

An unconvincing case for pseudepigraphy

*Forgery and Counterforgery:
The Use of Literary Deceit in
Early Christian Polemic*

Bart Ehrman

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Bart Ehrman is well-placed to be the ‘poster boy’ of Bible skepticism. He claims to have grown up with an evangelical faith and to have migrated to his current faithless position as a result of what he sees as the inescapable evidence against Christianity. And he was the last Ph.D. student of the most prominent textual critic of the 20th century, Bruce Metzger (1914–2007), so many take his criticisms of Christianity as the authoritative view of an expert. However, Metzger, a Christian, would definitely not have agreed with Ehrman’s conclusions.

*Forgery and Counterforgery*¹ follows Ehrman’s popular-level *Forged*, and is a more comprehensive and scholarly book which has essentially the same argument: many ancient works coming out of early Christianity, including many which made it into our New Testaments, were not written by the claimed authors, but by people who were intentionally deceptive and tried to pass their works off as apostolic to give their ideas greater authority.

Positive contributions

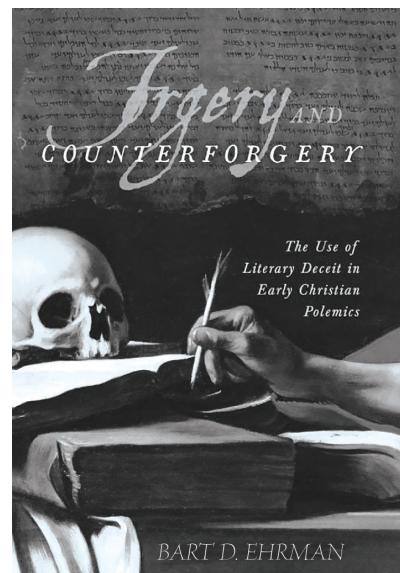
Given his skeptical outlook and the overly broad and unsubstantiated claims featured previously in *Forged*, it might seem surprising that there

would be anything instructive or useful in *Forgery and Counterforgery*, but it is probably the best recent systematic look at Christian forgeries, if one overlooks what he has to say about the canonical books. He gives a useful and extensive terminology for understanding different sorts of pseudonymity as well as discussing various motives for forgery, and gives a fairly extensive discussion of various works in the time period he covers.

Ehrman has an engaging and easy-to-read style, which makes what would otherwise be a very dull subject much more bearable. His extensive bibliography also makes this a useful launching point for further research.

The greatest contribution, which was also the best part of *Forged*, is his extensive and unanswerable case that forgery was seen as a *bad* thing in the ancient world, a form of deceit. It is common to claim that our view of forgery is a modern one, and that ancients simply did not see authorship as we do. But Ehrman proves this wrong. Every witness we have from ancient times who has commented on forgery has condemned it, and forged works were called false ψεῦδος (*pseudos*, false, lie), κίβδηλος (*kibdēlos*, counterfeits), and νόθος (*nothos*), the Greek slang word for ‘illegitimate child’, with all the same negative connotations of the English word. In other words, the work was of dubious ‘parentage’ as the claimed author or ‘father’ was not the real author (p. 32). And the crime of forgery sometimes had serious consequences—sometimes people were killed when their forgeries were discovered (p. 84).

If Ehrman spoke about the evidence for authorship of the NT books with the same carefully researched claims, this would be a much more



helpful book. However, when Ehrman turns to the books of the NT, his own ideology leads him to interpret the evidence as indicating forgery wherever possible.

Lack of important distinctions

Some of Ehrman’s information would have been a lot more useful if he had made some important distinctions. For instance, he says, “Arguably the most distinctive feature of the early Christian literature is the degree to which it was forged” (p. 2). But he can only say this by failing to make a distinction which most Christians would insist on. From the beginning of Christianity, there was the orthodox group of true Christians, and ‘false teachers’ who brought in teachings that were out of line with what Jesus and the Apostles taught. Many secular scholars dismiss the difference between these two groups because they do not recognize the differentiation between ‘orthodox’ and ‘heretical’.

Orthodox Christians sometimes produced forgeries; Ehrman gives some good accounts of them. But the difference between orthodox Christians and heretics is that other orthodox Christians would expose both heretical and ‘orthodox’ forgeries,



Figure 1. There is good, early evidence for the New Testament's Apostolic authorship.

and condemn them equally. That a document was lying about its authorship was reason enough to reject it, regardless of whether its contents were following traditional Christian teaching. But, interestingly, we know of no instance of heretics having this attitude toward their obviously pseudonymous writings.

Most of Ehrman's examples of forgeries are forgeries—no-one thinks that the *Coptic Apocalypse of Peter* was actually written by Peter, for instance; there is no-one, ancient or modern, who argues that it is orthonymous. But when it is lumped in with 2 Thessalonians, James, and Jude, it gives a false impression, because there are Bible scholars with credentials rivaling Ehrman's who argue that these books are genuine.

Were the New Testament books forged?

When Ehrman says, “From the period of the New Testament, from which some thirty writings survive intact or in part, only eight go under the name of their actual author, and seven of these derive from the pen of one man” (p. 2), he gives the impression that he is stating the consensus of scholars, and that there is no case to

the contrary. However this is far from the case.

Ehrman does not give fair consideration to the tradition of the early church, which in many cases never contested the authorship of these letters until the ‘critical’ era. We know that Christians were concerned with matters of authorship and rejected writings that were known to be pseudepigrapha, so the acceptance of the early church should be seen as a point in favour of their authenticity.

For instance, Ehrman claims, “Problems connected to the authenticity of 2 Thessalonians were first recognized by J. C. Chr. Schmidt in 1801. Schmidt pointed out that 1 Thessalonians is a letter allegedly by Paul that maintained that the end is imminent, whereas 2 Thessalonians warns against a letter allegedly by Paul that maintained that the end is imminent (2:2)” (p. 156).“

At this point, the logical person would ask whether Mr Schmidt was really the *very* first person to realize this, and whether other people in the first 1,700 years of biblical interpretation addressed this. For millennia, scholars and laymen alike read the two letters one after the other without seeing a contradiction between the two. And even today there are many scholars who maintain Pauline authorship.

But Ehrman fails to engage these scholars. He says,

“Malherbe can claim … that the ‘majority’ of biblical scholars continues [sic] to hold to authenticity [of 2 Thessalonians]. This may be true, but if so, it is simply because a sizeable plurality of biblical scholars (counting broadly) hold theological views that make the presence of literary forgeries in the canon of scripture [sic] untenable on principle. Among scholars with no such scruples, the balance swings in the other direction, and for compelling reasons” (p. 157).

But this is simply dismissing the *arguments* for the authenticity of the book because of the *beliefs* of the people making them. We could just as easily dismiss the claims of the nineteenth century ‘critical scholars’—and Ehrman himself—because their theological views made it convenient for them to find brand new evidence of forgery in universally accepted books.

Ehrman also fails to measure the ‘contradictions’ between the imminent return taught by 1 Thessalonians and the return preceded by signs of 2 Thessalonians against, for instance, Jesus’ own statements in the Gospels. If it is not a contradiction for Jesus to say on the one hand that He is going to come “like a thief in the night” but also that there will be signs indicating that His coming is near, it is not a true contradiction between 1 and 2 Thessalonians when they teach both, but differing emphases that are both valid expressions of Christian eschatology.

Issues of style

Many of the claims of forgery of Pauline letters appeal to inconsistencies in style:

In 2 Thessalonians, “the non-borrowed materials appear in a non-Pauline style” (p. 162).

In Colossians “none [of the factors in favour of forgery] has proved more decisive over the past thirty years than the question of writing style” (p. 174).

“Confirmation [for the forgery of Ephesians] comes in a range of arguments involving style, vocabulary, structure, and content” (p. 184).

In regard to the pastoral letters of Paul, “The reality is that these letters are far less like Paul than anything in Paul” (p. 201).

However, it could be argued that the combined factors of co-authorship, adaptation to the audience, and varying occasions could account for differing styles. And it seems tenuous

to claim that the seven undisputed Pauline letters give us an adequate sample against which we can reject other writings as non-Pauline on stylistic grounds. Ehrman himself, while arguing for a single author (but not Paul) for the pastoral epistles, says that “When trying to establish common authorship, it is not the differences of two (or three) writings that matter, but the similarities” (p. 194).

Even ‘most likely to be forged’ book has strong evidence for authenticity

Because space does not allow an in-depth treatment of each of Ehrman’s cases for forgery, we will address his case for the forgery of 2 Peter, which is widely acknowledged even by evangelicals to have the weakest case for genuine authorship. Even evangelicals Carson and Moo acknowledge that “for no other letter in the New Testament is there a greater consensus that the person who is named as the author could not, in fact, be the author.”² Unlike many of the New Testament books, it was not immediately accepted in the early Church.

But Thomas Schreiner maintains, “Nevertheless, good reasons still exist to support the authenticity of 2 Peter. One is not sacrificing one’s intellect in believing that 2 Peter is authentically Petrine. Indeed, Petrine authorship is still the most credible position.”³

Among other lines of evidence, the account of the Transfiguration of Jesus does not match any of the synoptic accounts (so is not copied from the Gospels) and is not embellished, as the accounts in pseudepigrapha are prone to do. So the internal evidence is on the side of authenticity.

And 2 Peter was eventually accepted by the fourth-century councils, which excluded other works claiming to be by Peter, as well as other edifying but pseudonymous works, so the councils

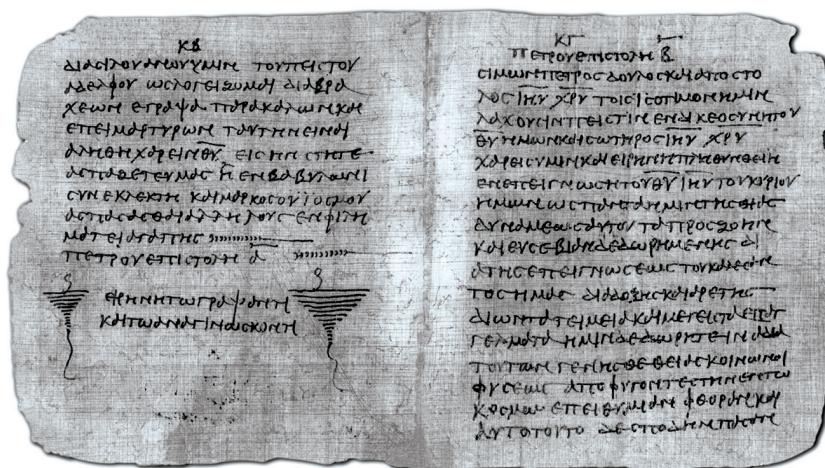


Figure 2. Ancient conventions of authorship allowed the use of a scribe or amanuensis to aid in the composition of a document.

which made proclamations on the canonicity or otherwise of various books were not uncritical. Something about 2 Peter obviously set it apart from the non-canonical books.

Were Peter, James, and John illiterate?

Ehrman frequently makes the claim that Peter, James, and John *could not* have written the works attributed to them because they were illiterate, and certainly could not have been able to write in the fluent Greek of the New Testament books attributed to them. But this argument ignores several things.

First, the disciples probably spoke Greek—it is not far-fetched to think that most of the people in first-century Israel would have been bilingual, speaking Aramaic and also Greek, as the latter was a sort of *lingua franca* in the world at the time. Grudem notes a significant percentage of ossuaries in Jerusalem from the first century or earlier are inscribed with Greek, and an inscription on a synagogue wall at Ophel was written in Greek only, indicating at least some Jews in Israel used Greek regularly.⁴ And the New Testament was written after the Apostles had been missionaries for decades. Even if they did not speak

Greek at first, learning the language would have greatly increased their ability to share the Gospel.

Second, there is evidence that the illiteracy of the ancient world was somewhat exaggerated.⁵ But even if these Apostles were illiterate, conventions of authorship allowed for a person to dictate to an amanuensis, who would do anything from simply taking dictation to even shaping the writing to be more literary. Ben Witherington III, for only one example, has argued that the letters of the New Testament should be viewed as rhetoric, which was meant to be *heard* and not primarily *read*.⁶

Third, the tradition of the church presents these men as being relatively unlearned tradesmen, but sees no contradiction in their authorship of these books. While this tradition is by no means infallible, surely interpreters much closer to the time of authorship would be in a better position to judge whether or not it was feasible for the Apostles to have written the letters attributed to them.

A worst-case scenario for biblical authorship

Ehrman’s arguments may cause some to doubt the authorship of some

biblical books, especially where the evidence might be construed to point against authenticity, as with 2 Peter and the pastoral epistles. However, Ehrman's book only succeeds if one is determined to ignore the growing number of evangelical scholars who strongly affirm biblical inerrancy. As Ehrman argues, their theological stance *does* inform their arguments about the canonical books, but no more than Ehrman's stance informs his.

This book should be read by people who want to read the best arguments from a 'skeptical' perspective on authorship, but it should not be read in isolation from the perspective of noted evangelical scholars who affirm genuine authorship of the various NT books.

Ehrman has, perhaps inadvertently, performed two valuable services for the Christian community. He has brought together a comprehensive and interesting account of forgeries coming out of early Christianity, and he has gathered together in one place the arguments against the NT canon that Christians should be prepared to address so that we can defend our faith.

References

1. This review used the electronic Kindle edition.
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4. Grudem, W., *1 Peter*, Tyndale New Testament Commentaries, Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, MI, p. 27–28 1988.
5. For instance, see Alan Millard's arguments in *Reading and writing in the time of Jesus*, NYU Press, New York, 2000.
6. For instance, see Witherington III, B., *New Testament Rhetoric: An Introductory Guide to the Art of Persuasion in and of the New Testament*, Wipf & Stock, Eugene, OR, 2009.