

Bart D. Ehrman, *Forged: Writing in the Name of God—Why The Bible’s Authors Are Not Who We Think They Are* (San Francisco: HarperOne, 2011), 307 pages

Review by Michael R. Licona, March 27, 2011

On March 22, the New Testament scholar Bart Ehrman published his latest iconoclastic book challenging the traditional Christian view. In *Forged*, Ehrman’s bottom line message is that literary forgeries were plentiful in antiquity, many of which were written by Christians and that approximately 70 percent of the New Testament writings were not written by those to whom they are attributed. Ehrman is well read on the subject, citing from a number of doctoral dissertations, scholarly monographs, and journal articles in both English and German.

Why is the subject matter of this book important? For years, a significant number of biblical scholars have contended that the traditional authorship of a large portion of the New Testament literature is mistaken. This raises an important question: If, lets say, Peter was not at all involved in writing 2 Peter and the letter was not written until several decades after Peter’s death, should it be included in the New Testament canon and regarded as authoritative to the Christian? After all, if God does not lie, it would seem that he would not have inspired a letter written by someone who was deceiving others by claiming to be someone he was not. So, if it can be soundly concluded that some of the New Testament literature were not written by the traditional authors, should the guilty literature be removed from the New Testament canon?

This is a fair question and discussions among scholars concerning canonicity have been occurring for the past several years at papers read at annual meetings of the Society of Biblical Literature, the Institute of Biblical Research, and even the Evangelical Theological Society. It is just a matter of time before the issue is placed in the public spotlight. Ehrman’s book may serve as the catalyst for more serious discussion. He’s a good scholar who writes clearly and compellingly. Readers who are unfamiliar with the topics of authorship and canonicity will find *Forged* a fascinating and/or threatening read, depending on which theological camp they fall into.

The issue of authorship is discussed at length in most introductions to the New Testament, which differ from surveys and are usually written for graduate students. These books explain the pro and con arguments for the traditional authorship of all of the New Testament literature. They also discuss the identity of the original readers to whom the book was addressed, where they were located, why it was written, and when it was written. For those interested in wrestling with the issue of authorship, it’s a good idea to look at a few New Testament Introductions that are written by scholars abiding at differing points on the theological

spectrum. Ehrman's New Testament introduction is a good choice for reading from a rather moderate to skeptical viewpoint.¹ Although he likes to think of himself as a moderate scholar, many of Ehrman's positions are to the left of the middle. The small percentage of New Testament literature to which he grants traditional authorship is one example. Granted, he's not out there hanging off the edge of the theological left where some of the members of the Jesus Seminar abide. But he's certainly not in the middle. Moreover, his view of who Jesus regarded as the apocalyptic Son of Man is closer to the Muslim view than the Christian one. The New Testament Introductions by Luke Timothy Johnson² and Raymond Brown³ are good choices from a moderate-to conservative view and the introductions by Andreas J. Köstenberger, L. Scott Kellum, and Charles L. Quarles⁴ and D. A. Carson & Douglas J. Moo⁵ are good at presenting the issues from a conservative view. I'm providing these references because it's not my intention in this review to examine all of the arguments for and against the traditional authorship of the New Testament literature in question. However, I will be interacting with a few of the new arguments offered by Ehrman.

My approach to the traditional authorship question is that there is evidence of varying weight in support of the traditional authorship of each of the 27 books and letters in the New Testament. For example, there is stronger evidence that Paul wrote his letter to the church in Rome than there is that Peter wrote 2 Peter. This was apparent even to the early Church. In the fourth century, the Church historian Eusebius placed early Christian literature in four categories: the certain/accepted literature, the uncertain/disputed literature (though still canonical), the illegitimate /rejected literature (false but not heretical), the heretical literature. In the certain/accepted literature, Eusebius included the four Gospels, Acts, Paul's letters, 1 John, 1 Peter, Revelation (?). The uncertain/disputed literature included James, Jude, 2 Peter, 2 & 3 John. Illegitimate/rejected literature: Acts of Paul, Shepherd of Hermas, Apocalypse of Peter, Barnabas, Didache, Revelation (?), Gospel according to the Hebrews. Finally, the literature regarded as heretical by the fourth century Church included several Gospels such as the Gospel of Peter, the Gospel of Thomas, the Gospel of Matthias and other Gospels, the Acts of Peter, the Acts of John, and Acts attributed to other apostles. As you may have noticed, some in the early Church placed Revelation among the accepted literature while others included it in the rejected literature.⁶ Allowing a book to be included in the New Testament was a big deal to the early Church and was not taken lightly. The general tendency in the early Church was to exclude rather than include.

Given this caution in the early Church, my approach is this: Before jettisoning belief in the traditional authorship of any of the 27, the arguments against it must be reasonably stronger than the arguments for it and be able to withstand the counterarguments. Some like Ehrman appear to take a different approach, assuming that all of the 27 are guilty of false attribution until nearly unimpeachable evidence to the contrary can be presented. Evidence of this

approach can be seen when the evidence for traditional authorship is dismissed too quickly or when arguments against the traditional authorship are strikingly weak.

For example, in his discussion pertaining to the authorship of Ephesians, Ehrman contends that Paul speaks of the resurrection of believers as a future event and provides Romans 6:1-4 and 1 Corinthians 15 in support (that Paul wrote these letters is undisputed). He then states that Ephesians teaches that the resurrection of believers has already occurred (2:5-6) and adds “[t]his is precisely the view that Paul argued against in his letters to the Corinthians” (111)!

Ehrman is correct that Paul thought of the resurrection of believers as a very real and physical event that would take place when Jesus returns.⁷ Romans 8:11 and 23 teach this even more clearly than the reference cited in Romans by Ehrman. He appears unaware, however, that Paul also spoke of the resurrection of believers in a symbolic sense. Consider Romans 6:13, the same chapter in the same letter Ehrman cites for Paul’s teaching that the resurrection of believers is a future event:

and do not go on presenting the members of your body to sin as instruments of unrighteousness; but present yourselves to God as those alive from the dead, and your members as instruments of righteousness to God.⁸

Paul’s teaching concerning the resurrection of believers in Romans is completely compatible with what we find in Ephesians and Colossians. Many of the teachings in the disputed letters of Paul that Ehrman regards as contradictory to the teachings in his undisputed letters are solved just as easily with a careful look at the texts in question. Unfortunately, because many of Ehrman’s readers will go no further than reading *Forged*, they will fall prey to some very poor arguments.

Let’s now take a quick trip through *Forged*. In the book’s introduction, Ehrman tells readers of his journey from being an evangelical undergraduate student at Moody Bible Institute to the point when he jettisoned his faith while teaching at Rutgers. In chapter one, Ehrman informs readers of the abundance of forgeries authored by Christians in the first few centuries of the Church. There were even some forgeries like the *Apostolic Constitutions* that instruct readers not to read forgeries (20)! Ehrman also discusses how some in the early Church questioned the authenticity of some of the New Testament literature. The traditional authorship of Revelation, Jude, 2 Peter, 1 & 2 Timothy, and Hebrews were all questioned for different reasons.

Ehrman then turns to providing a few definitions so that he can be clear in what he’s contending in this volume. Literature that is falsely attributed to a certain author is *pseudepigrapha*. Literature that was at first anonymous, that is, it was not attributed to any author, and was later attributed to someone who did not write it, carry this label. However, if the literature in question claimed at the outset to have been written by someone who was not

involved in its authorship, that literature is not only *pseudepigrapha*, it is forgery. Ehrman states, "My definition of a forgery, then, is a writing that claims to be written by someone (a known figure [as opposed to someone who writes using a pen name]) who did not in fact write it" (24). What qualifies pseudepigrapha as forgery, then, is authorial intent. With only a few exceptions, the ancients condemned forged literature once they knew it had been forged (36-40).

In chapters 2 and 3, Ehrman discusses forgeries composed in the names of Peter and Paul respectively. Forged literature attributed to Peter includes the *Gospel of Peter*, *The Epistle of Peter*, and *The Apocalypse of Peter*. Forged literature attributed to Paul includes *3 Corinthians* and a series of 14 letters between Paul and Seneca, the latter of which may have been the brightest mind of first-century Rome.

Ehrman goes on to argue that some forged letters attributed to Peter and Paul made it into the New Testament. Both letters attributed by Peter, that is 1 & 2 Peter are forgeries, and six of the 13 letters attributed to Paul "were probably not written by Paul" (Ephesians, Colossians, 2 Thessalonians, 1 & 2 Timothy, Titus; 92-93).

In chapter 4, Ehrman turns to a discussion of the various ways in which biblical scholars have attempted to explain the uncomfortable presence of forgeries in the New Testament. The first attempt claims that when a letter was written in someone else's name, say Paul's, deceit was not the intent but rather the author either was trying not to promote himself or thought no one would read an important message from an otherwise unknown person. But Ehrman rightly (in my opinion) replies that, whatever reason the forger had in mind and however noble it may have appeared to him, it is still deceit. Moreover, the evidence suggests that the early Christians always rejected known forgeries. A second attempt to get around the scandal of forgeries in the New Testament has been to state that the Holy Spirit still inspired the book in question even if it is a forgery. I agree with Ehrman that this is a desperate move. For me, at least, if this is the extent one must go in order to preserve the canonicity of forged literature, it is perhaps better to question whether that piece of literature should remain in the canon.

A third attempt is to claim that the forger has taken a genuine apostolic teaching and has rewritten it in order to address a different situation. In other words, because the teaching is still apostolic in a sense, the book should remain canonical. In reply, Ehrman asks "What is the *evidence* that 'reactualizing the tradition' by assuming a false name was a widely followed and acceptable practice" (126)? A fourth attempt contends that students in the ancient philosophical schools often penned literature in the name of their teacher since they had learned the content from them. Ehrman observes that there are only two examples often cited in support. The first does not actually say what is claimed and the second does not prove that

this was a practice within the philosophical schools much less outside them. Moreover, there is evidence that students in these schools often wrote in their own names.

The fifth and final attempt cites the involvement of secretaries in the writing of letters. Most, though not all, of the arguments against traditional authorship fall into two categories: style and content. If an author employed the use of a secretary to write what he dictated as well as provide varying degrees of editing, this would explain quite well why some of the questionable letters in the New Testament have vocabulary, grammar, some content and an overall writing style that differs, even significantly, from the undisputed letters. Ehrman recognizes this and writes, “Virtually all of the problems with what I’ve been calling forgeries can be solved if secretaries were heavily involved in the composition of the early Christian writings” (134). But he argues that, although it’s certain that Paul often used a secretary, the secretary only took Paul’s dictation. This is an Achilles heel in Ehrman’s case that we will discuss at length below.

In chapter five, Ehrman turns to some of the motive behind ancient forgeries. In the cases presented in this chapter, the Christians were responding to their conflicts with Jews and pagans. After discussing some of the literature he writes, “The authors intended to deceive their readers, and their readers were all too easily deceived” (159). Although Ehrman is correct, it is likewise noteworthy that none of the literature he cites became canonical. Ehrman fails to mention that.

Before we leave this chapter, I want to note that at one point Ehrman has made what I regard as a huge historical blunder. In his section “Pagan Opposition to Christianity” he asserts,

It is true that Christians were sometimes opposed by pagans for being suspicious and possibly scurrilous, just as most ‘new’ religions found opponents in the empire. But there were no imperial decrees leveled against Christianity in its first two hundred years, no declarations that it was illegal, no attempt throughout the empire to stamp it out. It was not until the year 249 CE that any Roman emperor—in this case it was the emperor Decius—instituted an empire-wide persecution of Christians. (164)

How could Ehrman miss Tacitus’ statement in around AD 115 that Nero had blamed the burning of Rome on the Christians because the Roman people suspected he was to blame (*Annals* 15.44)? Tacitus reports that, just after the fire in AD 64, *multitudes* of Christians were exquisitely tortured and brutally executed as a result.

Consequently, to get rid of the report [that he was responsible for the fire], Nero fastened the guilt and inflicted the most exquisite tortures on a class hated for their abominations, called Christians by the populace. Christus, from whom the name had its origin, suffered the extreme penalty during the reign of Tiberius at the hands of one of our procurators, Pontius Pilatus, and a most mischievous superstition, thus checked for

the moment, again broke out not only in Judaea, the first source of the evil, but even in Rome, where all things hideous and shameful from every part of the world find their centre and become popular. Accordingly, an arrest was first made of all who pleaded guilty; then, upon their information, an immense multitude was convicted, not so much of the crime of firing the city, as of hatred against mankind. Mockery of every sort was added to their deaths. Covered with the skins of beasts, they were torn by dogs and perished, or were nailed to crosses, or were doomed to the flames and burnt, to serve as a nightly illumination, when daylight had expired. Nero offered his gardens for the spectacle, and was exhibiting a show in the circus, while he mingled with the people in the dress of a charioteer or stood aloft on a car. Hence, even for criminals who deserved extreme and exemplary punishment, there arose a feeling of compassion; for it was not, as it seemed, for the public good, but to glut one man's cruelty, that they were being destroyed.⁹

And what about the letter of Pliny the Younger (c. AD 112) in which he informs the emperor Trajan that he has been going to the homes of those accused of being Christian and executing those who had refused to deny Christ (Book 10, Letter 96)?¹⁰ While neither of these instances within the very first century of Christianity reveal an official declaration by the empire itself to stamp out Christianity, they serve as conclusive evidence against Ehrman's statement that there was "no attempt throughout the empire to stamp it out."

In chapter six, Ehrman provides examples of Christian forgeries created in the midst of conflicts with false teachers. He points out that Paul's letters constantly address theological opponents and were used by orthodox, Gnostics, and others to support their views. However, Ehrman then enters dangerous territory.

The New Testament emerged out of these conflicts, as one of the Christian groups won the arguments and decided which books would be included in Scripture. Other books representing other points of view and also attributed to the apostles of Jesus were not only left out of Scripture; they were destroyed and forgotten. As a result, today, when we think of early Christianity, we tend to think of it only as it has come down to us in the writings of the victorious party. Only slowly, in modern times, have ancient books come to light that support alternative views, as they have turned up in archaeological digs and by pure serendipity, for example, in the sands of Egypt. (183)

I was shocked when I read Ehrman here. In a book where he is identifying deceit, it's ironic that Ehrman himself engages in misleading his readers. In a technical sense, he's correct: the reason we have the present literature in the New Testament is because a theologically orthodox group won the theology war. However, the impression Ehrman leaves his readers is that the only

thing distinguishing the literature that made it into the New Testament from the literature that did not is the results of a vote (and perhaps there were some floating chads there too!).

But sometimes the winners deserve to win. Consider the following statements by an expert in the early pseudepigraphal Christian literature.

[I]f historians want to know what Jesus said and did they are more or less constrained to use the New Testament Gospels as their principal sources. Let me emphasize that this is not for religious or theological reasons—for instance, that these and these alone can be trusted. It is for historical reasons, pure and simple.

The scholar who wrote the above has credentials identical to those of Bart Ehrman. He received his doctorate from the same school and also had Bruce Metzger as his mentor. He has published a number of books on the non-orthodox communities of early Christianity and the literature they produced. When comparisons can be made, Ehrman is almost always in agreement with this scholar. This is because the scholar who made this statement is Bart Ehrman!¹¹

It's also worth noting that Ehrman's definition of "Christian" can be challenged. For him, anyone calling himself a Christian qualifies. You can believe that Yahweh of the Old Testament was an evil god whom Jesus stood against and came to save us from (*a la* Marcion). Or you can believe that a goddess was overthrown by her subjects and imprisoned inside of physical humans on the Earth who could themselves be freed from the physical world by obtaining the secret knowledge available to them through the imprisoned goddess (*a la* Gnosticism). All of these are 'Christians' in Ehrman's eyes. I don't mean to appear judgmental but I wonder whether Jesus and his disciples would think of those just mentioned as 'Christians.'

Let's turn our attention back to the thrust of this chapter. Ehrman returns to some of the letters he had questioned in chapters 2 and 3: Colossians, Jude, 1 Peter, 1 & 2 Peter, James and adds Acts to his list. He also includes discussions on the noncanonical *Epistle of Peter*, the *Pseudo-Clementine Writings*, Gnostic forgeries and Anti-Gnostic forgeries.

One of the reasons Ehrman regards Acts as a forgery is because he sees contradictions between how the relationship between Peter and Paul are presented in it and how Paul speaks of Peter in his undisputed letters. For example, in Acts, Peter and Paul are "completely aligned in every respect" (204). In fact, when it came to accepting the Gentiles as brothers in Christ and eating with them, Peter received a revelation of this even before Paul. (This is not actually true. According to Acts 9-10, Peter's revelation occurred after Paul's conversion. And it was made known at the time of Paul's conversion experience that God was sending him to the Gentiles [Acts 9:15; cf. 22:21].) However, in Galatians 2:11-14 (an undisputed letter), Paul tells us that he opposed Peter to his face when he withdrew from eating with Gentiles (204). Ehrman

recognizes there are ways of reconciling these differences. But he extends no charity in such an exercise.

One could argue that Paul was right, that Peter was simply being hypocritical. But there is nothing in Galatians to suggest that Peter actually saw it this way or that he thought Paul was right about the matter (204).

There is also nothing in Galatians to suggest that Peter did not see it this way or that he thought Paul was wrong about the matter. Reconciling Galatians with Acts in this case is quite easy. But Ehrman will have none of it. Could it be because it would throw a wrench in his views?

We again notice this type of stubbornness on the next page. Ehrman writes that according to Galatians, after Paul's conversion

[h]e went away into Arabia, then back to Damascus, and did not go to Jerusalem for another three years (1:15-19). This makes the story of Paul's conversion in the book of Acts very interesting. Here we are told that Paul is blinded by his vision of Jesus on the road to Damascus; he then enters the city and regains his sight. And what's the very first thing he does when he leaves town? He makes a beeline straight to Jerusalem to see the apostles (Acts 9:1-26). Well, which is it? Did he stay away from Jerusalem, as Paul himself says, or did he go there first thing, as Acts says? (205)

In Greco-Roman historical writing, keeping the narrative flowing was an important component.¹² It takes very little effort to see that the author of Acts is doing precisely that. In Galatians 1:15-19, Paul said that after his conversion, he did not go to Jerusalem. Instead, he went away to Arabia for an unspecified period before returning to Damascus. Three years elapsed between his conversion experience and his first post-conversion trip to Jerusalem. In Acts 9:1-27, Paul immediately goes into Damascus—not Jerusalem—after his conversion experience and remains there for *several days* (9:19). In 9:23 it's reported that after *many days* had passed the Jews planned to murder Paul. With the assistance of the Christians, Paul escaped Damascus and went to Jerusalem (9:23-26). If Paul remained in Damascus for *several days* and then went to Jerusalem after *many days*, what was he doing during the time in-between? The Acts narrative does not tell us. What is noticeable is the author of Acts appears to fast-forward the narrative between 9:22-23 to keep the narrative moving.

Another alleged contradiction described by Ehrman concerns whom Paul met during his first trip to Jerusalem. In Galatians 1:18-19 Paul reports that he only saw Peter and James during that trip. However, in Acts 9:26-36 it's reported that the Jerusalem Christians were afraid to meet with Paul because he had been persecuting them. So, Barnabas brought Paul to the "apostles and spends some time among them—not just with Peter and James, but apparently with all of them (9:26-30)" (205).

But Acts does not say that Paul met with *all* of the apostles. Granted, “apostles” is plural. But Paul does say in Galatians 1:18-19 that he met with Peter and James. And two apostles is most certainly plural. Moreover, if the Jerusalem Christians were fearful that Paul may have playing a trick on them in order to infiltrate their ranks and identify the key leaders of the entire Christian Church, we can understand why only two leaders were willing to meet with him until they could be certain of the genuineness of his conversion to Christianity. A wise move indeed. No contradiction is necessary.

Despite Ehrman’s claim that Acts is a forgery, he likes it when it’s convenient for him. Discussing why the New Testament book of James was not written by James, he writes,

the one thing we know best about James of Jerusalem is that he was concerned that Jewish followers of Jesus continue to keep the requirements of Jewish law. But this concern is completely and noticeably missing in this letter. This author, claiming to be James, is concerned with people doing ‘good deeds’; he is not at all concerned with keeping kosher, observing the Sabbath and Jewish festivals, or circumcision. His concerns are not those of James of Jerusalem (198).

How do we know this about James? It’s reported in the book of Acts. Readers will be surprised, then, to read on the very next page that Ehrman regards Acts as a forgery: “a book that scholars have as a rule been loath to label a forgery, even though that is what it appears to be—the New Testament book of Acts” (199; cf. 208). Apparently, even for Ehrman, being a forgery does not negate the possibility of providing reliable historical evidence. It’s disappointing too that Ehrman speaks of Acts being a forgery as though this is the conclusion of scholarship. Craig Keener is a New Testament scholar known for his obsessive research. His commentary on John’s Gospel is one of the largest ever written, nearly 1,700 pages. Keener has a very broad knowledge of the ancient literature which he cites more than 10,000 times in that commentary. At this very moment, his commentary on Acts is in the editing process with Baker Academic and will be published one volume at a time. Why publish it in stages? Because Keener’s commentary on Acts is more than 7,000 pages! Those familiar with Keener’s work carry a huge respect for his introductory content where authorship is one of the topics covered. Keener has told me that having surveyed the academic literature on Acts and it’s prequel, Luke’s Gospel, he can assert that the majority of modern scholars hold to the traditional authorship of Luke and Acts. (Most specialists on the Gospel of Mark likewise hold to its traditional authorship.) Why doesn’t Ehrman mention this, since he mentions what the majority of scholars believe so frequently throughout the book? Perhaps he doesn’t know it or he doesn’t mention it because the majority don’t support his conclusions here.

Ehrman states that

the problems with identifying Luke as the author of the book [of Acts] are rife. For one thing, the idea that Luke was a Gentile companion of Paul comes from Colossians, a book that appears to have been forged in Paul's name after his death. To be sure, there is also a Luke named in Paul's authentic letter of Philemon (v. 24), but nothing is said there about his being a Gentile. He is simply mentioned in a list of five other people. . . (207)

I find it amazing how Ehrman can skim right past the reference to Luke in Philemon as though it's not a problem for him. It may not say that Luke was a Gentile. But Luke was a Greek name and he is mentioned as one of Paul's co-workers. The Greek word Paul uses here is *sunergoi*. And we will be coming back to this important observation later.

Ehrman states that perhaps the biggest challenge to the traditional authorship of Acts is that there are discrepancies between what Paul writes in his undisputed letters and what Acts reports of him. This subject is very involved. So, I will only comment that some scholars who have specialized in Paul see irreconcilable differences between Acts and Paul's undisputed letters while others contend that most of the differences are easily reconciled.

In chapter 7, Ehrman turns to a discussion of anonymous literature, that is, literature that makes no direct claims pertaining to its authorship. He writes, "It was a lot more common to write a book anonymously in antiquity than it is today. Just within the pages of the New Testament, nine of the books—fully one-third of the writings—were produced by authors who did not reveal their names" (220). Ehrman spends some space discussing the four Gospels which were anonymous in their original manuscripts.

It was about a century after the Gospels had been originally put in circulation that they were definitely named Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. This comes, for the first time, in the writings of the church father and heresiologist Irenaeus, around 180-85 CE. (225)

The actual first mention is quite a bit earlier. Papias was an early leader in the Christian Church who wrote five volumes titled the *Expositions of the Saying of the Lord*. These volumes have perished. But bits of texts from them have been preserved in the writings of other early Christians. Scholars debate when Papias wrote. Most place his *Expositions* around AD 120. But some scholars opt for a date a few decades earlier (c. AD 95-110).¹³ There is also debate concerning how closely Papias was related to the apostles. Irenaeus (c. AD 180) says he knew the apostle John and Eusebius (c. AD 325) says he knew someone who knew the apostle John.¹⁴ In either case, Papias is very close to the time of the apostles. He is the first to inform us that Matthew was one of the twelve disciples, the tax-collector. Mark wrote his Gospel based on what he had received from the apostle Peter. And John's Gospel was penned by John the

apostle who had leaned on Jesus during the Last Supper.¹⁵ The traditional authorship of Luke is first mentioned by Justin Martyr (*Dialogues* 103:19; c. AD 150).

Ehrman knows of Papias' report but rejects it as referring to the Matthew and Mark in our present New Testament (226-27). Although he provides reasons, he fails to mention even in an endnote that many scholars disagree and have provided answers to what Ehrman regards as conclusive.¹⁶

Something else must be considered. There were many biographies written in antiquity. Plutarch was one of the most prolific biographers of that time, writing more than 60 biographies of which we still have 50. It is of importance to observe that Plutarch's name is absent from all of his extant biographies, which are therefore anonymous like the four Gospels in the New Testament. Yet, modern historians are quite certain Plutarch wrote them. Most classical authors did not include their name. But the manuscript traditions pertaining to the authorship of Plutarch's biographies are clear. Moreover, the Lamprias catalogue from the fourth century attributes them to Plutarch.¹⁷ Does this provide us with unimpeachable evidence that Plutarch wrote the biographies attributed to him? No. Is it reasonable to believe that Plutarch wrote them? You bet. The same may be said concerning the four Gospels in the New Testament. The traditions concerning the traditional authorship of the Gospels begin within 30 years of the final of the four to be written and continues without debate for centuries. Thus, Ehrman's argument from the anonymity of the autographs of the four Gospels carries little if any weight.

Chapter 8 concludes *Forged*. Ehrman discusses a few modern forgeries such as the *Long-Lost Second Book of Acts* and *Secret Mark*. Why do people forge literature? For lots of reasons. Many Christians forged literature for different reasons, some noble. But at the end of the day they are still forgeries and involve deceit.

And now I wish to return to the crux of the matter of the traditional authorship of the disputed New Testament letters, but especially those attributed to Paul. Most scholars recognize that the use of a secretary in the writing of a letter has the potential to change much. As stated earlier, Ehrman himself recognizes the seriousness of the secretary factor related to arguments against traditional authorship.

Virtually all of the problems with what I've been calling forgeries can be solved if secretaries were heavily involved in the composition of the early Christian writings.
(134)

Did Paul sometimes use a secretary? We may answer with an unequivocal yes. Of Paul's seven undisputed letters, it is certain that four involved the use of a secretary.

I, Tertius, who write this letter greet you in the Lord. (Rom 16:22)

This greeting is in my own hand—Paul. (1 Cor 16:21; cf. Gal 6:11; Phile 19)

Ehrman concurs, “There is no doubt that the apostle Paul used a secretary on occasion” (134). But how heavily involved in the letter were those secretaries? Ehrman interacts with what he refers to as the “fullest and most exhaustive” recent work devoted to the issue of secretaries in Paul’s letters, the doctoral dissertation by E. Randolph Richards.¹⁸ Ehrman is correct that the best work on the topic of Paul’s use of a secretary has been done by Richards. Ehrman cites Richards’ dissertation published in 1991. I’ve likewise read it and it’s impressive.¹⁹

Ehrman says Paul certainly used a secretary to whom he dictated at least some of his letters. But that there’s no evidence that he used them for any other services such as editing to correct grammar and improve style, coauthor to contribute to content, or compose the letter with the named author giving his final approval (134-36; cf. 77). Let’s take a look at his 3 reasons for holding this.

First, Ehrman asserts that there is no evidence of this being done by anyone outside of the ultra-wealthy. He writes, “Virtually all of [the evidence for the use of a secretary beyond taking dictation] comes from authors who were very, very wealthy and powerful and inordinately well educated” (135-36).

Writing a letter in antiquity was a costly enterprise. In the updated and expanded version of Randolph Richards’ doctoral dissertation, he discusses the costs involved. Papyri, labor, and courier fees added up quickly. Of course, Cicero, Seneca and the ultra-wealthy could easily afford the costs. But Paul the missionary would not have been so fortunate. Richards estimates that the cost for penning Paul’s letters ranged from \$101 in today’s dollars for *Philemon* to \$2,275 for *Romans*. And that does not include the expenses involved with a courier.²⁰

Now perhaps you’re thinking, “But Paul tells us he had churches that supported him (Phil 4:10-18; 2 Cor 11:9). And we know he had co-workers whom he mentioned in his letters. They would naturally have been the couriers and could even have served as his secretaries. So, he wouldn’t have incurred little if any labor costs.” Of course. And what’s to have prevented these co-workers from also providing editorial and compositional services according to their personal abilities? Could the Tertius mentioned in Romans 16:22 have been a professional secretary who had volunteered his services? We will never know. What is clear is the fact that Paul was not a member of the ultra-wealthy does not preclude his use of a secretary for editing and composition.²¹

Second, Ehrman points out that letters in the Greco-Roman world were very short and to the point whereas the NT letters are lengthy treatises that deal with complex issues (136). Ehrman says this is problematic because the disputed letters of the New Testament such as Ephesians and 1 Peter are “lengthy treatises that deal with large and complex issues in the form of a

letter” and are “so much more extensive than typical letters . . . in their theological expositions, ethical exhortations, and quotation of and interpretation of Scripture. These New Testament ‘letters’ are really more like essays put in letter form. *So evidence that derives from the brief, stereotyped letters typically found in Greek and Roman circles is not necessarily germane to the ‘letters’ of the early Christians”* (136, *ital. mine*). Indeed. And what is true of Ephesians and 1 Peter is even more true of ALL of Paul’s seven undisputed letters with the exception of Philemon. Ehrman has unwittingly eliminated his own argument against the heavy involvement of secretaries! Ephesians and 1 Peter are quite long when compared with the average length of the letters of Cicero and longer than the average length of the letters of Seneca.

- Cicero: avg 295 words per letter, but ranging from 22 to 2,530 words²²
- Seneca: avg 995 words per letter, but ranging from 149 to 4,134
- Paul: avg 2,493 words per letter (13 letters), ranging from 335 (Philemon) to 7,111 (Romans)²³
 - Rom: 7,111; 1 Cor: 6,830; 2 Cor: 4,477; Gal: 2,230; Eph: 2,422; Phil: 1,629; Col: 1,582; 1 Th: 1,481; 2 Th: 823; 1 Tim: 1,591; 2 Tim: 1,238; Tit: 659; Philem: 335
- Avg of Paul’s *undisputed* letters: 3,442
- Avg of Paul’s *disputed* letters: 1,386
- Other NT letters:
 - Hebrews: 4,953; James: 1,742; 1 Peter: 1,684; 2 Peter: 1,099; 1 John: 2,141; 2 John: 245; 3 John: 219; Jude: 461

The above figures provide some interesting observations. With the exception of Philemon, the average length of the New Testament letters is much longer than the average length of letters written by others of the period. However, notice the length of the *undisputed* letters of Paul. They are longer than the *disputed* letters. Yet no one, including Ehrman, questions whether Paul wrote Romans and 1 Corinthians in spite of the fact that those letters are each around 7,000 words! This reveals that Ehrman’s argument concerning letter length is only a paper tiger.

Millions of hard working folks have lost their jobs during the downside of our present economy. If your workplace was going to cut 30 percent of the workforce and you had to write and submit a document to the management articulating why your job is necessary and why you’re the person for that job, you wouldn’t take the task lightly. You would write it, read it, and edit it, carefully rewording certain sentences and paragraphs in order to communicate your points clearly and persuasively. You would ask your spouse and/or a trusted friend to read it and offer their honest suggestions before you submitted a final draft. You would do this because you would want to continue making your house payments, car payments, buying groceries and paying all of your bills. In a nutshell, you would carefully craft the document because you would want to keep your job and your present standard of living.

The early Christian Church faced many situations and theological debates. In their minds, these matters were often more important than life itself. For example, in 1 Corinthians Paul is answering a situation where some members of the church in Corinth were denying an afterlife. Paul replies that if we are not raised from the dead to enjoy eternal life, Christ was not raised from the dead either. And if Christ was not raised, our Christian faith is worthless and our loved ones who have already died are forever gone. In fact, Paul adds, if there is no future resurrection of the dead and this life is all there is, let's party hard now because we will all be dead in a relatively short period of time (1 Cor. 15:12-19, 32)!

The letters in the New Testament weren't written for the mere enjoyment of the exercise and at leisure as many of the letters of Cicero and Atticus had been. Given the importance the early Christian letters had for their authors and recipients, there was a much greater need for using a secretary in order to craft the letters carefully. We know Paul could write, since he signed many of his greetings at the end of his letters. So, why have a secretary to whom he could dictate a letter without also depending upon him for editing services? After all, as Ehrman rightly notes, Paul did not belong to the intellectually elite (135-36).

There's another very good reason for holding that Paul would want his secretary to be more involved than simply taking dictation: Paul was apparently not very good at public speaking. This conclusion comes from information provided in his undisputed letters. In 2 Corinthians 11:6, Paul admits that he is "untrained in public speaking" (See also 1 Cor 2:1, 4). In 2 Corinthians 10:9-11 he writes, "it is said, 'His [i.e., Paul's] letters are weighty and powerful, but his physical presence is weak, and his public speaking is despicable.' Such a person should consider this: What we are in the words of our letters when absent, we will be in actions when present." Notice carefully how the subject changes from Paul the poor public speaker in the singular to the "we" who write the letters. More than one person is involved in writing Paul's letters. So, the involvement of the secretary appears to go beyond taking simple dictation.

In Ehrman's third and final argument against the secretary being heavily involved in Paul's letters he says there's evidence that brief stereotyped letters like land deeds and sales receipts were created by secretaries. But there is "absolutely no evidence" that such authority was ever provided to a secretary for "composing a long, detailed, finely argued, carefully reasoned, and nuanced letter like 1 Peter or Ephesians" (137). For example, Ehrman contends that 1 Peter was written by a

highly educated Greek-speaking Christian who understood how to use Greek rhetorical devices and could cite the Greek Old Testament with flair and nuance. That does not apply to the uneducated, illiterate, Aramaic-speaking fisherman from rural Galilee, and it does not appear to have been produced by a secretary acting on his behalf. (138-39)

And it does not seem possible that Peter gave the general gist of what he wanted to say and that a secretary then created the letter for him in his name, since, first, then the secretary rather than Peter would be the real author of the letter, and second, and even more important, we don't seem to have any analogy for a procedure like this from the ancient world. (139)

But recall that Ehrman himself admits that, given the length of the New Testament letters, the Greco-Roman letters are not necessarily germane. Moreover, some analogy exists related to the liberty the historian could take in recreating speeches. The digital recorder was a long time away from being invented when historians attempted to reproduce speeches in antiquity. The historian was to do his best in recalling the content of the speeches from those who had personally witnessed it. However, according to Lucian, a Greek author from the second century who provides the only surviving treatise on the proper conventions of writing history in that era, historians were instructed to use accurate content. However, it was then that the historian could become orator and display his own elegance of words when communicating the content.²⁴

Forged is an interesting read. Despite its shortcomings, it does a masterful job of raising the issue of traditional authorship in an accessible and entertaining manner to the general public. Ehrman's treatment of Paul's use of secretaries is both weak and problematic. If secretaries were involved with the traditional New Testament authors in the editing and composition of their letters, most of the arguments used against the traditional authorship of this literature lose their force and, as an old friend of mine would say, Ehrman is left with a firm grasp on an empty sack.

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- ¹ Bart D. Ehrman, *The New Testament: A Historical Introduction to the Early Christian Writings*, fourth ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008).
- ² Luke Timothy Johnson, *The Writings of the New Testament*, third ed. (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2010).
- ³ Raymond E. Brown, *An Introduction to the New Testament* (New York: Doubleday, 1997).
- ⁴ Andreas J. Köstenberger, L. Scott Kellum, and Charles L. Quarles, *The Cradle, The Cross, and The Crown: An Introduction to the New Testament* (Nashville: B&H, 2009).
- ⁵ D. A. Carson and Douglas J. Moo, *An Introduction to the New Testament*, second edition (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2005).
- ⁶ For a full accounting of the ancient lists of canonical literature, see Lee Martin McDonald, *The Biblical Canon: Its Origin, Transmission, and Authority* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2007), 445-51.
- ⁷ For a comprehensive case that Paul regarded Jesus' resurrection as an event that involved his physically transformed body, see Michael R. Licona, *The Resurrection of Jesus: A New Historiographical Approach* (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2010), 400-37.
- ⁸ NASB. See also Rom. 6:11; 7:6. John reports Jesus speaking of the resurrection of believers in both a present and future sense in John 5:25 and 28.
- ⁹ English translation by Alfred John Church and William Jackson Brodribb (1876).
- ¹⁰ See also *The Martyrdom of Polycarp* (c. AD 155-160); Tertullian, *The Apology* 50 (c. AD 200).
- ¹¹ Ehrman, *The New Testament* (2008), 229; cf. 221.
- ¹² See Ronald Mellor, *The Roman Historians* (New York: Routledge, 1999).
- ¹³ Robert W. Yarbrough, "The Date of Papias: A Reassessment" in *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 26/2 (June 1983), 181-91.
- ¹⁴ See the *Fragments of Papias* in *The Apostolic Fathers: Greek Texts and English Translations*, third ed., Michael W. Holmes, ed. and transl. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2007), 733-37.
- ¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 739-41.
- ¹⁶ For a few examples, see R. T. France, *Matthew: Evangelist and Teacher* (Downers Grove: IVP, 1989), 53-60; Robert H. Gundry in *Mark: A Commentary on His Apology for the Cross*, Volume 2 (9-16) (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993), 1027-45; Craig S. Keener, *Commentary on the Gospel of Matthew* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999), 38-41;
- ¹⁷ I am grateful to Christopher Pelling for his assistance related to Plutarch.
- ¹⁸ E. Randolph Richards, *The Secretary in the Letters of Paul* (Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr, 1991).
- ¹⁹ Richards as an updated and expanded version with which Ehrman does not interact or mention: E. Randolph Richards, *Paul and First-Century Letter Writing: Secretaries, Composition and Collection* (Downers Grove: IVP, 2004).
- ²⁰ Richards (2004), 169.
- ²¹ Josephus uses the Greek term *sunergoi* (co-workers) for those who had helped him write the *Jewish War*. Richards (1991, 153n108) cites a number of references in Paul's letters where those he mentions with him may be regarded as *sunergoi* (1 Cor. 1:1; 2 Cor. 1:1; Phil. 1:1; Col. 1:1; 1 Th. 1:1; 2 Th. 1:1; Philem. 1. cf. Gal. 1:1). I will add that Paul calls his traveling companions *sunergoi* in contexts where they may possibly be understood in a manner compatible with Josephus' use (Rom. 16:21; 2 Cor. 8:23; Phil. 2:25; Philem. 1:24; Col. 4:11). We should keep in mind that Josephus was wealthy. However, this does not disqualify Paul's *sunergoi* from serving in similar duties in the letter-writing process, although they may not have been skilled professionals.
- ²² The figures for Cicero and Seneca are from Richards (2004), 163.
- ²³ Numbers of Greek words in each of the New Testament literature is from BibleWorks 8.
- ²⁴ Lucian, "How to Write History," 58.