



Forged: Writing in the Name of God

Bart D. Ehrman

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Bart D. Ehrman, the *New York Times* bestselling author of *Jesus, Interrupted* and *God's Problem* reveals which books in the Bible's New Testament were not passed down by Jesus's disciples, but were instead forged by other hands—and why this centuries-hidden scandal is far more significant than many scholars are willing to admit. A controversial work of historical reporting in the tradition of Elaine Pagels, Marcus Borg, and John Dominic Crossan, Ehrman's *Forged* delivers a stunning explication of one of the most substantial—yet least discussed—problems confronting the world of biblical scholarship.

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From Reader Review Forged: Writing in the Name of God for online ebook

Louise says

While looking for something aimed at the general reader on how the books of the Bible were selected, I came upon this book. It has a different focus, but through the story of how the books were written, it answers some questions on how the actual canon was created.

The author, Bart Ehrman, provides a lot of background on the times with emphasis on literacy, the culture's view of forgery, pseudonyms and other aspects of authorship. His best descriptions are those of why some books are suspect: some refer to events in the future and people not yet born; others contradict the known philosophies of the person purporting to write them; for others its a stretch to think the purported author would be literate... in Greek.

One of the points, new to me, was the deep divisions in doctrine among the earliest followers of Christ. One major point of contention, whether Christianity was an extension of Judiasm or a something totally new, is all but forgotten today. Passions on this, and other points ran high for generations.

There is material on books not included in the Bible. Some have fantastic stories of Christ and healing. While some have historically inaccurate portraits of Pilate in remorse, others were eliminated because they were unfavorable to Pilate.

Ehrman makes the material easy to understand and a delight to read. I'll be looking for his other books.

Rusty says

Straight up, a warning, I still have half a dozen religiously related books on my to-be-read pile, and several others I intend on getting to at some point soon that I've not already purchased. So, tons of pointless religious talk coming. Read at your own peril.

It's like this, I was listening to this podcast the other day, and it was a free form conversation, but with the assumption that the two persons would spend the most of their time discussing the existence of God, the necessity of religion, and foundations of morality.

What I ended up hearing was a two hour debate on what 'truth' is. Both parties were obviously very smart, both very well educated, and both were dedicated at getting to the heart of the matter.

But what I heard was one person making clear, well-considered, logical arguments, and another person redefining terms, not thinking through the implications of their stance, and otherwise speaking incoherently. To say that both sides made points would be unfair. The stance of one of the persons wasn't just ill-defined and poorly defended, it was nonsensical.

What bothered me most about this was that I'm sure someone else could listen and come away with the same opinion, but disagree with me about who was making sense.

That's how it goes with God/religious talk for me. My thoughts about this stuff are so clear, and make so much sense to me, that I honestly can't make heads or tails out of the other side's position.

This book, *Forged*, is one of those things that I agree with, mostly. It's a long list of the unthinkable high number of forgeries and interpolations that litter the history of Christianity. Almost from its inception.

The implication here, and it was maybe stated outright, I'm not sure, is that not only does the modern new testament of the bible not only have every evidence of being made up largely of forged documents, but that it's so obvious upon close inspection that it's hard to understand why people think otherwise.

Example, Peter, the book explains quite clearly that a Jewish fisherman from Galilee around the time of Christ would have been an illiterate Aramaic speaking peasant. The literacy rates of people from this area and background at the time were effectively 0%. And the book goes on to explain reading and writing were entirely separate fields of study at the time, so literacy is only a reference to the ability to read, being able to write is another skillset that is taught separately.

But here we have not one, but two books of the new testament attributed to Peter. Both written in Greek, and both written by someone that had a good understanding of rhetoric and form. This person, when quoting the O.T., does so by quoting it in Greek (itself an oddity – for an Aramaic speaking Jew, if they were to decide to choose a language to be literate in, would choose Hebrew, and should have been quoting the Hebrew O.T. – even if they were writing for a Greek audience).

There are pages and pages of text in this book explaining why Peter could not be the author of the two books he supposedly wrote, in fact, textual analysis shows that whoever wrote 2 Peter was NOT the person who wrote 1 Peter. They were written a lifetime apart from one another and in the case of 2 Peter, are specifically addressing second century issues within the church.

And again, it's mountains of clues that all point to the fact that what we see in our bibles is not written, in many cases, by whom we've been told wrote them.

On that Peter topic, I have to point out that I, personally, would not be stunned to learn 1 Peter was actually written by Peter. For the simple fact that the backstory of Peter is given to us by the Gospels, themselves so suspect that gleaned any historically accurate information from them is nearly impossible (covered in numerous other books on the topic of the gospels), so why the bio of Peter is taken as rock solid info here is perplexing to me.

It seems much more reasonable that the life of Peter was mythologized by the Gospel writers. Again, being written so long after the events they describe, it's not only possible, but probable, that the details of his life were made up to fit the narrative of the church's origin.

I'm about as sure of Peter's actual existence as I think a reasonable person could be in this regard. Paul's genuine (another long story here) letters mention him. What if later writers of the Gospels, having some of Paul's letters and little else but word of mouth, filled in the blanks?

So, in my made up scenario, Peter could have been a Greek speaking Jew from Jerusalem that was educated and made plenty of calls for people to follow the Christ. I could accept that as possible. If that were true then him authoring 1 Peter becomes possible.

As far as I know, I'm the only person alive who's considered that, but since I thought of it, I'm pretty sure

there are oodles of books on the subject that make the same case. Maybe I read it somewhere else and don't know where, and am thinking I had an original thought when I didn't, but whatever, I don't care.

My larger point, before I got off-track with whatever it was I was ranting about, is that this book puts the era the N.T. was compiled in in some context. It shows how rampant fraudulent books of the disciples & apostles were, and how arbitrary so many of the choices were that determined what is considered canon today.

In all, this was an interesting topic, and I'd like to read a bunch more on it. This particular book didn't quite dig in as deeply as I'd have liked. The author did mention he produced a companion piece intended for scholarly review which did exactly that. But I'm not sure I'll pursue it right now.

So, interesting. But if you really wanted to dig deeply into this topic, I feel like this is a starting point, not an ending one.

Grace Tjan says

What I learned from this book (in no particular order):

1. There were lots of forged writings in the ancient world, including biblical ones.
2. Out of the 27 books of the New Testament, 10 might have been forged works --- depending on which biblical scholar you talked to.
3. Some modern-day scholars of biblical textual criticism prefer to call them "pseudepigrapha" ("falsely attributed"), but this term is misleading, as the authors of these works *intended* to pass themselves off as someone else, typically an apostle or someone who was perceived as having authority in the early church, so these works should properly be deemed forgeries.
4. Other scholars argue that writing under someone else's name, usually a master or leader of a religious/philosophical school is an acceptable practice in the ancient world. Biblical writers who wrote as Peter, Paul or any other authority figures merely followed this tradition. However, there is no evidence whatsoever that such a practice was deemed acceptable by people at that time: forgery, as it is now, was roundly condemned.
5. The inclusion of these forged works explains factual and theological inconsistencies in the New Testament. Did Paul forbid women leaders in the church or not? Did Peter and Paul get along famously from the beginning, or was there any friction between them? Did Peter think that sharing a (presumably non-Kosher) meal with Gentile converts OK or not? Did Paul think that physical resurrection is a future event that will happen at the end of time or something that had already happened?
6. Pontius Pilate, the man who ordered Jesus to be crucified, is a saint in the Abyssinian Church. This is largely due to forgeries that exonerated him from executing Jesus, placing the blame squarely on the 'perfidious Jews' instead.
7. Thomas is Jesus' twin brother, at least according to the *Gospel of Thomas*, a Gnostic forgery from the

Second Century.

8. According to the *Acts of Peter*, another non-canonical forgery, Peter proved himself as a true, miracle-working man of God by raising a smoked tuna from the dead.

9. Jesus was a mischievous 5-year old, according to the *Infancy Gospel of Thomas*, an ancient forgery fan fiction:

“The account begins with Jesus as a five-year-old playing by a stream near his home in Nazareth. The young Jesus gathers some of the water of the stream into a pool and orders it to become pure. And it does so, by his word alone. Jesus then stops down and forms twelve birds out of the mud. A Jewish man who is walking by becomes upset, because it is Sabbath and Jesus has violated the law by “working.” The man heads off to tell Joseph what his sons has done, and Joseph rushes to the stream to upbraid the boy for breaking the Sabbath. In response, Jesus claps his hands and cries out to the birds to come to life and fly away, and they do so. Here Jesus is shown to be above the law and to be the lord of life. Beyond that he has gotten off the hook with his father by destroying, in effect, any incriminating evidence. Mud birds? What birds?” *

10. If you had believed that the Bible is the inerrant word of God and discovered otherwise through your textual criticism studies, you will want to spread the word with a missionary zeal.

*The Koran 5.110: " When Allah saith: O Jesus, son of Mary! Remember My favour unto thee and unto thy mother; how I strengthened thee with the holy Spirit, so that thou spakest unto mankind in the cradle as in maturity; and how I taught thee the Scripture and Wisdom and the Torah and the Gospel; and how thou didst shape of clay as it were the likeness of a bird by My permission, and didst blow upon it and it was a bird by My permission, and thou didst heal him who was born blind and the leper by My permission; and how thou didst raise the dead by My permission; and how I restrained the Children of Israel from (harming) thee when thou camest unto them with clear proofs, and those of them who disbelieved exclaimed: This is naught else than mere magic;"

Dave Maddock says

Not much new in this book if you're familiar with Ehrman's other work. As he has done before, Ehrman marshalls his typical collection of anecdotes, facts, assertions, etc. and applies them to a specific focus. In *Misquoting Jesus* the focus was textual variation in New Testament manuscripts. In *Jesus Interrupted* it was variation in content, theme, etc. in NT books. In *Forged*, he focuses specifically on authorship.

The details about the books themselves are nothing new to people who know what they are talking about (which excludes many Bible readers unfortunately). The interesting sections of the book are when he refutes the oft-heard claim that forgery was an accepted practice in antiquity. He demonstrates pretty clearly that it was disdained just as much then as now. This assertion is one of the few bastions left for those who want to claim special authority for the New Testament, but are rational enough to actually feel a need to acknowledge scholarly evidence disproving traditional authorial beliefs.

Dee Eisel says

This is a fun book to read. Ehrman does not take himself too seriously, and enjoys teasing everyone from atheists to literalist fundamentalists. His topic this time? Which books of the New Testament are forged - that is, written by people other than the people said to be their writers. It's a fantastic fun read, and if you have to read just one book by Ehrman, make it this one.

In the first part of the book, Ehrman defines his terms: What does forged really mean? What is pseudoepigraphical? How can you tell anyway? Why don't people call things in the Bible forged when they so clearly are? He makes sure the lines are clearly drawn, and also makes a point of being kind to those who disagree with him.

Ehrman argues from the Bible itself and from what is known about the region. He notes that it's clear that Jesus of Nazareth had siblings, and that James was said to be one. He talks about the various names and nomenclatures, and sketches the conflict between the Jews, the early Christians who were Jewish, and the early Christians who were not Jewish. He is not afraid to call out anti-Semitism - in fact, he notes that it's a good thing that several apocryphal and forged books did not make it into the canon, because they were even more anti-Semitic than the ones that did make it in! (I don't know about you, but that makes me shudder.)

He also doesn't have much truck with conspiracy theorists (and if you want to know more about that, by all means go on to read his book on *The Da Vinci Code* for giggles!) and he's not afraid to note the discrepancies between what we know and what has been assumed by many Biblical inerrancy advocates. He doesn't share my tremendous dislike for Paul, but then he believes that several of the books attributed to that person were in fact forged and so many of the worst passages he feels can't be laid at Paul's feet.

By all means, read this! It's a quick and enjoyable glance through the edges of Biblical scholarship, and it's worth your time.

Clif Hostetler says

The material covered isn't new to anyone familiar with critical biblical scholarship. However, Ehrman is different because of the following:

1. He's willing to call it forgery, lying and deceit (where appropriate).
2. He says those who use milder adjectives are not supported by the evidence.
3. He used to believe the Bible was true without error.
4. He is now writing about the untruths and errors contained in the Bible.
5. His writing style is interesting and clear.
6. He has the academic credentials to back up his writing.

I suspect that his academic colleagues are jealous because Ehrman is getting rich selling books to the popular audience, while the rest of them are working with the same material but within the obscurity of the academic world.

Ehrman criticizes many scholars, but I found of special interest his criticism of the book titled The Five Gospels published by the Jesus Seminar because it, "contains at least one statement that scholars would call a

'howler'." He's referring to their statement that plagiarism was not known in Biblical times. Ehrman says that's simply not true, and he proceeds to sight various examples from that era of writers complaining of the practice.

Some personal reflections:

It's interesting to recall that the Protestants thought they were getting away from the all too human origins of traditions developed by the Catholic Church when they insisted on "solo scriptura" (by scripture alone). The assumption behind that is that the early Christian church had it right, directly from the Jesus, the Holy Spirit and God. Their thinking was that the scriptures were divinely inspired and free of human taint.

Unfortunately, modern scholarship has pulled back the veil on those early times and revealed plenty of human shortcomings involved in the development of the New Testament scriptures. (The same can be said for the Old Testament (Hebrew Scriptures) but that's not the focus of this book.)

The good old days weren't as golden as previously supposed. I find this new knowledge to be enlightening in that it makes modern humans, by comparison, seem not so disorganized and divided after all. But they're plenty of things to learn from history. So the work of historical scholarship is not a license to conclude there's no truth to be gleaned from canonical writing. The truth is still there even when viewed through the lenses of historical knowledge.

E. says

A lot of Ehrman's work I've considered simply popularization of stuff that those of us with academic training in religion learned in school. I think he would generally acknowledge that. Gosh, I even learned most of it in my Southern Baptist school, because the academic standards of historical-critical method were still used.

I really wanted to read this book, however, because it made what to me was a new argument. It had been standard in my education and in other commentaries I've read to claim that in the ancient world it was common practice to engage in pseudopigraphy and that we should not morally condemn the ancient practice. I have even made such statements from the pulpit when discussing how a biblical book was not actually written by the author in the title.

Ehrman argues that that thing we were taught is not true. That this practice should be called forgery and was morally condemned even in the ancient world. Having read the book, he makes a pretty convincing case, and I want to learn more about scholarly reaction and whether this is the developing new consensus.

The book itself had a lot of material that was easy for me to skip quickly through, as he makes his case for the larger question pretty early on and then just goes through lots of examples. Some of it pretty basic stuff on why the named author couldn't be the actual author. He does a nice summary of various non-canonical works. I also thought the book rather repetitive in places, though probably not bad for a lay reader who has never engaged this sort of thing before.

The final chapter is an intriguing discussion of wide-range of other practices that he also considers lying and condemns. So, his larger agenda is broader in scope.

I do have some questions. I know that part of the practice in the Hebrew Scriptures was for later editors and

redactors to put together existing material that came from various authors. What does he think of this practice, its influence on the Christian literary tradition, and whether it explains some of the texts we have received?

I'm also curious with issues beyond biblical studies. If something similar to his view does become the new scholarly consensus, what are the theological, pastoral, and homiletical reflections? Before I could say something like, "I Peter was not written by Peter, this was accepted practice in the ancient world, let's see what it has to say to us." The authority of the text, for me, was not dependent upon the author at all. It was dependent upon the story, the community, the fruit that the text bears.

But, if we conclude that the author was engaging in a practice that was morally condemned even in the authors time, then that does raise interesting questions. We can still claim that this is the received canon developed by the community (always knowing this was a messy process), but it might begin to sound more and more like an ever retreating and more desperate argument.

Which brings me to a half-joke I made to some UCC friends a few years ago that we should call an ecumenical council to re-open the canon. If we really believe "God is still speaking," then that sounds like something we should consider. I followed that I was going to argue for the Letter from Birmingham Jail to be included.

Edward says

I think this is the eighth book by Bart Ehrman I've read this year, so to be honest it's becoming a bit of a blur. *Forged* is one of the good ones, though. At first glance the topic appears to be a re-tread of *Misquoting Jesus*, but actually the main focus is on overall attribution of the books of the New Testament (and other extra-biblical writings), not the ways in which the initial texts became corrupted through the years. It's interesting to see which of the books in the NT were actually written by those to whom they are attributed. It should not come as a surprise that many of them are not, especially those whose "authors" were in fact illiterate. The real answer is even more surprising: virtually only the letters of Paul were likely written by their supposed author, and in fact even several of these are forgeries.

In *Forged*, Ehrman works through each piece of writing, and presents the evidence for who wrote it and why. What interests me most in the analysis are the ways in which the disputes of the early church are clearly visible in the writings, with authors often writing pseudonymously to gain authority for their own views. This explains why the bible can be so contradictory - why do the views espoused in one of Paul's letters contradict the views in another? Because they were not both written by the same person. Through history, the effects of these forgeries have been very damaging, especially with respect to justifying the treatment of Jews and women by the church.

It's important to keep in mind that all this is not just one man's opinion. Ehrman is not some lone crackpot with a keyboard and a few wacky ideas. He is a serious and recognised scholar in his field, and his views usually represent a consensus opinion or are at least widely-held and defensible in scholarly circles. Of course, the difference between what scholars and historians have established about the bible, and what your average Christian believes, is startling to consider.

Libby says

This book is another winner by Bart Ehrman, whose works I have reviewed before. Ehrman has the knack of dealing with complex issues in assessable terms. He clears up murky issues, defines sneaky slippery terms and frequently footnotes to lead the reader to other authors' works. Needless to say, dealing with the issue of forgery or falsity in the Bible is a little like juggling live lobsters and lit dynamite, hot, emotional and controversial. Ehrman is an agile and dextrous juggler who leads his readers to the knowledge that many pastors don't mention in their average Sunday sermon. If you are emotionally wed to the notion that the Bible is the inerrant Word of God, this book will make you angry, confused or shaken. If you are open to his message, it will make you consider what you think you know about Scripture. To the amateur historian of religion, it is a picnic basket of delights. It should go on your shelf next to *Jesus Interrupted*, *Lost Christianities* and *Misquoting Jesus*.

Trevor says

Part of me wasn't going to bother with this one. I had already read *Misquoting Jesus*, and suspected this book would be much the same and on exactly the same topic. But, although he does cover some of the same material (mostly right at the end) he does this in a very summary way – just enough to remind you of some of the stories there. This book covers lots of new ground for me and, like his other books, is remarkably interesting.

I'm not going to do a full review of this one, really. This will be more just a couple of asides further to this review here <http://www.goodreads.com/review/show/...>

All the same, there are things I need to say about this one:

The bit that stopped me was a line about Thomas the Contender – who was the 'author' of a Gnostic gospel, but whose main claim to fame, even beyond being one of the apostles, was that he was Jesus's twin brother. It is hard to adequately describe what happened to my brain on hearing this. The first thought that slammed in was – how did I get to be this old without knowing Jesus had a twin brother? (Surely someone ought to have mentioned this to me at some stage before now) I know people are sometimes surprised to learn that Jesus had brothers and sisters, but nothing prepared me for the idea he might have a twin. And then slowly the full implications of this came to me. 'Hang on – Mary was impregnated by the Holy Spirit... That would mean Thomas really could have been a contender'.

And there was more that I'd never heard of before, not least the gay fan fiction at the end where Jesus brings young men back to life so he can have his way with them, a new meaning to raising the dead. And the 'prequels' were just amazing – particularly the life of Mary pre-Jesus and adolescent Jesus staring in 'The Road to Tibet', but perhaps the best new story was Jesus the mass murderer – a kind of 'don't cross the man on the cross' story of Jesus as a rather unforgiving boy.

Lots of stuff about Christianity's long road to anti-Semitism and some disturbing accounts of other texts. I had no idea that Pontius Pilate was made a Saint in the Abyssinian Church. The poor man was so overcome by allowing the nasty Jews to convince him to kill God that he became a convert to Christianity, even writing his own account of the death of Jesus. This was, in fact, a story he felt strongly compelled to write. So compelled he wrote it years and years after his own death. That sort of commitment does deserve

recognition.

It probably is time we stopped blaming the Jews for the death of Christ. However, if we stop blaming the Jews it might mean we need to then blame the Italians – and that can't be allowed to happen (with Italian food, Italian women and Italian coffee God is clearly on their side). Isn't there some way we can blame the death of Christ on the Danes? If there is one thing missing from the New Testament it is Vikings.

If you don't catch yourself saying, "oh no, you have got to be kidding", at least five times during this book, you really aren't trying.

David Schwan says

Interesting book. A somewhat large percentage of the new testament was written by people other than who the works are attributed to. Sometimes it has been clear that these occurred and these works were officially blessed by the church, other times it has only been modern scholarship that has identified certain works as deceiving at the minimum. This book can in places present more detail than is necessary to make it's point but in spite of this is still a very insightful book well worth reading.

Ian says

I am a nominal Roman Catholic. I attend mass once a week; I send my children to Catholic school; my wife teaches at Catholic school; I am a semi-active volunteer in my parish community; I even play in the Sunday evening worship band. (Yes, Catholics can have worship bands, too.) For most of my life, up until a few years ago, I would have described myself as an evangelical Christian. I spent my formative years in the Presbyterian Church (USA) then, for over a decade, I was a member and very active participant in the Evangelical Covenant denomination. (I played in the worship band in that church also, and yes, the music was better there ... *much* better ... I miss it.) I once found Truth in the Protestant Church, especially in its more evangelical forms. Now I find Truth in the Roman Catholic Church. I also find plenty to disagree with in both. Spiritually, I am probably best described as a Teilhardian agnostic. You already know what an agnostic is; look up Pierre Teilhard de Chardin for the other half of my spiritual equation. I attend mass primarily because I find meaning and sustenance in the act and ritual of the Eucharist. Don't ask me to explain how an agnostic can find meaning in the Eucharist; sometimes I can and somethings I can't. Just remember that being an agnostic doesn't mean I don't believe in a spiritual realm; indeed I very much believe in a spiritual realm. One might even call me a mystic in that respect and I wouldn't take offense.

All of the above is simply to establish who I am and what I believe in the most general terms. And it's important for my purposes that you believe what I say is true, that you believe I am who I say I am and I think what I say I think. It's important to me, in other words, that you believe this review *not to be a forgery*. I'm not sure how to prove it to your satisfaction. Perhaps there's some way to track the time the review is posted and the IP address of the computer being used and the GR account used to post the review and the location of the computer. And perhaps I could present you with a declaration from my wife, signed under penalty of perjury, stating that I stayed up too late one night writing this review and that she was annoyed because the kids had gone to bed and she wanted me to "come to bed" (wink wink, nudge nudge) and this review sounds like me and says things that her arrogant bastard husband likely would say. Or something ... I

mean, look, you're not going to get a declaration from my wife because she's asleep and there's no (wink wink, nudge nudge) bedtime activities going on tonight. So why don't we all just assume, for the sake of argument, that this review is not a forgery? Okay? Assume that Ian Foster of Vista, California, actually wrote it and he actually believes the things the review says he believes.

Having dispensed with the preliminaries, I'd like to get to the heart of the matter. I want to discuss this concept called intellectual honesty. The thing is, I don't believe we are called to a faith that requires us to abandon reason, ignore our perceptions of the world around us, or embrace ignorance. Nor do I think we're called to throw out freedom of intellect and conscience. We shouldn't have to perform philosophical, historical, or logical gymnastics in order to "verify" something we think we ought believe. I'm not arguing that we embrace pure, empirical rationalism, or humanism or secularism. I'm certainly not asserting that we must deny the existence of a supernatural or spiritual realm. I'm absolutely not saying that you or anybody else needs to agree with me on my concept of truth (whether capital or lower-case "t"). I'm simply saying that it's okay to embrace an intellectually honest faith.

I wrote about intellectual honesty in my review of Bart Ehrman's *Jesus Interrupted*. In particular I described the "*solo scriptura*" viewpoint as intellectually dishonest; I find it to be so for a number of reasons, most of which I detailed in that review and don't want to waste space reiterating here. But one of those reasons I want to elaborate upon; it is the subject of Bart Ehrman's *Forged: Writing in the Name of God*, namely: many books of the canonical New Testament are now known to be forgeries.

When I drop something like this in the lap of a conservative Christian friend, his or her typical response is something like: "Forgery? You mean incorrectly attributed authorship, right? You don't really mean *forged*, do you?" My friends are understandably reluctant to use words like "forged" or "forgery" because they come with all sorts of negative connotations. Forgery is immoral ... forgery is illegal ... forgery is *wrong*. And we all know the Bible can't contain anything *wrong*.

But there's a reason Bart Ehrman uses those words. He uses them because that's what he means, negative connotations and all. We're not talking here about mistaken authorial attribution of a work that, on its face, is written anonymously. That would be a better description of the gospels, which were written anonymously and, only a century or two later, were attributed to Mathew, Mark, Luke, and John. Those are almost certainly mistaken attributions (for several empirical and historical reasons, the specifics of which are not the topic of this review). The same is also probably true of Acts and Hebrews. But a number of New Testament books, including six alleged letters of Paul, were forgeries, plain and simple.

As we all know, a document can be written anonymously or the document itself can make a claim of authorship. Within the former category are the four gospels plus Acts and Hebrews; none of those six documents makes a claim of authorship on its face. Within the latter category are the remaining 21 books of the New Testament. However, to the surprise of many a Christian, nearly all modern scholars agree that the authorship of only seven of those books is certain. The remainder are believed to be pseudonymous; that is, 14 books of the New Testament were written by somebody other than who is stated as the author in the documents themselves. Bart Ehrman successfully argues, moreover, that the term pseudonymous doesn't go far enough, that the term "forgery" is more precise, and that it is so *because* of the negative connotations, rather than in spite of them.

I don't have the space in this review to go through all the reasons Ehrman and other scholars believe each of the 14 alleged pseudonymous books are forgeries--you'll have to read Ehrman's book yourself for that. Instead, I'll summarize the Pauline letters to exemplify what we're talking about.

By "Pauline letters" I mean the 13 or 14 New Testament books which are traditionally attributed to Paul. One was written anonymously--Hebrews--and people have argued for centuries about whether Paul wrote it. Hebrews is not a forgery because it doesn't make any authorial claim. 13 letters claim to be written by Paul. Of those 13, scholars agree that Paul wrote seven: Romans, 1st and 2nd Corinthians, Galatians, Philippians, 1st Thessalonians, and Philemon. Six are believed to be written by people other than Paul: Ephesians, Colossians, 2nd Thessalonians, 1st and 2nd Timothy, and Titus. The reasons the latter six are believed to be forgeries are numerous and differ letter-by-letter, but can be summarized generally as follows:

>>The six pseudonymous letters were written at least several decades (some perhaps a century or more) after Paul's death.

>>They make theological arguments at odds with the beliefs Paul asserted in the letters we know Paul wrote.

>>They make factual assertions at odds with what we believe we know about Paul's life.

>>They use dramatically different vocabularies and sentence structure, different both from each other and from the letters we know Paul wrote. This has been demonstrated through extensive statistical study of every word contained in every Pauline letter.

>>They expressly and specifically address historical circumstances and theological disputes that were not extant in the time of Paul, but were hot topics of later centuries.

Bart Ehrman argues that the same, now unknown, person wrote 1st and 2nd Timothy and Titus because of similarities in vocabulary, historical context and writing style; he believes Ephesians, Colossians, and 2nd Thessalonians were written by three different people. It's important to note, just as I did in my review of *Jesus Interrupted*, that the claims Ehrman makes in *Forged* are not controversial in the academic world. Not every scholar, perhaps, is willing to use the term "forgery," but the scholarly consensus is Paul did not write those six letters. Yet it seems clear to me that "forgery" is the correct term. Whoever wrote the six pseudonymous Pauline letters, they weren't Paul, they knew they weren't Paul, and yet they claimed to be Paul anyway, intending to deceive their readers into believing the letters were written by Paul. If that isn't forgery, then somebody please explain to me what forgery is.

In antiquity, just as today, there were any number of reasons people forged documents in other people's names. The most probable reason people forged documents in Paul's name was to add authority to their ideas and arguments. The real author of any of those letters probably was a "nobody" or at least someone the recipients otherwise wouldn't have listened to if they knew his identity. By writing in Paul's name, he hoped to make people listen to what he had to say. And the thing is, it worked. It worked spectacularly. People believed he was Paul and they listened to what he had to say. How do we know this? We know because the letter made it into the Christian Canon and, for 1800 or more years, people believed Paul was the author.

Those whose faith is dependent upon the Bible being the inerrant and sole source of Truth often find themselves in the position of defending Paul's authorship of the six disputed letters. They object to the charge of forgery in three general ways (at least, these are the three objections I've seen):

>>>The first objection is that forgery—they would say "pseudepigraphy"—just wasn't a big deal in antiquity. People did it all the time and it wasn't seen as unethical like we see it today. The authors of the pseudonymous Pauline letters weren't doing anything wrong and didn't intend to deceive anybody.

This is easy to respond to: it's inaccurate historically. Bart Ehrman cites mountains of evidence to show that

forgery, or pseudepigraphy or whatever you want to call it, was just as frowned-upon in antiquity as it is today. It was considered unethical and forgers were despised. Ancient writers repeatedly warned their readers to be on the lookout for forgeries and not to trust everything they read. In fact, a common trick of forgers who wanted to add an air of authenticity to their letters was to warn their readers not to trust forgeries! A letter can't be a forgery if it tells us not to trust forgeries, right??? This is exactly what happened in one of the forged Pauline letters. 2nd Thessalonians warns its readers not to trust an earlier, allegedly forged, letter to their church, and it may have been referring to Paul's actual 1st letter to the Thessalonians!

Moreover, it is absurd to argue that the people who wrote the forged Pauline letters did not intend to deceive their readers. Of course they intended to deceive. How do I know this? When they wrote the letters, *they claimed to be Paul!* As noted above, their deception was spectacularly successful!

>>>The second objection is that the letters weren't forged, but written by Paul's secretary (or secretaries), who were given latitude to write the letters as they saw fit, which explains why the vocabulary and style differ from Paul's.

I saw another GR reviewer say that Ehrman "brushed aside" this argument without serious consideration. I found that odd. Ehrman devotes at least five pages to the topic, explaining in detail why the argument doesn't work, and citing an entire book someone else wrote on the issue.

Ehrman begins his response to this objection by explaining that we know that Paul on occasion dictated his letters to a secretary; Romans and Galatians in particular are known to have been dictated to secretaries. Whether Paul used secretaries for other letters is not known, but Ehrman is quite clearly argues that the secretaries did not contribute content to the letters.

Secretaries in antiquity were used in different ways. They might simply write down what the author dictated, word-for-word, or they might take the author's written work and correct grammar and spelling. In those cases, it is the person who dictated the content who is the author of the letter, not the secretary. But could secretaries also be given broad latitude to write letters themselves, in their own words and style, which the "author" would then simply sign before it was sent off? Yes, that happened in antiquity, but only rarely, and only the secretaries of the most wealthy and powerful individuals were given that latitude due to constraints on the employer's time. Moreover, when secretaries were used in that fashion, the letters were short and to the point—one page or less, involving a short greeting and brief information or request. There simply is no evidence that Paul ever used a secretary in that fashion. Paul was not among the empire's wealthiest or most powerful individuals, and the Biblical letters in question are not one-page updates on business dealings, but rather represent lengthy and sophisticated theological treatises. In fact, Ehrman argues, citing an entire book on the subject of the use of secretaries in the ancient world, there is no evidence that any literate person used secretaries in the manner required to explain the six Pauline letters as being Paul's. Furthermore, this objection does not explain the evidence of the letters having been written decades *after* Paul's death, mainly the fact that the letters address the historical context of the second century CE. Finally, if indeed it was a secretary who penned the content and style of the letter, then *Paul isn't the author* in any real sense; the secretary is the author!

>>>The third objection says the letters were not forged, but were compilations of later scribes who wanted to put in writing some of Paul's handed-down teachings.

I don't recall seeing Ehrman address this argument directly but I've heard other people make it, and I freely admit it doesn't make any sense. For one thing, the letters we're talking about are written to specific people/congregations and written to address specific issues. They don't read like, and don't claim to be,

compilations on general theological issues. Even if they were intended to reflect Paul's handed-down teachings on specific issues, rather than be compilations, how were the second-century scribes to know how Paul would have responded to the specific issues affecting the Christian church after his death? At best these would be educated guesses, at worst they would simply be made up, reflecting the scribes' opinions, not Paul's. This objection also doesn't explain why the letters claim to be written personally by Paul himself. Why the deception? Why not just say "we think this is how Paul would have responded to your situation"? Finally, as far as I have seen, this objection isn't backed up by historical evidence; it appears to be creative conjecture invented to support a predetermined conclusion that Paul must have written all the letters the Bible attributes to him because, well, *he must have*.

When we get right down to it, the only evidence in favor of Paul having authored the six disputed letters (Ephesians, Colossians, 2nd Thessalonians, 1st and 2nd Timothy, and Titus) is the fact that the letters themselves claim to be authored by Paul, and church tradition. When you think about it, the fact that a letter claims to be written by Paul is really no evidence at all. I can claim to be Barack Obama writing this review; that claim means jack squat. Church tradition is a little bit stronger evidence until you realize that it, too, is simply based upon the original expression of authorship in the letters. By contrast, the historical evidence *against* Paul's authorship of those six letters is substantial. Thus, one can demonstrate that Paul wrote those six letters only if one begins with the assumption that he did, based upon the letters' claim of authorship, and then comes up with speculative arguments, unsupported by actual evidence, to counter the historical evidence against Paul's authorship. In other words, defending Paul's authorship turns out to be intellectually dishonest.

Intellectual honesty: that's all I'm asking for. I'm not asking anyone to give up their faith. I'm simply saying that if you subscribe to *solo scriptura* you need to admit it's an arbitrary personal choice. You can make that choice if you want, and if it gives you comfort in your life, then more power to you. But a choice is all it is. The Bible has lots of great things in it, plenty of things I think are still applicable to the modern world, but there's no good reason to believe it's the sole source of Truth, or even that it's all divinely inspired.

Is that so much to ask for?

Bill Kerwin says

Bart Ehrman is a legitimate scripture scholar who began as a fundamentalist at the Moody Bible Institute and who is now an agnostic teaching at Chapel Hill. He is scrupulously accurate and typically fair-minded, but he does have an ax to grind: he is a man who feels he has been deceived by lies and misled by euphemisms, and consequently commits himself--at least in his non-scholarly books like this one--to calling a spade a bloody shovel.

The term pseudo-epigraphy--the scholarly term for works falsely, deliberately attributed to the apostles and disciples and others--should be replaced, he argues, with the term "forgery." Contrary to scholarly and popular assumption, the people of the ancient world were not comfortable with false attribution and condemned individual works when detected as "pseudos" ("lies") or "nothos" ("bastards"). Most of them may be well-intentioned, and more than a few of them (certainly Paul's epistles to the Hebrews, arguably all four of the gospels) may even have made it into the canon, but this should not stop us from looking squarely and honestly at what they are.

This is an enjoyable and challenging book. Ehrman's brief summaries of the contents of many of the non-canonical "forgeries" are particularly informative and entertaining.

Russell Ince says

I am a big fan of Bart Ehrman because, as an erstwhile Christian and venerable New Testament scholar, he is adequately equipped to discuss these subjects but unlike many Christian academics his agnosticism lends him an air of intellectual honesty which I, as an agnostic atheist interested in Christianity, sometimes find lacking in other New Testament scholars. Ehrman has a respect for his Christian material that axe-grinding atheists may lack but is not clouded by personal subjectivities and religious dogmas. Put simply, Ehrman is not afraid to call a spade a spade and this is what he does in *Forged*.

Ehrman tells us that the consensus opinion amongst scholars is that the word 'forgery' is considered inappropriate apropos the pseudepigraphal books of the New Testament. Throughout the course of the book Ehrman explains that the arguments made to demonstrate that 'forgery' is an inappropriate label are themselves flawed and, thus, forgery is an acceptable term. Ehrman identifies three broad categories of authorship for the 27 books of the New Testament:

Anonymous (mis-attributed) - the 4 gospels, Hebrews, 1st, 2nd & 3rd John.

Orthonymous (correctly named) - 7 of Paul's epistles and Revelation was written by a John but is not, and neither does it claim to be, John the apostle.

Pseudonymous (forged) - 6 Paulines, Acts (although anonymous it misleadingly implies authorship by a companion of Paul), 1st & 2nd Peter, James and Jude.

If 11 of the 27 books of the New Testament are forgeries and the texts we have today have been changed, as argued by Ehrman in *'Misquoting Jesus'*, how can we possibly hope to know what the earliest Christians believed? When later Christians of a particular dogma forged and interpolated the earliest writings of the church in order to harmonize them with their own views, how can we be sure what or whom we are really reading?

Laura says

When I was young and still trying to be a Christian, something I read mentioned off handedly that at first, the book of Job ended with him abasing himself before God. No restoration, no great grandchildren, no death at 140 full of days. It was the first time it had hit me that this book I'd read and been taught was central to faith, while perhaps inspired in the writing, was edited by human hands. It preyed on me. On the one hand, it made it seem like a wiser text. Bad things do happen to good people; good things happen to bad people; Job without the last few verses suggests, if not a particularly satisfactory explanation, at least a realistic one. On the other hand, it was a serious shock. I'm supposed to make moral and spiritual choices based on a book that was written by just folks?

Bart Erhman doesn't talk about that, and I don't know if it's true. He's a New Testament scholar and former

evangelical Christian who (like me) left the faith over the problem of evil. He's got a chair in the religious studies department at UNC Chapel Hill, which is awesome. We heard an NPR Fresh Air interview with him about his book, *Misquoting Jesus*, as we were leaving Salt Lake some years ago and I was riveted. If I'm remembering him correctly, he said that there were as many differences in the historical fragments of texts as there are words in the New Testament. People sat down and picked a canon. While I have no reason to doubt their earnestness, it was hundreds of years after the events and generations of copies later. Whole passages – "Let he who is without sin cast the first stone," the whole of Mark after the women flee the tomb (meaning all the stuff about speaking in tongues, handling serpents, and drinking poison) just showed up at some point, years after the first drafts had nothing like that.

This is the third book of his I've read, and in many ways, it's the least satisfying. The other two, *Misquoting Jesus* and *Jesus, Interrupted*, are charming and engaging, told with great affection for the material but with a clear view towards its historical and textual frailties. I suspect, though I don't know, that this book is more of a response to his critics than an attempt to communicate his work to a lay audience. He is taking on the idea that we should not be troubled that many (most?) of the books in the New Testament were, in whole or in part, not written by those we credit. Conventional wisdom is that we should not be troubled because it's just "pseudepigrapha," and because those selecting and translating the texts were divinely inspired.

Pseudepigrapha is just fancy way of saying forged. As for the divine inspiration . . . well, that is probably why this book was less satisfying. The church I left was mainline protestant. It didn't seem too hung up on whether or not there was a divine copyeditor approving every word. I can see intellectually how the frequent fundamentalist insistence that the Bible, even in translation, is the word of god has to get irritating for a guy who's done the work and shown fairly persuasively that no, there's all sorts of human decisions and demonstrable inaccuracies in this text, even as to authorship.

He takes on and goes a fair way towards persuading me that the old chestnut that the ancient world had a relaxed attitude about forgery and aggressive editing is just a convenient circumlocution. I'm not enough of a historian to feel settled on the matter, but if he's right on the textual justification for the idea, it's eye rollingly slim. (Reminded me of something a law prof said once – "If the judge is citing Am. Jur., you know she's making it up.")

I am glad I read it. I know now about Thecla baptizing herself in a barrel of man eating seals, which is awesome, and that Paul probably never did tell women to be silent in church in 1 Corinthians, which given that passage was a large part of why I left Christianity, is bemusing. But I liked *Misquoting Jesus* better.
