

The gospels present the story of one of the most significant characters in human history - Jesus of Nazareth. He is not the only person we encounter when we read a gospel. But he is certainly the major focus of the gospel authors. Our first task will be to determine the nature of this particular form of literature - for quite a simple reason. We would not normally go to this morning's newspaper if we were trying to determine the causes of the Great War. Neither would we consult a dictionary to find last night's sports results.

Our understanding of the nature of the literature we are reading shapes our expectations about what we will discover and the kind of questions we will ask or avoid asking. Each gospel author brings distinctive features to their writing. Even when the gospels show a close relationship to each other - as is the case with Matthew, Mark and Luke - each author has written a distinctive account. But all four authors share a common purpose: they have all written a story of Jesus of Nazareth designed to appeal to the faith of their readers. Each story indicates what each author considered to be significant in that story. So, sometimes when reading the gospels, our primary focus will be the perspective of the gospel author; at other times, it will be on an aspect of Jesus' story. Of course the two things are intertwined. It makes for lively discussions about the meaning of particular gospel passages.

So, when we come to read about Jesus in the gospels we confront a distinctive form of literature in which we are introduced to Jesus of Nazareth. And, we also encounter the author of the gospel. As well, in some sense, we encounter the audience for whom the gospel was originally composed. Some scholars argue that we also encounter ourselves when we read the gospels: the perspective a reader brings to the gospels helps to determine what meaning might be seen in a particular text. For example, a person who lives in a country with an oppressive, corrupt government might read with a particular understanding the gospel passages on the trials of Jesus before Pontius Pilate.

Gospel Authors

We know very little with certainty about the identity of the gospel authors. We do not even know for sure if all were men. From time to time, researchers will bring forth strong arguments that this or that gospel was written by a woman. The simple reality is that we will never have enough evidence to know the gender of the gospel authors, or just about anything else about their lives and careers. The gospel authors are anonymous, at least to modern readers. Here, the gospel authors will be identified as "he" on the balance of probability that they were all males. If you believe that one or other of the gospel authors was a woman, you are serenely free to hold that view, and you will be able to locate respected scholars who support your beliefs.

We can say some things about the gospel authors, based on a close reading of their writings. In a world where literacy rates were around five percent, these authors were among a small portion of the population who could read and write. They were also learned in the ways of Jewish religion and its off-shoot in the way of life preached by Jesus of Nazareth. The gospel authors all wrote their accounts in Greek. We can presume that Greek was their first and primary language. We presume they were writing their stories of Jesus in a way that responded to the needs and interests of their audience, so their gospels are shaped to a certain extent by what they perceived about the people who read/heard their gospels. Some scholars have argued that this notion of a gospel audience