing of them (Matthew and John). Authorship of the four canonical Gospels was known from their beginning.

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32. The claim of original anonymity is more dubious if this is claimed for all four Gospels than if it is claimed for one of the four individually. The probability that the four were anonymous is the product of the four individual probabilities. Assume the following likelihood of anonymity: Matthew 90%, Mark 75%, Luke 67%, John 95%. The probability for all four together is $0.9 \times 0.75 \times 0.67 \times 0.95 = 0.43$. Even if we grant this much likelihood of anonymity to each of the four, the chance of all four being anonymous is still less than half.

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