Carol Poster
English Department
Florida State University
Tallahassee FL 32306
USA
e-mail: cposter@english.fsu.edu

Anonymity and Truth: The Construction of Ethos in the New Testament

The construction of a technical ethos, or self presentation, within a speech, which will be persuasive to a given audience, depends on both the nature of the audience and the type of thing of which they are to be persuaded. In both particulars, the subject of the speech and the audience, early Christian discourse differs from oratory in the *tria genera causarum*, and the concomitant recommendations of the rhetorical handbooks. The audiences and purposes of the New Testament, especially, differ from those of oratory in social context (as Tom Olbricht has argues in his paper, and has been discussed also in the socio-rhetorical criticism of Vernon Robbins). The attitudes and beliefs of the early Christian church materials are also quite distinct from those of most forms of civic oratory, though somewhat closer to those of the philosophers. Christian discourses address unbelievers for the purposes either of proselytizing and conversion (which was rarely attempted by pre-Christian Graeco-Roman religions) or mitigation of anti-Christian hostility (a genre which does have precedent in embassies and petitions to Roman officials.) Discourse addressed to Christian believers has such purposes as education new converts, affirmation or strengthening if faith, theological controversy, and correcting the heterodox, often in an effort to reduce factionalism, as well as purely pastoral functions. Since the writings of the New Testament, from both external evidence of their use in the church and from internal evidence, appear addressed primarily to an audience of believers, in this paper, I will discuss the particular problems of how the ethos of anonymity and pseudoepigraphy which predominate in these works serves to both further and enact their purposes. Rather than examining these forms of authorship as attempts at appropriating the transferred authority of the putative author in the manner of forgery (as John Marshall has done in his paper), I shall look at the ways in which not writing under one's own name creates a deliberately modest and communal ethos, opposed to the self-promoting egotism of the sophists and other prominent orators of the first and second century, in some ways attempting to extend Bruce Winter's work on the contrast between oratorical and Christian ethos beyond the immediate cases of Philo and Paul, and look at the more philosophical contexts of and models for early Christian discourse.

The theories and practices of anonymous and pseudonymous writing in antiquity should not, as Stirewalt has pointed out, be placed within the modern conceptual rubric of forgery. With the exception of late (e.g. Donation of Constantine) and documentary (forged evidence in legal trials) cases, ancient misattribution (e.g. the Epistles of "Socrates", pseudo-Platonic dialogues) or non-attribution (e.g. gnomic saying, "Homeric" hymns) were either accidental (e.g. student imitations becoming part of the corpus of the writer being imitated) or philosophically intended (e.g. maxims worthy of Pythagoras becoming part of the Pythagorean "akousmata".) Both of these types, accidental and philosophical misattribution, occur in the New Testament and the Nag Hammadi gospels (e.g. the Gospel of Thomas, the pseudo-Jamesian apochrypha), but the intentional misattribution for construction of Christian ethos is the more theologically significant case. The theories and concomitant practices concomitant practices of language that are precursors to Christian anonymity and pseudoepigraphy are the Pythagorean and Platonic schools, where such practices were intentional and philosophically motivated.

Pythagorean and Neo-platonic Anonymity

The philosophical substrate to the anonymity developed in the Pythagorean schools begins with a distrust of language (sometimes termed Platonic "misology") and an advocacy of silence, only to be broken when necessary. A central text for this notion is Plato's Epistle VII (341c-d):

> There does not exist nor will there ever exist any treatise of mine dealing with [the subject I seriously study]. For it does not admit at all of verbal expression like other studies, but, as a result of continued application to the subject itself and communion therewith, it is brought to birth in the soul on a sudden as light that is kindled by a leaping spark, and thereafter it nourishes itself.

Alcinous (fl. 150 C.E.), in his epitome of Platonic philosophy, is evidence of the persistence of this tradition in Middle Platonism, claiming: "The most valuable and greatest good he [Plato] considered to be neither easy to discover, nor, when discovered, to be such as to be safely revealed to all." (Alcinous, Didaskalikos 27:1)

Like the Orphics, Eleusians, and oriental mystery cults with which both Pythagoreans, Pythagoreanizing

Platonists, and certain gnostics and Manichees had many affinities, the early Pythagoreans revered silence, and keeping true doctrine from the unintiated. Iamblichus, for example, provides repeated admiring testimonia to the limitations placed on speech in early Pythagorean communities, citing the five-year silence required of all initiates (Iamblicus de Vit. Pyth. 74), saying "He [Pythagoras] showed more concern for silence than for speech" (Iamblichus de Vit. Pyth. 94)[10]. As in Plato's Epistle VII, the subjects on which it is most necessary to preserve silence are also the most important doctrines:

> They [the Pythagoreans] observed the most careful "holding one's peace" towards outsiders, keeping the doctrines unpublished and unwritten in their memory, and handing them on to their successors like the mysteries of the gods. So for a long time, no important doctrines became public: they were taught, learned, and known only within the walls. (Iamblichus, de Vit. Pyth. 226-227)

The preservation of silence and restriction of knowledge to initiates is due both to a belief that only the prepared soul could understand the more esoteric parts of philosophy and also to a deep pessimism concerning the ability of words to express the essential part of divine truth. While early Christianity was an evangelical religion, nonetheless, even outside some of the more secretive gnostic communities, it did reflect some of the same concerns about language, and some of the same solutions, that we see in Pythagoreanism and its successors. First, the tendency to a period of instruction before participation in the Eucharistic celebration might indicate that there were certain elements of Christianity not readily revealed to outsiders. The rumors circulating in pagan writers that Christians practiced human sacrifice and cannibalism may well have started from vague hints concerning the mystery of Eucharistic practice -- something that only could have been countered by a move to make more generally known the contents of Eucharistic theology. The more important trend to Pythagorean teaching practice for the purpose of understanding New Testament literary genres, is its ways of reconciling mystical silence with voluminous pseudonymous (or transferred authorship) written texts.

The central problem of writing for Pythagoras, Plato, and their followers was that it could not adequately express divine knowledge. There was no corresponding doubt concerning the utility of language for more mundane purposes, such as those of biography. If one could not write directly about divine philosophy, one could write

descriptions of the lives of those who had gained such knowledge, including the practices which had led to such knowledge and the sayings of those who had attained it. The first of these of these options, the biographical turn, can be seen in the earliest writings of the followers of Socrates (including Xenophon and Plato), who wrote dialogues in which Socrates (who never wrote philosophy and seems never to have expressed any particular fixed dogma) was the main character. Plato, in particular, never (outside his letters, many of which are not authentic) wrote in propria persona, but instead always wrote dialogues in which he himself never appeared in his own character -- he even specifically mentions his own absence from the gathering in the Phaedo. Instead, what we have is a view of the ways in which Socrates, the Pythagoreans, the Eleatics, and the Sophists lead their lives and conduct their philosophical investigations in conversation. This biographical tradition of philosophical writing, in which the "author" of a work makes philosophical points through stories of the lives and sayings of divinely inspired predecessors, is precisely the genre of the four gospels and Acts. These are not stories narrated with the evangelists as active participants, nor dogmatic essays concerning the evangelists' theological beliefs, but instead anonymously told stories of Jesus, through which Christian faith is revealed. Like the philosophers in Eunapius such as Alypius, whose "teaching was limited to conversation" (Eunapius, Vitae 460). Jesus produced no body of written doctrine, and neither did his immediate followers produce their own doctrines, but only recorded what they saw as those of Jesus himself, or of the risen Christ.

A variant of this biographical approach to philosophy was that of the Pythagoreans, who transmitted both stories of Pythagoras, and a group of sayings known as the akousmata, (or later the Pythagorean symbols), which included sayings of Pythagoras himself and of those sayings deemed to be worthy of Pythagoras (in the sense of divine or Pythagorean truth) uttered by his disciples. All these sayings were transmitted as "Pythagorean," irrespective of (and without record of) actual authorship. This genre of collections of sayings appears both in the sources of the four canonical gospels and in the Gospel of Thomas. Since people's records of the sayings of the risen Christ would not have been considered "inauthentic", any more than the Pythagorean or divinely inspired saying of the followers of Pythagoras, there may well have been substantial numbers of sayings included in these collections which were not uttered by the living Jesus, something which has provided a very difficult task for the Jesus Seminar.

A third biographical form of philosophical writing was the letter. Obviously, if a much admired philosopher, or "divine man", wrote letters, his diligent followers would collect and preserve them as part of his

biographical tradition. Another letter form was the pseudoepigraphic letter which expressed, in the famous words of Thucydides concerning his own reconstruction of speeches, not what a person actually said but what he should have said. If, for example, there were no genuine Pauline letter to a specific church, but a church felt in need of the guidance that such a letter would have given, it was almost a duty to try to construct a text to supply that need by trying to approximate what Paul would have said about the specific situation for collective or individual knowledge of Paul. This is not forgery in the modern sense of intentional deception but rather, like the sayings of the risen Christ as well as the living Jesus, as true way of bringing to bear the spirit of Paul, if not the actual living Paul, as need or inspiration struck. The pseudo-Pauline letters, or the letter of James, are genuine answers to the question "what would Paul or James have said about X had they been present or able to say it?"

An extension of this form of pseudonymity to expound the ways absent or dead people might have thought about a certain problem or dilemma is the move to exegesis. One way of arriving at what Jesus would have said about something ge did not discuss or a question arising in the early church not explicitly or unambiguously expressed in the gospels, was to analyze what Jesus may have said about related subjects. This move from pseudoepigraphy to exegesis becomes quite pronounced in the patristic period; in fact, it might be possible to trace the rise of exegetical works as paralleling a decline in pseudo-epigraphic works of Jesus and Paul.

Like pseudoepigraphy and anonymity, exegesis is purportedly modest. The author of an exegetical work, at least putatively (if not actually), is not setting forth views of his own, but rather clarifying the voice of someone else. Plotinus, for example, wrote only reluctantly and under the urging of his students. The <u>Enneads</u> were not actually published by Plotinus; they were edited and disseminated by his disciple Porphyry; moreover, they did not claim to be systematic philosophy, but instead corrections of misinterpretations of Plato. Similarly, Proclus' <u>Platonic Theology</u> does not claim originality but considers itself purely a work of exegesis. In fact, the majority of extant neo-platonic works are not treatises at all, but introductions to, biographies of, and commentaries on Platonic, Aristotelean and Pythagorean texts and/or subjects.

In each of these cases, the motives behind biographical, sayings, and exegetical texts are a combination of reluctance to write with an overwhelming need to articulate something (e.g. the living Word of Christ rather than the human words of doctrine) which being divine is not amenable to expression in human words. [Elias], for example, comments clearly on how Platonic writing responds to this dilemma. He first develops the Platonic arguments

against writing:

> First we must answer the much discussed question why he [Plato] thought it necessary to commit his teachings to writing. Plato himself in the Phaedrus [275e], it is remarked, criticizes writers of books because their works, being lifeless, cannot defend themselves when doubts are raised ... therefore, he says, we should not write books, but leave pupils who are living books ... thus Socrates and Pythagoras left only pupils, not writings. (Anon. Proleg. 13:1-10)

Once [Elias] has shown why earlier sages eschewed writing, and recapitulated Plato's critique of writing, he then constructs an apology for Platonic writing:

> ... [T]his is another point on which Plato strove to imitate the Godhead, and in choosing to write, he let a greater good prevail over a lesser evil. For just as God has made some parts of his creation invisible ... and others, however, subject to our ideas in writing and some by word of mouth, like incorporeal perception and visible ... so Plato too has handed on some of his entities, imperceptible to the sense, namely what he said in his lectures. (Anon. Proleg. 13:11-20)

[Elias] constructs a typically neo-platonic argument based on analogy and hierarchy of being. Plato's writing participates in the divine by analogy. Like divine creation, Plato's teaching is part corporeal and part incorporeal. The incorporeal parts of Plato's teaching (the oral teachings) are superior to the written parts in the same manner that the incorporeal parts of divine creation are superior to the corporeal parts. The incorporeal (unwritten) parts of Plato's teaching are analogous to, and are intended for, the rational part of the soul (analogous to the intelligible universe); the corporeal (written) parts of Plato's teaching are analogous to, and appeal to, the non-rational (lower or corporeal) part of the soul (which is analogous to and perceptive of the material part of divine creation). Both types of teaching are necessary, in order to address both parts of the soul (cf. Alcinous, Didaskalikos 24).

Early Christian communication as well could be divided into spiritual and corporeal. The living word of Christ was both divine spirit and corporeal human. The physical words of the disciples or the appearance of the risen

Christ could be followed by a descent of the immaterial Holy Spirit which might in turn inspire more physical words. The human who uttered these words was not important. Truth was divine and universal, to be found only in God, as father, son, and holy spirit, for the Christians, or as the One in Plotinus. The human agent was not, and could not be, the creator of true words, but only of error, in the sense that the limitations of human expression could never encompass, or even accurately reflect, all (or even any) of absolutely divine truth. What pseudonymity and anonymity do is place the mere human author in the background, in order to foreground the divine source of the material. Paul, for example, even in his highly personal correspondence, which might seen the diametrical opposite of the pseudonymous modesty of the sayings gospels, always introduces himself as a mere servant, bearing not his own words, but those of Jesus Christ. As he points out in 1 Corinthians (10-12) to follow an individual emissary of Jesus is not to follow Jesus himself, even if that emissary is Paul, for: "Christ did not send me to baptise, but to preach the gospel -- not with the words of human wisdom, lest the cross of Christ be emptied of its power." (16)

Anonymity and pseudonymity thus act as a form of rhetorical ethos which attempt to make the human author transparent in order to let divine wisdom reveal itself. Even in Galatians, where Paul is engaged, to some degree, in a doctrinal dispute among various factions, and is constructing an elaborate personal account of why his authority should be trusted, he found it necessary to invoke the ethos of the universal divine God, and insignificance of the human author, saying:

> I want you to know, brothers, that the gospel I preach is not something that man made up,. I did not receive it from any man nor was I taught it: rather I received it from the revelation of Jesus Christ. (Gal. 1.11-12)

The purpose of early Christian ethos is not to establish the skills of the speaker as a teacher of declamation, nor to increase the importance and authority of the speaker as an individual within an assembly, but to convey a divine message, unimpeded by the limitations of the speaker's humanity. From the point of view of Christian (as well as Platonic) theology, the most appropriate rhetorical ethos is anonymous or pseudonymous, an imperative so strong that even Paul, speaking in his own persona, attempts to claim it.

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