

NEW TESTAMENT PSEUDONYMITY AND DECEPTION¹

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This study provides afresh an answer to the question: ‘If pseudonymous letters exist in the New Testament, what can be said about their intention and reception?’ Chapter 1 provides a survey of scholarship, which shows the need for the present inquiry.

Three views currently dominate the issue: (1) they were not written to deceive their readers regarding their authorship, but nonetheless their readers were deceived; (2) they were not written to deceive their readers, and they did not in fact do so; and (3) they were written to deceive their readers and they were successful in doing so.

A fourth alternative, standing in contrast to the previous three, is that no pseudonymous works exist in the NT. However, the arguments of this thesis are presented most efficiently by working from the assumption, for the sake of argument, that some letters in the NT are inauthentic. If the dissertation did not proceed from this assumption, it would gravitate toward the issue of whether pseudonymity exists in the NT—i.e. the problem of each disputed letter’s authenticity, an issue which is not this work’s subject matter.

Five primary areas are investigated in the following chapters. First, because scholars often argue that literary property played little or no role in the ancient world, chapter 2 determines whether a concept of intellectual property existed and operated in Graeco-Roman antiquity. An examination of various Graeco-Roman and Christian texts reveals that sometimes in the ancient world pseudonymous documents were written with no intention to deceive (e.g. see Iamblichus’ remarks in *de Vita Pythagorica* §158, 198 on the pseudo-Pythagorean writings). However, not every pseudonymous writing in antiquity was written in the same spirit. For it is then shown that many writers in Graeco-Roman antiquity, including early Christians, had scruples regarding both literary property and pseudonymity (e.g. see Galen, *On His Own Books*; Quintilian, *Institutio Oratoria* 7.2.24; changes of handwriting

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in letters bearing Paul's name; Revelation 22:18-19; Clement of Alexandria, *Stromata*, VI.11; etc.). In the course of this study, it is argued that, to some degree, the literary standards of the ancients were fairly comparable to those of the modern day.

Second, because some scholars have claimed that the disputed NT letters, if pseudonymous, are without relevant epistolary parallels, chapter 3 compares some Graeco-Roman pseudepigraphal epistles (Jewish epistolary literature is scant and not particularly helpful) with the disputed Pauline letters (chosen for practical reasons). Although one is hard-pressed to find any pseudonymous epistles to which the disputed NT letters are *entirely* comparable, this study reveals that the disputed Paulines nonetheless share several affinities with some Graeco-Roman pseudepigraphal epistles. For example, the practice of paraenesis, which seems to have had no intention to deceive, is emphasised as a common convention found in both bodies of literature. Therefore, non-deceptive pseudonymity is, arguably, in principle possible for the disputed Pauline letters, if pseudonymous, in the light of the analogy of some Graeco-Roman pseudepigraphal epistles. However, before drawing the conclusion that the evidence in this chapter suggests, the evidence in the next chapter needs to be considered.

Third, because the responses of early Christian leaders to pseudo-apostolic works are often discounted prematurely or neglected by many NT scholars, chapter 4 examines the available evidence from the early church. This documentation (e.g. Tertullian's comments in *de Baptismo* 17 on the *Acts of Paul*; Serapion's remarks recorded in Eusebius' *Ecclesiastical History* 6.12.2ff. on the *Gospel of Peter*) indicates that the early church (second century onwards) generally did not accept apostolic pseudepigrapha and suggests that it regarded such writings as deceptive. These responses to apostolic pseudepigrapha are further used in this chapter to scrutinise various theories in current scholarship (e.g. the content of works is more important than authorship), and they act later in the thesis as a background against which some of the alleged NT pseudepigrapha are evaluated. At the end of the present chapter, an excursus is offered on the *Wisdom of Solomon* and its reception in the early church because it is occasionally noted to support the position that early Christians viewed pseudonymity as a non-deceptive literary convention.

Fourth, of critical importance in any discussion of the question posed in this thesis is the early church's understanding of apostolic authority, because the NT documents which are routinely identified as

pseudonymous are letters bearing the names of apostles. Thus, various concepts and texts in the Apostolic Fathers and the NT (e.g. the apostles as witnesses and as Christ's representatives; 1 Cor. 9:1-3; 14:37-38; Gal. 1:1; 1:12-2:10; etc.) are examined in chapter 5 to determine the early church's perception. This study shows the uniqueness of the apostolic office in the first and second centuries. The evidence is marshalled against the assumption that a discontinuity of attitudes towards pseudepigrapha exists between the first-century church and the second-century church. It is suggested that apostolic authority may have provided the impetus to write under the names of the apostles, but that this practice was not acceptable.

Fifth, because letters substitute for their writers' actual physical presence, it is suggested that the use of the pseudonym may have been less appropriate in epistles than in other genres. Not all scholars have realised (especially in the light of the fact that the early church generally rejected apostolic pseudepigrapha if discovered) the implications that the latter theory may have had in regards to whether pseudo-apostolic letters were written to deceive. With this theory in mind, the disputed Pauline epistles (chosen again for practical reasons) in the NT are examined in chapter 6 for any additional evidence to help answer the question posed in this thesis. This study reveals that the authors of these works, if pseudonymous, created verisimilitude for their letters, sometimes going well out of their way to give these works the appearance of authenticity (e.g. 2 Thes. 3:17; the extensive personalia in 2 Timothy, etc.).

Finally, it is acknowledged that the question posed by this thesis is a difficult one to answer since there are, arguably, some historical epistolary parallels which point one way and early church evidence which points another. The cumulative evidence led to the following conclusion: non-deceptive pseudonymity for the disputed Pauline letters, if pseudonymous, is in principle possible in the light of the analogy of some Graeco-Roman pseudepigraphal epistles. However, in the light of the preponderance of the evidence from the early church, if pseudonymous letters exist in the NT, there is sufficient indication that they were written to deceive their readers; moreover, their presence in the NT is *prima facie* evidence that they succeeded in doing so. The implications of this conclusion and any objections to it are also discussed in this last chapter.