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## **Pseudepigraphy and the Problem of Personal Reference**

Many New Testament letters contain autobiographical references—specific allusions to the life circumstances of their presumed authors. This is a complicating factor when those letters are thought to be pseudepigraphical.

The letters attributed to Paul do not simply continue his teaching in a new vein; they offer travel plans, greetings to and from associates, news regarding various trials and triumphs, and other tidbits of information that would make little sense if Paul were not still alive and actually writing the letters himself (see, e.g., 2 Tim. 4:13).

Likewise, the author of 2 Peter makes specific reference to the time that he stood on the mountain of transfiguration with Jesus (2 Pet. 1:17–18).

Some scholars think that such autobiographical references count against pseudepigraphy: the letters obviously are written by persons of high moral character who would not claim to be someone they are not; thus the letters must be authentic or else they would not contain such references.

Other scholars regard the references as a literary device intended to give the letters verisimilitude (i.e., a realistic air). The pseudonymous writer takes on the character of the named author, just as an actor

portrays a historical person in a play. The attempt is not to deceive the reader but rather to write as if the letter were being composed by the person whose name it bears.

Still others view the references as instances of well-intended deception, employing what the ancient world called a “therapeutic lie.” Throughout history, prominent church leaders (Origen, Jerome, Chrysostom) have maintained that mild deception is commendable if it serves a higher purpose, and granting apostolic authority to sound doctrine might have been thought to qualify as such a purpose.

Finally, some scholars think that these autobiographical references require the letters to be regarded as forgeries (if they are not authentic). Such features suggest deliberate subterfuge, which, had it been recognized, would have rendered the works unacceptable as Scripture.