

16. Pseudepigraphy in the Ancient World & in the New Testament

I. "Pseudepigraphy" Writing a text in someone else's name, "false writing;" different from pseudonymity and still different from a later tradition's ascription of an unsigned work to someone who didn't actually write it. Written to give the impression of authority, importance, and trustworthiness. Technically, a literary "forgery" but without the modern ethical connotations of "forgery"

II. Pseudepigraphy in the Greco-Roman world: Attribution of speeches. Attribution of texts, for a wide variety of reasons. Seems to have begun during the 4th- 3rd centuries, B.C. Increased with the establishment of the great public libraries, including the library of Alexandria, founded by Ptolemy Philadelphus (283-246 B. C), and the library of Pergamum established by Eumenes II (197-159 B.C.) Mimesis: imitation of the vocabulary and phraseology, syntax and style, ideas, and ideology of the pseudonym, was a valued technique in the production of works designed to honor a revered master.

Some examples: Porphyry notes that among the 280 books by Pythagoras judged to be authentic, eighty come from Pythagoras. The rest come from his circle of friends. Tertullian writes, "It is allowable that that which disciples publish should be regarded as their masters' work" (Against Marcion IV.5). A contrary example: Suetonius, the Roman biographer (69-122 A.D.) says that Augustus condemned those who wrote sub alieno nomine.

III. Attribution within the Judeo-Christian tradition: Attribution of categories of literature, the psalms, the wisdom literature, prophetic literature. Attribution of sayings of Jesus. The Letter of Jeremiah and the Letter of Aristeas

IV. God's choice: Of human authors. And of how they wrote in their time.

V. Within the New Testament: A judgment as to whether a text is pseudepigraphic is raised only with regard to the letters of the New Testament since these are the only "signed" texts in the New Testament apart, perhaps, from the Book of Revelation. A judgment must be made in each individual case. The criteria: style, vocabulary, ideology, references
The consensus: Within the Pauline corpus: Ephesians, Colossians, 2 Thessalonians, 1-2 Timothy, and Titus are pseudepigraphic, but Hebrews is not. Outside the Pauline corpus

VI. The purpose of New Testament epigraphy:

VII. The value of epigraphic texts in the New Testament: They are canonical and inspired. They invoke the authority of Paul and tell us what a disciple of Paul wrote, at a later time and in a different set of circumstances. They must be interpreted in their own right, and Paul must not be interpreted by means of them.

Review Questions

1. What is meant by pseudepigraphy?
2. What in the Jewish tradition and what in the culture of the Greco-Roman world would have allowed Christian authors in the first and second centuries to write pseudepigraphic letters?
3. Why did Christian authors write such letters?
4. Does the fact that Paul himself did not write Ephesians, Colossians, 2 Thessalonians, 1 & 2 Timothy, and Titus make them any less canonical or any less useful?