



Greenberg, Gary.

Who Wrote the Gospels?: Why New Testament Scholars Challenge Church Traditions

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Rightly Dividing the Word of Truth

New Jersey

Who Wrote the Gospels?: Why New Testament Scholars Challenge Church Traditions is Gary Greenberg's attempt to inform the public about issues that have been long known to New Testament scholars concerning the authorship of the four canonical Gospels. The basic thrust of this book is that we don't know who wrote the Gospels, but we do know that it wasn't the people traditionally said to have written them. Throughout the course of writing Greenberg attempts to explain a number of issues at a popular level, namely source and redaction criticism (which entails the Synoptic Problem) and NT textual criticism. In all, he does an adequate job of explaining the basics, but he doesn't go far beyond them.

I searched in vain for signs of originality or fresh insight in this book. One might be tempted to call Greenberg the poor man's Bart Ehrman, and I don't mean that disparagingly, but Ehrman's influence is evident as he is the single most cited scholar in this volume (with Raymond Brown coming in second). Greenberg seems to be attempting to popularize Ehrman's own popularization of these issues but then one wonders exactly who Greenberg's intended audience is since presumably Ehrman has already reached the markets that Greenberg wants to reach, i.e., "members of the lay public" (see back cover). Every author stands on the shoulders of others, but I can't see that Greenberg has said anything that hasn't been said before, and hasn't been said as well or better.

For a book that ubiquitously makes claims about the “almost universal view among scholars” (20) or what “almost all New Testament scholars” (20, 80), “almost all text scholars” (148), “most New Testament historians” (1, 6, 11, 14); “most scholars” (16, 19, 58 [noting that they do not necessarily endorse his view], 128, 135, 156, 157, 158); “most Q scholars” (39), “most Johannine scholars” (136), “most contemporary scholars” (141, citing Comfort), “[m]ost New Testament scholars” (172, n. 52); and the “large majority of New Testament historians” (6) believe or “almost universally accept” (35), Greenberg only references about half a dozen scholars throughout the entire volume! As noted above, the reliance on Ehrman and Brown is lopsided.

What’s most striking is that Greenberg doesn’t interact with scholarship that runs contrary to his claims. While he very well may be espousing majority views (the question of which majority is another issue), that doesn’t change that there are dissenters who have published and defended their alternative views. Greenberg repeatedly refers to Papias as an unreliable (6, 15, 154) or untrustworthy (16) source for identifying the authors of the Gospels, and yet there is absolutely no interaction with Richard Bauckham’s *Jesus and the Eyewitnesses*, which seems almost unthinkable in a book making such bold claims. Likewise, there is zero mention of Martin Hengel’s *The Four Gospels and the One Gospel of Jesus Christ* in which he argued that the traditional ascriptions were appended to the Gospels from the earliest times.

This is all the more peculiar since Greenberg is clearly not opposed to discussing varying viewpoints and making arguments in favor of the one he believes to be correct. For example, in chapter 2 he notes the various positions regarding the Synoptic Problem (i.e., Two-Source Theory, Four-Source Theory, Griesbach Hypothesis, Farrar Theory). He discusses some of the strengths and weaknesses of each view and even refers the reader to a work that runs contrary to the scholarly acceptance of ‘Q’, namely Mark Goodacre’s *The Case Against Q* (see 39). This makes the non-acknowledgement of book length scholarly arguments for traditional Gospel authorship all the more disappointing.

I could also complain about Greenberg’s contrived reordering of Pilate’s dialogues in the Gospel of John (chapter 4), which he claims solves some alleged “chronological anomalies” (93, 111, 119) and provides a “smoother literary/narrative flow” (93, 99, 107, 111, 119). Funnily enough, in trying to solve these problems, Greenberg is engaging in exactly the type of harmonization that is eschewed by the historical-critical scholarship he so overwhelmingly relies on. Coincidentally, we don’t find Greenberg saying anything about “most scholars” in this chapter, and the two notes that we do find (105n. 114, 109n. 115) lead to endnotes that consist of an explanatory remark and a reference to one of Greenberg’s earlier books (173). The reason that Greenberg doesn’t cite any

scholarship in support of his reconstruction is because there is no text-critical or narrative basis for it.

Much more could be said to condemn this project but little else to commend it. I can't see myself recommending this work to anyone seeking to learn more about Gospel authorship, redaction criticism, source criticism, or textual criticism. There are simply too many helpful resources aimed at lay audiences on all of these topics to make this book a necessity, and they all lack the conspiratorial feel that *Who Wrote the Gospels* has. Interested readers would do well to consult Darrell Bock's *Studying the Historical Jesus: A Guide to Sources and Methods* for terse overviews of historical, source, form, redaction, tradition, and narrative criticism. For a nice introduction to textual criticism I'd recommend Ehrman's *Misquoting Jesus: The Story Behind Who Changed the Bible and Why*, with the note that the title makes the book sound much more insidious than it is, and the caveat that Ehrman's conclusions are neither necessary nor preferable in light of evidence.