

PSEUDONYMITY AND PSEUDEPIGRAPHY¹

Pseudonymity and pseudepigraphy denote the practice of ascribing written works to someone other than the author—that is, the works in question are falsely (*pseud-*) named (*onoma*, “name”) or attributed (*epigraphos*, “superscription”). This must not be confused with anonymity, in which no formal claim is made (e.g., Matthew, John and Hebrews are all formally anonymous). Similarly one must distinguish between pseudepigraphical and apocryphal works. The word *apocrypha* is tied rather more to notions of canon than to notions of authenticity. The matter of false attribution played little or no part in the identification of the fourteen or fifteen books or parts of books that constitute the Apocrypha, most of which Roman Catholics view as deuterocanonical. A book is either canonical or apocryphal (or, for Roman Catholics, deuterocanonical), regardless of whether or not it is pseudepigraphical.

Although pseudonymity and pseudepigraphy are today used almost synonymously, only the latter term has been traced back to antiquity (as early as an inscription from the second century B.C., found at Priene). Apart from the intrinsic interest of the subject—by what criteria do scholars decide that a document makes false claims regarding its authorship?—its bearing on NT interpretation arises from the fact that a majority of contemporary scholars hold that some of the NT books are pseudonymous. The list of books varies considerably, but a broad consensus would label Ephesians and the Pastoral Epistles (attributed to Paul) pseudepigraphical, as well as 2 Peter (attributed to Peter). Some would add other books: Colossians, 2 Thessalonians, 1 Peter.

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3. Evidence Internal to the New Testament Documents
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1. Extrabiblical Evidence.

1.1. Preliminary Observations. Given the broadest definition, pseudonymity is a more extensive phenomenon than some have thought. It embraces every false claim of authorship, whether for good motive or ill, and whether advanced by the real author or by some later historical accident. It includes every instance of an author adopting, for whatever reason, a nom de plum—Mary Ann Evans writing under the name of George Eliot or the three Brontë sisters (Charlotte, Emily and Anne) publishing their poems under the title *Poems by Currier, Ellis and Acton Bell*, or the English scholar Gervase Fen writing detective fiction under the name of Edmund Crispin. According to Galen, a learned physician from the second century A.D., literary forgeries first circulated in large numbers when Alexandria and Pergamum began a race to outdo each other by increasing the number of volumes in their respective libraries (*see* Alexandrian Library): the Ptolemies of Egypt and King Eumenes of Pergamum offered large sums to acquire copies of the works of ancient authors. Among other things, Galen feels outraged and betrayed

¹Stanley E. Porter and Craig A. Evans, *Dictionary of New Testament Background : A Compendium of Contemporary Biblical Scholarship* (electronic ed.; Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2000).

by the interpolations and corruptions introduced into the medical works he and Hippocrates had written (in Hippocrates *Nat. Hom.* 1.42).

At this juncture it is vital to distinguish between pseudepigraphical works and literary forgeries (Metzger, 4). A literary forgery is a work written or modified with the intent to deceive. All literary forgeries are pseudepigraphical, but not all pseudepigrapha are literary forgeries. There is a substantial class of pseudepigraphical writings that, in the course of their transmission, somehow became associated with some figure or other. These connections between a text and an ancient figure, however fallacious, were judgments made with the best will in the world. We do not know how the commentaries of Pelagius on Paul came to be associated with the name of Jerome (who violently opposed Pelagius), but that is what happened. Most hold that Lobon of Argos wrote the *Hymn to Poseidon* in the third century B.C., even though the hymn is widely attributed to Arion; but it is doubtful that Lobon himself had anything to do with the attribution. The reason this distinction is important is that debates over the authenticity of NT books are tied up with the motives of actual authors, since the texts are so early and so stable that the putative author's name is there from the beginning. For the purposes of this article, then, it will be well to focus only on cases where demonstrable intent is involved and thus to exclude all pseudepigrapha that have become such owing to nothing more than the irretrievable accidents of history.

The motives of pseudepigraphers, ancient and modern, have been highly diverse and include the following. (1) Sometimes literary forgeries have been crafted out of pure malice. According to Pausanias (*Descr.* 6.18.2–6) and Josephus (*Ag. Ap.* 1.24 §221), in the fourth century B.C. Anaximenes of Lampsacus destroyed the reputation of a contemporary historian, Theopompus of Chios, by writing, under the name of his rival, horrible invectives against three Greek cities (Athens, Sparta and Thebes) and circulating them. Eusebius (*Hist. Eccl.* 9.5.1) reports that in the fourth century the *Acts of Pilate* began to circulate (possibly written by the apostate Theotecnus), full of bitter slanders against the moral character of Jesus. In modern times, czarist Russia produced the “Protocols of the Learned Elders of Zion.”

(2) More commonly, as we have already seen, literary forgeries were prompted by promise of financial payment.

(3) Sometimes the pseudepigrapher used an ancient name to gain credence for his writing in order to support a position he knew to be false. According to Strabo (*Geog.* 9.1.10), in the sixth century B.C. either Solon or Pisistratus inserted a verse in Homer's *Iliad* (book B, line 258) in order to support the Athenian claim to the island of Salamis. Herodotus (*Hist.* 7.6) says that Onomacritus was banished from Athens when it was shown he had interpolated a passage into the Oracles of Musaeus predicting that the islands off Lemnos would sink into the sea. This third motive has some overtones of the first.

(4) Similarly the pseudepigrapher sometimes used an ancient name to gain credence for his writing in order to support a position he judged to be true. This was especially the case in ancient schools in which the founder was highly venerated. Very few of the Neo-Pythagoreans published their works under their own names. They attributed them to Pythagorus himself, even though he had been dead for centuries (so Iamblichus, c. A.D. 250–325: *De Vita Pythagorica* 198, following Deubner's edition). In the sixth century

A.D. several works appeared claiming to be written by Dionysius the Areopagite (cf. Acts 17:34), though drawing on much later Neo-Platonic argumentation.

(5) A more idiosyncratic case of the same thing has occasionally occurred when an individual has ostensibly hidden his or her own name out of modesty, using the name of another. Perhaps the most famous instance is that of an encyclical that began to circulate about A.D. 440, ostensibly written by someone who identified himself as “Timothy, least of the servants of God.” Bishop Salonius guessed the author was Salvian, a priest in Marseilles. Without admitting anything, Salvian responded to the bishop’s sharp queries by saying that he thought authors, out of humility and modesty, might be justified in using the name of another, so as not to seek glory for themselves (cf. Haefner). One may perhaps be excused for thinking this is a trifle disingenuous. It is a strange modesty that thinks one’s own writings are so good that they could and should be attributed to an ancient biblical hero.

One easily imagines that this motive runs into another: (6) A deep desire to get published and be widely read, for both personal and ideological reasons, doubtless characterizes more authors than the Brontë sisters and may be the motive behind the motive of Salvian.

(7) More difficult to assign are the substantial numbers of pseudepigraphical writings that belong to specific genres. Doubtless more than one of the preceding motives were involved. But it is difficult to overlook what might almost be called a genre incentive. In the post-Aristotle period, the rise of the great Attic orators generated high interest in rhetoric and oratory. Students were taught to compose speeches based on models left by the ancient orators. The most skillful of these were doubtless difficult to distinguish from the originals. This drifted over into the reconstruction, by historians, of speeches that their subjects probably would have made (in the view of the historians). Some historians, of course, were more reflective about such practices than others (cf. Thucydides *Hist.* 1.22). L. Alexander has shown that from Isocrates on, one can distinguish between a more scientific historiography and a looser, more creative form—and Luke, at least (she insists), fits into the former category.

Further, if complex motives were involved in the creation of pseudonymous speeches, the same can be said of letters. At least in the classical period, great leaders and thinkers were credited with important and voluminous correspondence. One hundred forty-eight letters are attributed to the sixth-century B.C. tyrant Phalaris of Acragas (= Agrigentum), portraying him as a gentle and kind man and as a patron of the arts—though since the end of the seventeenth century scholars have known that these letters were almost certainly composed in the second century A.D., probably by a Sophist (see the work of Bentley). The phenomenon is less common in Hellenistic times, but see below.

(8) Finally, several bodies of writings are ascribed to some philosophical-religious-mythical figure, especially Orpheus, the Sibyl and Hermes Trismegistus (see esp. Sint, Speyer and some essays in Brox).

1.2. Jewish Examples. Jewish literature evinces a fairly high occurrence of pseudepigraphical literature from about the middle of the third century B.C. to the third century A.D., much of it belonging to the genre of apocalyptic (broadly defined). One thinks of the *Psalms of Solomon*, *1 Enoch*, *2 Enoch*, *3 Enoch* (see *Enoch*, Books of), the works of the Ezra cycle (e.g., *4 Ezra*; see *Esdras*, Books of), the *Treatise of Shem*, the *Apocalypse of Zephaniah*, the *Apocalypse of Abraham*, the *Apocalypse of Adam* (see

Adam and Eve, Literature Concerning) and many more. We may include here the various testaments, most of which have apocalyptic sections (e.g., *Testaments of the Twelve Patriarchs*, *Testament of Job*, *Testament of Moses*, *Testament of Solomon*.) Yet other genres are not unrepresented (e.g., Wisdom of Solomon). Some works are of such mixed genre they are variously classified. The *Sibylline Oracles*, for example, appears to be made up of a strange mix of pagan oracles from various countries, Jewish writings from a wide spread of dates and Christian moralizing interpolations—yet all the while the document maintains the claim that this conglomeration is the utterance of the Sibyl, an ancient prophetess, sometimes represented as the daughter-in-law of Noah. This arrangement is transparently designed to gain credence for the oracles as genuine prophecies.

The wide variety of expansions of OT narratives are not normally pseudepigraphical, but some of the expansions that are also prayers must be placed in that category: Prayer of Manasseh, *Prayer of Joseph*, *Odes of Solomon* (see Psalms of Solomon). Occasionally a later, nonbiblical, literary figure finds his name forged: today's scholars read not only Philo but Pseudo-Philo (first century A.D., like the real Philo).

Examples of pseudepigraphical letters from this milieu are harder to come by. The two cited by everyone are *Epistle of Aristeas* and *Epistle of Jeremy*, neither of which is really a letter.

1.3. Early Christian Examples. About the middle of the second century A.D., pseudonymous Christian works began to multiply, often associated with a great Christian leader. We are not here concerned with works that purport to tell us about esteemed Christian figures without making claims as to authorship but only with those that are clearly pseudepigraphical. Some of these are apocalypses (e.g., the *Apocalypse of Peter*, the *Apocalypse of Paul*); some are gospels (e.g., *Gospel of Peter*; *Gospel of Thomas*, which is really no gospel but mostly a collection of sayings attributed to Jesus; see Apocryphal Gospels). Several are letters claiming to be written by Paul: *3 Corinthians*, *Epistle to the Alexandrians*, *Epistle to the Laodiceans* (see Apocryphal Acts and Epistles). The latter was almost certainly written to provide the document mentioned in Colossians 4:16. It is a brief and rough compilation of Pauline phrases and passages, primarily from Philippians. The largest collection of pseudonymous epistles from the early period of the church's history is the set of fourteen letters of correspondence between the apostle Paul and Seneca. They are referred to by both Jerome (*Vir.* 12) and Augustine (*Ep.* 153). The *Muratorian Canon* (c. A.D. 170–200) refers to the *Epistle to the Alexandrians* and the *Epistle to the Laodiceans* as “both forged in Paul's name” (*Mur. Can.* 64–65), and so the canon will not allow them to be included. This last observation leads to the next heading.

2. The Stance of the Church Fathers.

All sides agree that pseudepigraphy was common in the ancient world. Nevertheless, in Jewish and Christian circles it was *not* so common in epistles—and it is in the epistolary genre where the subject impinges on the NT documents. But does pseudonymity occur in the NT?

From a mere listing of pseudepigraphical sources, one might unwittingly infer that no one cared. But that is not the case. “Both Greeks and Romans show great concern to maintain the authenticity of their collections of writings from the past, but the sheer number of the pseudepigrapha made the task difficult” (Donelson, 11). Similarly J. Duff:

“It simply cannot be maintained that in the pagan culture surrounding the early Christians there was no sense of literary propriety, or no concern over authenticity” (Duff, 278). Referring both to Christian and non-Christian sources, L. R. Donelson goes so far as to say, “No one ever seems to have accepted a document as religiously and philosophically prescriptive which was known to be forged. I do not know a single example” (Donelson, 11).

This is virulently the case in early Christian circles. We have already observed the stance of the *Muratorian Canon* and of Bishop Salonus. When Asian elders examined the author of an *Acts of Paul*, which included the pseudonymous *3Corinthians*, they condemned him for presuming to write in Paul’s name. When about A.D. 200 Serapion, bishop of Antioch, first read *Gospel of Peter*, he thought it might be genuine. When further investigation led him to conclude it was not, he rejected it and provided a rationale for the church of Rhossus in Cilicia: “For we, brothers, receive both Peter and the other apostles as Christ. But pseudepigrapha in their name we reject, as men of experience, knowing that we did not receive such [from the tradition]” (Eusebius *Hist. Eccl.* 6.12.3; cf. 2.25.4–7—widely cited in the literature). Tertullian is blistering against the Asian elder who confesses that he wrote *Acts of Paul and Thecla*. All the elder’s protestations that he had done so out of great love for the apostle did not prevent him from being deposed from the ministry (Tertullian *De Bapt.* 17). Similarly, when Cyril of Jerusalem provides a list of canonical books, he allows only four Gospels, for the rest are “falsely written and hurtful” (*pseudepigrapha kai blabera*; Cyril of Jerusalem *Cat.* 4.36).

I know of no exception to the evidence, which is far more extensive than this brief summary suggests. Ostensible exceptions turn out, under close inspection, to be unconvincing. For instance, M. Kiley (17–18) rightly observes that the *Muratorian Canon* attaches to its list of NT books the Wisdom of Solomon, observing that it was written by the “friends of Solomon in his honor”—which surely, he suggests, demonstrates that “at least portions of the early church were able to detect the pseudepigraphical process.” But where it is clear that a “pseudepigraphical process” is observed by the fathers, the fathers universally condemn it. In this case, as Kiley himself observes in an extended footnote, the reference in the *Muratorian Canon* may not be to our Wisdom of Solomon but to the book of Proverbs, which was at that time sometimes referred to as the Wisdom of Solomon. But in that case pseudonymity is not an issue, since the book itself frankly distinguishes various collections of proverbs by different authors.

Similarly, some have argued that Tertullian’s words admit the legitimacy of at least some kinds of pseudonymity: “It is allowable that that which pupils publish should be regarded as their master’s work” (Tertullian *Marc.* 4.5). But D. Guthrie has rightly shown that this is to misunderstand Tertullian. Tertullian is discussing how Peter stands behind Mark’s Gospel and how Paul informs Luke’s writing. He does not suggest that the church received the second Gospel as if it had been written by Peter when in fact it was written by Mark.

The view that the NT includes some pseudepigrapha was not mooted until two centuries ago (by Evanson in 1792) and became popular with the work of F. C. Baur. But so far as the evidence of the fathers goes, when they explicitly evaluated a work for its authenticity, canonicity and pseudonymity proved mutually exclusive.

3. Evidence Internal to the New Testament Documents.

All sides acknowledge that, however they are taken, the extrabiblical examples of pseudonymity cannot establish the ostensible pseudonymity of any NT document. Such material provides no more than a social world of plausibility (or implausibility!) for the acceptance of pseudepigrapha into the NT. The pseudepigraphical character of any particular document is established on other grounds: anachronisms; a high percentage of words or phrases not found in the known writings of the author; a high number of words and phrases found in the ostensible author's agreed writings but used in quite different ways; forms of thought and emphasis that seem at odds with the dominant strains of the agreed writings; and more of the same.

Although some scholars view such evidence as having no more weight than that which affects the balance of probabilities, many judge it to be so strong that there is no doubt in their minds that some NT books are pseudepigraphical (e.g. Charlesworth, Donelson, Meade, Metzger, Speyer). In some cases, those who disagree with them are dismissed as beyond the pale, unworthy and perhaps incompetent opponents. But the issues are complex and interlocking. One might usefully gain insight into the nature of the debate at its best by reading the respective commentaries on Ephesians by A. T. Lincoln and P. T. O'Brien—not only their introductions, but their exegeses wherever understanding of the text is affected by, or affects, the questions of authorship; or by reading the exchange between S. E. Porter and R. W. Wall; or standard introductions, such as those by W. G. Kümmel and Guthrie (esp. the latter's appendix C: "Epistolary Pseudepigraphy," 1011–28).

The entire complex apparatus of technical scholarship and historical criticism, not to say theology and worldview, impinge on a complex string of judgments that bear on the question of whether or not there are pseudepigrapha among the NT documents. Scholars who answer yes are inclined to argue that, say, Ephesians has far too much realized eschatology for it to be Pauline; scholars who answer no highlight all the passages that retain futurist eschatology and argue that whatever differences that remain are nothing more than different locations on the Pauline spectrum, variously applied by the apostle himself in different ways to meet certain pastoral needs. Scholars who answer yes carefully list all the *hapax legomena* in Ephesians; scholars who answer no point out that Ephesians has no more *hapax legomena* than do some undisputed Pauline letters. Such matters cannot be addressed here, yet it is important to see that they impinge on our topic and that the evidence is spun by scholars in different ways and given very different weight.

Two other bits of internal evidence bear on the discussion. (1) The author of 2 Thessalonians is aware of forgeries made in his own name. He therefore warns his readers "not to become easily unsettled or alarmed by some prophecy, report or letter supposed to have come from us" (2 Thess 2:1–2) and provides them with some signature or token to enable them to distinguish which letters purporting to come from him were authentic and which were not (2 Tim 3:17). If the author was not Paul, as many scholars think, then our pseudonymous author is in the odd position of condemning pseudonymous authors; a literary forgery damns literary forgeries. If the author was Paul, then the apostle himself makes it clear that he is aware of pseudonymity and condemns the practice, at least when people are using his name. (2) It is clear that Paul and perhaps other NT writers used amanuenses (e.g., Rom 16:22). There is a long and complex literature about how much freedom amanuenses enjoyed in the ancient world—much as I

might give my secretary detailed dictation or simply ask her to write a letter along such and such a line, which becomes mine once I have read it and signed it. These questions have a bearing on many critical debates and cannot be overlooked in discussion of, say, the authenticity of the Pastorals.

4. Some Contemporary Theories.

Some scholars are convinced that the NT contains many examples of literary forgeries and are unembarrassed by this conclusion. On this view, the pseudonymous author of 2 Peter, for instance, was trying to deceive his readers into thinking that the apostle wrote the missive (so Charlesworth): he was a hypocrite. Similarly Donelson on the Pastorals: the pseudonymous author, in “the interest of deception ... fabricated all the personal notes, all the fine moments of deep piety, and all the careless but effective commonplaces in the letter.... [He] is quite self-consciously employing pseudonymity in order to deceive” (24). W. A. Meeks on Colossians is similar.

On the other side are those who similarly point out how often deception plays a role in pseudepigraphy but recall how the church universally rejected any hint of such deception (e.g., Ellis). This is not to deny the complexity of motives that stand behind the various forms of pseudepigraphy lightly sketched above. It is to say that the letters of the NT, where pseudonymity is alleged to have taken place, are not educational exercises designed to ape the rhetorical styles of Attic orators. Nor are they writings that belong to a certain school of thought with a great but deceased head (whether Paul or Peter): the NT documents make concrete claims that the apostle is the author. Rather, the nature of the ostensibly pseudonymous claim is such that we must conclude that if the documents are pseudonymous, the writers intended to deceive in a way that is morally reprehensible—and given the nature of the documents, this is not credible. Thus in Ephesians, the author refers to his earlier ministry, written and oral (Eph 3:3–4), his chains, his arrangement of the ministry of other of Paul’s men (e.g., Tychicus, Eph 6:21–22). He exhorts his readers to pray for his (Paul’s!) needs (Eph 6:19–20), when, on the assumptions of pseudonymity, the apostle was already dead. Yet he also exhorts his readers to put off falsehood and to speak truthfully (Eph 4:25; cf. also 4:15, 24; 5:9; 6:14). Similar things can be said about all the ostensibly pseudepigraphical works in the NT. It seems better to take the documents at face value, respect the opinion and care of the church fathers in this regard and read the historical-critical evidence for pseudonymity with historical-critical discernment.

In recent years several mediating positions have been advanced. K. Aland and others have argued that the Holy Spirit breached the gap from ostensible author to real author. Provided the Spirit inspired the text, what difference does it make who the human author was? But this solution is awkward. It ignores the widespread recognition within earliest Christianity that there was such a thing as false prophecy. Worse, it overlooks that these “inspired” prophets were making historical claims that were either true or not true.

D. G. Meade argues that the most believable background to NT pseudepigraphy is neither the body of Greco-Roman parallels nor the corpus of Second Temple Jewish pseudepigraphy but the process within Jewish writing whereby an original deposit (oral or written) has been enlarged upon, with all the later material being attributed to the earliest author. This pattern, he argues, began within the OT itself: Isaiah, the Solomonic corpus, Daniel. But in every case the ostensible parallels break down. On Meade’s assumptions, the prophecy of Isaiah of Jerusalem was enlarged by contributions made

more than a century later by others who followed in his train. But Ephesians or 2 Thessalonians or the Pastorals are not additions to a book, additions that seek to make contemporary the prophetic word of someone long dead. They are independent documents, written, even under Meade's assumptions, within a decade or so of the apostle's death. Nor is there anything like the personal claims and historical reminiscences of Ephesians or the Pastorals in Isaiah 40 and following chapters. Meade's theory sounds like an attempt to make the results work out after one has already bought into the dominant historical-critical assumptions.

The mediating position that is perhaps most widely followed today is some form of school theory (e.g. Dunn, Farmer, Bauckham; see *DLNTD*, Pauline Legacy and School; 2 Peter). Those who espouse it concur with the majority opinion that certain NT documents are pseudonymous, but they argue that no deception was involved because within the school of those churches or writers everyone who needed to know understood that the writing was not really from the ostensible author. There was a kind of living tradition that allowed for its expansion in this way, and its adherents understood the process.

If this position were genuinely sustainable, it would have its attractions. In reality it presents more problems than it resolves. The school terminology suitable to the Neo-Pythagoreans does not transfer very well to the church: the former constituted a closed, disciplined society. Moreover, even if the Neo-Pythagoreans understood that some new publication was not penned by Pythagorus, doubtless some outsiders were duped. If the school mode of transmission was so ubiquitous and easily understood, why did none of the church fathers who addressed questions of authenticity view it as an appropriate model for their grasp of the NT documents? Moreover, the new treatises published by the Neo-Pythagoreans did not attempt the personal claims and allusions happily thrown in by the NT writers. Their new truths were tied up with new insights into numbers, not comments on Pythagorus's prison conditions or solicitations that the readers pray for him. One must not fly in the face of the evidence. J. D. G. Dunn (see *DLNTD*, Pseudepigraphy, 978), for instance, writes, "It is hard to believe that such a convention was not recognized, at least by most thoughtful readers, in the case of the Enoch corpus, the *Testaments of the Twelve Patriarchs* or the *Apocalypse of Adam*, all written probably between second century B.C. and second century A.D." But the fact is that when "the most thoughtful readers" discuss the authenticity of various documents, where they become convinced that a document is pseudonymous it is invariably judged ineligible for inclusion in the canon.

In short, the search for parallels to justify the view that the intended readers of some NT documents would have understood them to be pseudonymous, so that no deception took place, has proved a failure. The hard evidence demands that we conclude either that some NT documents are pseudonymous and that the real authors intended to deceive their readers, or that the real authors intended to speak the truth and that pseudonymity is not attested in the NT.

See also APOCRYPHA AND PSEUDEPIGRAPHA; APOCRYPHAL ACTS AND EPISTLES; APOCRYPHAL GOSPELS; CANONICAL FORMATION OF THE NEW TESTAMENT; LITERACY AND BOOK CULTURE; SCHOLARSHIP, GREEK AND ROMAN; WRITING AND LITERATURE: JEWISH.

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