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## **Pseudepigraphy as an Affront to Religious Faith**

Academic discussion of whether some New Testament letters are pseudepigraphical letters is complicated by confessional concerns and by different notions of what it means to view such writings as Scripture. For many Christians, including responsible and respected scholars, the notion that some writings of the New Testament are pseudepigraphical is an affront to religious faith.

**The question is quite different from issues regarding authorship of the New Testament Gospels.** Academic scholars question church traditions regarding the authorship of the Gospels, but the Gospels themselves are anonymous, and it is only traditions concerning them that are being challenged. With the letters, the challenge concerns what is said in the biblical books themselves: the disputed letters clearly state that they are written by Paul, James, Peter, or Jude, but some scholars think that they were not actually (or literally) composed by those individuals.

**For some, the authority of the writings as Scripture is at stake.**

Some Christians maintain that any letter that claims to be authored by a person who did not actually write it should be regarded as erroneous (if not deceptive) and, accordingly, ought not be accepted as Scripture. Even those who would consider such a judgment extreme often discover that, in practice, writings deemed

pseudepigraphical are regarded as less valuable or important than writings judged to be authentic. Thus the New Testament letters most often regarded as pseudepigraphical tend also to be the ones most neglected in biblical study; they are not rejected outright but, for some, they seem to become unofficially regarded as “second-tier scripture.”

**Some Christians claim that an a priori confession of these writings to be Scripture rules out any possibility of them being pseudepigraphical.** For example, J. I. Packer asserts that if the Pastoral Epistles (1 Timothy, 2 Timothy, Titus) are regarded as Scripture, then “their claim to authorship [by Paul], like all other assertions, should be received as truth from God; and anyone who rejects this claim ought also to deny that they are Scripture.”<sup>1</sup>

**Academic discussion about pseudepigraphy can become stalled, hampered by an unusually high degree of suspicion and intimidation.** Those who are opposed in principle to the notion of New Testament letters being pseudepigraphical may have little interest in the topic apart from learning arguments to refute what they take to be a troubling position. Interpreters who are open to the possibility that some writings might be pseudepigraphical are naturally frustrated by the prospect of debating such matters on academic grounds with people who are not likely to be persuaded by academic arguments. This frustration sometimes produces a backlash in academic circles, according to which arguments that

would be supportive of a position that is favored by some for confessional reasons get easily ignored or dismissed without regard for their intrinsic validity.

Within some circles, conformity to the conventional wisdom of the guild (particularly on matters challenging to those who hold resistant confessional postures) can come to be regarded as a test of an interpreter's level of commitment to true, unbiased scholarship. The guild's "conventional wisdom" can then become, in effect, a confessional position of another kind. Scholarship can become polarized along ideological grounds: interpreters may be labeled "conservative" or "liberal" and expected to defend the positions most amenable to the camp in which they have been placed (by peers or opponents).

**These problems are real, but their scope and intensity can be exaggerated.** The great majority of biblical scholars try to analyze the evidence for and against pseudepigraphy as fairly as possible. Most are also able to identify their own presuppositions and to note ways in which their stance or perspective might influence their evaluation of the data. Indeed, there are scholars who reject claims to pseudepigraphy even though their theological position would in no way necessitate such a decision, and there are scholars who admit that in certain cases an objective evaluation of data would favor a decision for pseudepigraphy even though their personal religious convictions prevent them from accepting that verdict.

1. J. I. Packer, *Fundamentalism and the Word of God* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1958), 184.