

Corporate Authorship

One of the most important (and difficult) notions for a modern scholar of the Bible to understand is what is often called *corporate authorship*. A correct understanding of what this means – and the fact that a belief in the validity of corporate authorship was the norm for many years (until very modern times, in fact) – is essential for a Biblical scholar in order to correctly address a number of modern literary hypotheses concerning the origins of various books of the Bible.

The Modern Notion of Authorship

In today's world (with all its copyright lawsuits and claims of plagiarism) the title of “author” is exclusively given to the person who actually wrote or composed the work in question. A work which was written in the style of another person, inspired by their thoughts and views, or which was written by someone who is attached to the school of that author is generally not considered to be “by” that author. It is considered to be “by” the person who actually wrote the words down, even if none of the ideas are original ones.

The originator of the ideas might be credited, but not as the author – and few people today would say that the work was “written by” the originator of the ideas.

This notion of authorship is, while very popular today, not the traditional notion of authorship which was held in the ancient and even Medieval and Renaissance worlds. Without grasping the notion of corporate authorship, modern scholars will unfairly dismiss many traditional theories of Biblical authorship.

Corporate Authorship – an old new way of looking at authorship

In the ancient (and not-so-ancient) world the understanding was quite different. The understanding was that those who wrote as part of the “school” of a particular person were writing “in the mind” of that person and that the term “author” could be applied to the founder of school, even if the actual founder of the school did not personally write the document – and even if he was long dead!

The understanding was that those who legitimately wrote in the tradition of a particular author or thinker were, in fact, producing works which were “written by” that author. While this understanding may seem very unusual to us today, it was part and parcel of the thought of those who were contemporary to the writing of the Biblical texts.

Thus, when we discuss the “authorship” of a particular book of the Bible we must always be careful when choosing to reject traditional theories of authorship – as these will be based on the ancient understanding of corporate authorship. If we choose to reject them simply because we are refusing to acknowledge the contemporary understanding of what authorship is which the ancients held, then that is all well and good – but we must realize that we are now choosing to look at the Bible in a manner which those who wrote it did not!

Such a choice is a matter for individual scholars to decide – but the understanding of the authors of the Bible and those who assembled it (that is, the Catholic Church) was *not* based on the modern notion of authorship.

Many of the traditional theories of authorship are perfectly rational, logical and have absolutely *no* problems when the scholar accepts the ancient understanding of corporate authorship (which was, of course, the prevailing understanding when these theories were originally advanced). Examples of such traditional theories would be Johanine authorship for the Fourth Gospel or Mosaic authorship of the Torah. It is only fair to judge theories of authorship based on the *understanding of the time*. Without this, we are almost “moving the goal-line” which can be considered unfair.

Legitimate writing

A key point to grasp within the concept of corporate authorship is the idea of “legitimate”

writing – one cannot suggest, for example, that a document written by someone other than Saint Paul which is not in the tradition of Saint Paul and in fact was made separate from any school which he may have founded is “by” Saint Paul. Merely sticking the name of an author onto a document is not enough to qualify for corporate authorship.

The document must be written in the tradition on the original author (that is, in the case of the Bible, following his theology, style and methodology). The writer must also be in some sense part of the school of that author – whether as part of a formal establishment, or a more informal master / disciple relationship. In many ways this would mean that all of the Gospels, in a certain sense, are authored by Jesus Christ – as they were written by men who wrote His words and deeds down in accordance with His theological notions.

An example from the Church

The notion of corporate authorship can be difficult for modern scholars to get their heads around. Fortunately, the Catholic Church herself provides us with a very good example and understanding of how this works. The Catholic Church exists as the author of various documents (the Bible being the first, and then followed by encyclicals, decrees and so forth). But the people who wrote these documents are not “the Church” themselves; they are members of the Church, writing legitimately and authentically based on the teaching of the Church and her founder, Jesus Christ.

The authority of the documents produced by the Church rests on the authority of the Church herself – which is based on a very specific form of corporate authorship. Those writers who wrote in the tradition of earlier authors are very much doing the same thing, and so it is therefore fair to say that many books of the Bible were written by the traditionally ascribed authors.