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By Command of God Our Savior: A Defense of the Pauline Authorship of the Pastoral Epistles

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Introduction

“It is one of the received traditions in New Testament scholarship,” writes Stanley Porter, “that Paul is not the author of the Pastoral Epistles, a view held by the vast majority of scholars.”¹ Although a few buck the trend, arguing instead that Paul *did* write the Pastoral Epistles (PE)—1 and 2 Timothy, and Titus—“most other scholars,” according to I. Howard Marshall and Philip Towner, “now take it almost as an unquestioned assumption that the PE are not the work of Paul.”² Christian scholars who accept the consensus see the PE as nevertheless canonical and authoritative.

However, unbelieving biblical scholars like Bart Ehrman leverage the science of historical criticism to cast doubt on the reliability and authority of biblical books, including the PE, by calling into question their traditionally accepted authorship. While giving lip service to the possibility that their contents may nevertheless reflect genuine Christian teaching, Ehrman clearly wants readers to believe they do not, for he says that, by lying to and deceiving audiences by whom they would not want to be lied to and deceived, their authors “did not live up to one of the fundamental principles of the Christian tradition, taught by Jesus himself, that you should ‘do unto others as you would have them do unto you.’”³ No doubt many Christians will naturally wonder whether the PE should be treated as authoritative if Ehrman is right, and may lose a great deal of trust in the rest of the Bible—or cease altogether to follow Jesus.

¹ Stanley E. Porter, “Pauline Authorship and the Pastoral Epistles: Implications for Canon.” *Bulletin for Biblical Research* 5 (1995), 105.

² I. Howard Marshall and Philip H. Towner, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Pastoral Epistles*, International Critical Commentary (London, UK; New York, NY: T&T Clark International, 2004), 57–58.

³ Bart D. Ehrman, *Forged: Writing in the Name of God—Why the Bible’s Authors Are Not Who We Think They Are* (New York, NY: HarperOne, 2011), 265.

On the other hand, of the thirteen epistles attributed to Paul—Romans, 1 and 2 Corinthians, Galatians, Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians, 1 and 2 Thessalonians, Philemon, and the three PE—the PE are argued to be the most obviously pseudepigraphal (not actually written by the author they claim wrote them). If the case made by Ehrman and other like-minded scholars rests on shaky ground, and if the case for their authenticity is compelling, Christians are likely to find their faith bolstered, both in the reliability of Scripture, and in Jesus himself.

As it turns out, the evidence offered for denying the apostle Paul wrote the PE is unpersuasive, and explanations thereof, consistent with Pauline authorship, are quite plausible. Meanwhile, other evidence is best explained if Paul really was the author of the PE: the early church's belief that Paul wrote the PE; their underdeveloped references to the false teachings of which they warn, implying their recipients did not need detail to identify them; so-called "undesigned coincidences" between them and other NT writings; and the abundant similarities between the PE and the undisputed Pauline letters. Christians are thus on solid ground in accepting the traditional Pauline authorship of the PE and other disputed epistles, and need not doubt their reliability or authority.

Examination of Evidence Against

"For most modern critical scholars," writes James Aageson, the question of Pauline authorship "has been largely settled for some time."⁴ Among their reasons, Aageson includes "linguistic and theological dissimilarities with the seven undisputed Pauline letters," "the difficulty of situating these three letters in the chronology of Paul's ministry," and "the new and

⁴ James W. Aageson, *Paul, the Pastoral Epistles, and the Early Church* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2008), 4.

seemingly more developed sense of church structure, authority, and leadership reflected in the Pastorals.”⁵ Each of these features prominently in Ehrman’s case against Pauline authorship, with the exception of chronology. Chronology will therefore be examined here first.

Chronology

As explained by Porter, “The view that the Pastoral Epistles are pseudepigraphal began with the difficulty of fitting them within the Pauline chronology, especially 1 Timothy.”⁶ Porter offers Udo Schnelle as characteristic of German critics who expound this difficulty. Schnelle is insistent: “The historical situation presupposed in the Pastoral Epistles *cannot* be harmonized either with the data of Acts or with that of the authentic Pauline letters.”⁷ As the basis for his certainty, Schnelle first offers 1 Timothy 1:3, which presents Paul as urging Timothy to remain in Ephesus as he had done when he left for Macedonia. Acts 19:22, on the other hand, records Paul remaining in Ephesus while sending Timothy to Macedonia, while the next chapter has Paul following him there, and the two of them heading together to Jerusalem a few months later (20:1, 4). And Titus, Schnelle demands, cannot have been written by Paul, because Acts makes no mention either of a mission on Crete (Titus 1:5) or Paul’s stay at Nicopolis (3:12).⁸

Porter observes a certain irony in Schnelle’s argument, for “the long-standing tradition of German criticism of Acts and the Pastoral Epistles is to doubt the historical veracity of Acts,”

⁵ Ibid., 4–5.

⁶ Stanley E. Porter, “Pauline Chronology and the Question of Pseudonymity of the Pastoral Epistles,” in *Paul and Pseudepigraphy*, eds. Stanley E. Porter and Gregory P. Fewster (Leiden, Netherlands: Brill, 2013), 70.

⁷ Udo Schnelle, *The History and Theology of the New Testament Writings*, trans. M. Eugene Boring (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 1998), 328–9; emphasis added.

⁸ Ibid., 329.

and so drawing conclusions about authorship of the latter, based on comparison with the former, “appears to be special pleading of the most egregious sort.”⁹ What is more, the argument appears to presume that any events recorded in the PE must also be recorded in Acts in order to be considered genuine.¹⁰ Yet, as Luke Johnson points out, 2 Corinthians, Galatians, and Romans—all deemed authentic by Ehrman—record events in Paul’s life not recorded in Acts (e.g., 2 Cor 11:23–24; Gal 1:2; 4:13–14; Rom 15:19).¹¹ In fact, “All [Paul’s] letters together inform us magnificently of the fact that Acts ignores completely: that Paul wrote letters to his churches!”¹² And so one need not be able to fit the PE into the chronology of Acts in defense of Pauline authorship. Like many of Paul’s other letters, the PE may simply reflect elements of the apostle’s life not recorded elsewhere.

Thus, Porter concludes, “the most plausible explanation seems to be that neither Paul’s letters nor Acts gives a complete chronology of Paul’s life and travels, and hence it is impossible to decide on the basis of chronological issues what to do with the Pastoral Epistles.”¹³ Lydia McGrew concurs, noting that Acts ends with Paul in prison, and that Paul would surely have continued writing letters after being freed and until his death.¹⁴ Perhaps this is why chronology

⁹ Porter, “Pauline Chronology,” 84–85.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 85.

¹¹ Luke Timothy Johnson, *The First and Second Letters to Timothy: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, Anchor Yale Bible, vol. 35A (New Haven, CT; London, UK: Yale University Press, 2001), 68.

¹² *Ibid.*

¹³ Porter, “Pauline Authorship,” 107.

¹⁴ Lydia McGrew, *Hidden in Plain View: Undesigned Coincidences in the Gospels and Acts* (Chillicothe, OH: DeWard, 2017), 190.

does not appear to feature in Ehrman's popular or academic work, no longer seen as the challenge it once was.

Vocabulary

Ehrman instead begins his survey of modern arguments against the Pauline authorship of the PE with vocabulary. “There are 848 different words used in the pastoral letters. Of that number 306—over one-third of them!—do not occur in any of the other Pauline letters of the New Testament.”¹⁵ In other words, “over one-third of the vocabulary is not Pauline.”¹⁶ Walter Lock admits the challenge posed to Pauline authorship of the PE by the uniqueness of their vocabulary, adding that *hapax legomena*—words appearing only once in the NT—range in frequency from eight to thirteen per page in 1 and 2 Thessalonians, Galatians, Romans, 1 and 2 Corinthians, and Philippians, but as many as nineteen to twenty-one per page in the PE.¹⁷ On the other hand, Ehrman includes 2 Thessalonians among the deutero-Pauline (pseudepigraphal) epistles, despite its *infrequent* use of such words. If their frequency in the PE is evidence against Pauline authorship, should not their infrequency in 2 Thessalonians serve as evidence for it? Perhaps, then, Ehrman and others make too much of the uniqueness of PE vocabulary. Indeed, Lock observes that of the 2,500 distinct words attributed to Paul in the NT, roughly half of them appear in just one letter or another. As Terry Wilder puts it, “differences exist within the other Pauline letters which are just as extensive as those between the Pastorals and the rest of the

¹⁵ Ehrman, *Forged*, 98.

¹⁶ Bart D. Ehrman, *The New Testament: A Historical Introduction to the Early Christian Writings* 6th ed. (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2015), 454.

¹⁷ Walter Lock, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Pastoral Epistles (I & II Timothy and Titus)*, International Critical Commentary (Edinburgh, UK: T&T Clark, 1924), xxviii.

Pauline corpus.”¹⁸ One therefore has little reason to disagree with Lock in saying Paul merely exhibits “a great choice of vocabulary and fondness for different groups of words at different times,” a variety similar to that exhibited by the works of Shakespeare.¹⁹ Besides, Porter notes that these kinds of statistical analyses are highly dependent on methodology, and that the studies of some researchers, making what they believe are better methodological decisions, counter the claims of Ehrman and the like.²⁰ For these and other reasons, Porter concludes, “it is extremely difficult to use statistics to determine Pauline authorship of the Pastoral Epistles.”²¹

Both Ehrman and Lock, however, point out that more challenging to Pauline authorship is the popularity of the Pastorals’ unique vocabulary in the second century. “Strikingly,” Ehrman writes, “over two-thirds of these non-Pauline words are used by Christian authors of the second century.”²² Lock breaks the numbers down: Of the words to which Ehrman refers, “61 occur in the Apostolic Fathers, 61 in the Apologists, 32 of which are not in the Apostolic Fathers, making 93 in all; and 82 words which are not found either in the N.T. or in these Christian writers are found in Pagan writers of the 2nd century.”²³ This, Ehrman argues, “suggests that this author is using a vocabulary that was becoming more common after the days of Paul, and that he too therefore lived after Paul.”²⁴ Lock is not convinced, however, because the vocabulary of second-

¹⁸ Terry L. Wilder, “Pseudonymity and the New Testament,” in *Interpreting the New Testament: Essays on Methods and Issues*, eds. David Alan Black and David S. Dockery (Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman, 2001), 325.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Porter, “Pauline Authorship,” 109.

²¹ Ibid., 110.

²² Ehrman, *The New Testament*, 454.

²³ Lock, *I & II Timothy and Titus*, xxix.

²⁴ Ehrman, *Forged*, 98.

century Christian writers may have been influenced by the PE.²⁵ One would expect first-century writings received as Pauline to influence the vocabulary of second-century Christians and the pagans with which they interact. And there is no evidence that such vocabulary could not have originated earlier than the second century. Indeed, William Mounce observes that of the vocabulary in the PE not found elsewhere in Paul, over 90% can be found in writings prior to A.D. 50.²⁶ J. D. Douglas, Merrill Tenney, and Moisés Silva go so far as to say that “detailed study . . . has shown that the Pastoral Letters contain not one single word that was foreign to the age in which Paul lived and could not have been used by him.”²⁷

Mounce offers a number of external influences as having plausibly influenced Paul’s vocabulary in the PE. During his four-year imprisonment in Caesarea and Rome, for example, he may have learned Latin so as to be able to minister further westward, which may account for the many words and phrases in the PE which originate in Latin.²⁸ The nature of the heresies the author opposes may also have been unique in Paul’s experience, calling for the use of words not used elsewhere, just as new subject matter specific to the circumstances of the Corinthians and Romans called for the use of words peculiar to Paul’s letters to them.²⁹ From these and other such influences, Mounce concludes, “Every person’s writing style and word choices are, to some degree, affected by the external influences of the particular situation of writing. While the PE do

²⁵ Lock, *I & II Timothy and Titus*, xxix.

²⁶ William D. Mounce, *Pastoral Epistles* (Word Biblical Commentary. Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 2000), ciii.

²⁷ J. D. Douglas, Merrill C. Tenney, and Moisés Silva, eds., “Pastoral Letters,” in *Zondervan Illustrated Bible Dictionary*, rev. ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2011), 1078.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, c.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, c–ci.

show some differences from what is found in other Pauline letters written to different historical situations and addressing different needs, the use of statistical analysis has far outreached itself.”³⁰

A third challenge Ehrman poses from vocabulary, and which cannot be easily explained by external influences and motivations, is the alleged inconsistency between the meaning the author of the PE gives to words that *are* used elsewhere in the undisputed Pauline corpus, and what they mean there. “The term ‘faith’ [*pistis*]” for example, refers in the undisputed Pauline letters “to the trust a person has in Christ to bring about salvation through his death” (e.g., Rom 1:12; Gal 2:16), but in the PE it “means the body of teaching that makes up the Christian religion.”³¹ Ehrman sees this as reflecting a proto-orthodox set of doctrines that developed later in response to groups deemed heretical, like the Gnostics.³² Similarly, “Paul’s word for ‘having a right standing before God’ (literally, ‘righteous’ [*dikaios*])”—e.g., in Romans 2:13—“now means ‘being a moral individual’ (i.e., ‘upright’; Titus 1:8).³³ Yet, *pistis* does, in fact, seem to refer to a body of doctrine at times in the Pauline corpus (e.g., 1 Cor 16:13; 2 Cor 13:5; Gal 1:23; Phil 1:27). So too does *dikaios* at times mean something like “right” (e.g., Rom 5:7; 7:12; Phil 4:8). Ehrman’s claim, then, that the author of the PE understood terms differently than the real Paul, is unconvincing.

In the end, the uniqueness of vocabulary in the PE poses no real challenge to their authenticity. Paul exhibits a willingness to vary his choice of words throughout his

³⁰ Ibid., cxvii.

³¹ Ehrman, *Forged*, 99.

³² Ehrman, *The New Testament*, 456.

³³ Ibid., 454.

correspondence, often using language specially and uniquely suited to the occasion, and the author's use of terms that *do* appear in Paul's undisputed epistles is consistent with their use there by Paul.

Content

Ehrman acknowledges that arguments from vocabulary are not decisive, but his is a cumulative case that combines the aforementioned lexical evidence for a second-century provenance of the PE with evidence that their content is characteristically second-century in nature. The author's references, for example, to "myths and endless genealogies" (1 Tim 1:4), to false teachers "who forbid marriage and require abstinence from foods" (4:3), and to that which "is falsely called 'knowledge' [*gnōsis*]" (6:20) all strike Ehrman as most consistent with second-century Gnosticism.³⁴ Johnson notes, however, the characterization of the faith's opponents by the PE often follows rhetorical conventions of polemic, contemporaneous with Paul, and one cannot therefore determine with confidence the identity of the opponents and thereby place the PE in history.³⁵ Meanwhile, Marshall and Towner observe that the various elements of the opposition's heresy, including its Jewish myths (Tit 1:14; cf. 1 Tim 1:4; 2 Tim 4:4), asceticism (1 Tim 4:3), and claimed knowledge of God (Tit 1:16; cf. 1 Tim 6:20), as well as the author's claim to be a teacher of the Gentiles (1 Tim 2:7), to whom he insists salvation is available (1 Tim 2:4–6; Tit 2:11), can be explained as an early Jewish-Christian sect without recourse to second-century Gnosticism.³⁶ "Despite the widespread support which it has received," they conclude,

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 450.

³⁵ Johnson, *The First and Second Letters to Timothy*, 73.

³⁶ Marshall and Towner, *Commentary on the Pastoral Epistles*, 46–51.

“the identification of the heresy in the PE as a form of Gnosticism is not only an unnecessary hypothesis but also a distortion of the evidence.”³⁷ While the false teachings of the early sect opposed by the PE may have been a sort of “*incipient Gnosticism*,” John Rutherford argues that the author would have used language clearly pointing to the more developed Gnosticism of the second century if it were what he had intended to combat.³⁸

Ehrman also argues that whereas genuinely Pauline churches in the first century were non-hierarchical, charismatic communities in which no one exercised authority because everyone was endowed with gifts from the Holy Spirit, the churches overseen by the stated recipients of the PE are instead governed by a hierarchical authority that had not yet developed until the second century, after the church had come to terms with the reality that Christ was not to return as soon as previously expected.³⁹ As Johnson puts the challenge, “Christianity in the Pastorals has come to grips with the delay of the parousia and is adjusting to continued existence in the world by creating an institutional structure.”⁴⁰ Responding to the challenge, Johnson points out, among other things: that allusions to hierarchy in the PE are scattered and insufficient to paint a complete picture of church order; that they resemble the order of first-century synagogues and Greco-Roman *collegia* more than they do second-century Christian ones; that whatever hierarchical development has occurred since an earlier time, characterized by more charismatic communities, need not have taken decades; and that Paul does, in fact, recognize authority

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 51.

³⁸ John Rutherford, “Pastoral, Epistles, The,” in *The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia*, eds. James Orr, et al., 5 vols. (Chicago, IL: The Howard-Severance Company, 1915), 2260–1; emphasis added.

³⁹ Ehrman, *The New Testament*, 455–6.

⁴⁰ Johnson, *The First and Second Letters to Timothy*, 74.

figures in his undisputed epistles, such as overseers and deacons in Philippians 1:1 and Romans 16:1, and the fellow-workers and laborers of 1 Corinthians 16:15–17 and 1 Thessalonians 5:12.⁴¹ Furthermore, Rutherford notes that whereas the PE demand a “presbyterial administration” by bishops, elders, and deacons (1 Tim 3; Tit 1:5), the church in the second century had developed a “monarchical episcopacy.”⁴² To whatever small degree the PE place a greater emphasis on appointed ministries and their qualifications than do the undisputed Pauline letters, E. Earle Ellis attributes it to the increasing threat of false teachers faced by Paul’s churches, saying the PE “represent an understandable development of [Paul’s] earlier usage.”⁴³ As Douglas, Tenney, and Silva put it, “It is also very natural that Paul . . . should specify certain qualifications for office, so that the church might be guarded against the ravages of error, both doctrinal and moral.”⁴⁴ Johnson concludes, “When all these points are taken into account, the issue of church order in the Pastorals turns out to be nondeterminative for their authenticity.”⁴⁵

Ehrman points to two additional issues in the content of the PE as evidence against their authenticity. First, whereas the real Paul is allegedly unconcerned with orthodoxy-protecting creeds, “in the Pastoral epistles what is of critical importance is ‘the teaching,’ that is, the body of knowledge conveyed by the apostle, sometimes simply designated as ‘the faith.’”⁴⁶ But as

⁴¹ Ibid., 75–76.

⁴² Rutherford, “Pastoral, Epistles, The,” 2260. See also Wilder, “Pseudonymity and the New Testament,” 325.

⁴³ E. Earle Ellis, “Pastoral Letters,” in *Dictionary of Paul and His Letters*, eds. Gerald F. Hawthorne, Ralph P. Martin, and Daniel G. Reid (Downers Grove, IL; Leicester, UK: InterVarsity, 1993), 660.

⁴⁴ Douglas, Tenney, and Silva, “Pastoral Letters,” 1080.

⁴⁵ Johnson, *The First and Second Letters to Timothy*, 76.

⁴⁶ Ehrman, *The New Testament*, 456.

demonstrated earlier, references to such bodies of doctrine using *pistis* exist in the undisputed Pauline corpus. And as Wilder points out, in them Paul does, in fact, stress the importance of received tradition (e.g., 1 Cor 11:2), and draws upon early creedal sayings and hymns (e.g., 1 Cor 15:3–5; Phil 2:6–8).⁴⁷ Second, Ehrman argues that the appeal in 1 Timothy 5:18 to a passage from the Torah alongside a saying of Jesus (Luke 10:7), together identified by the author as “Scripture,” reflects a proto-orthodox development of authoritative canon not seen in the lifetime of Paul.⁴⁸ However, this appeal to an authoritative NT writing is alone in the PE, and is underdeveloped if anything. It seems eminently plausible that the later proto-orthodox developed such a canonical view of the NT because they found the germ of one in Paul and Peter (2 Pet 3:16).

The content, therefore, of the PE does not appear to challenge their Pauline authorship. The false teachings they oppose are easily placed in the first-century lifetime of Paul; the church structure called for by their author represents at most only a slight and warranted development of the offices Paul calls for in his undisputed letters; and their apparent appeal to creeds is consistent with genuinely Pauline literature, their underdeveloped appeal to canon no meaningful challenge to inclusion therein.

Examination of Evidence For

Of course, from the absence of persuasive evidence against the authenticity of the PE it does not follow that they should therefore be presumed genuine. However, at least four lines of evidence argue in favor of their Pauline authorship: external evidence in the form of early church

⁴⁷ Wilder, “Pseudonymity and the New Testament,” 326.

⁴⁸ Ehrman, *The New Testament*, 456.

ascription of Pauline authorship; and internal evidence in the form of vague, unclear references to false teaching only the author's stated recipients would recognize, "undersigned coincidences" between the PE and events recorded in Acts, and a vast array of similarities between the PE and the undisputed Pauline letters.

Early Christian Witness

Guthrie observes that while "there is a modern tendency to play down the significance of the external evidence . . . it is only against the background of early Christian views about the Epistles that a fair assessment can be made of modern theories unfavorable to Pauline authorship."⁴⁹ And the external evidence is clear: The early church consensus was that the PE were written by Paul.

The epistle of Polycarp to the Philippians constitutes a very early extra-biblical assignment of Pauline authorship to the PE. Alexander Roberts, James Donaldson, and A. Coxe date it to "about the middle of the second century."⁵⁰ Kenneth Berding dates it earlier, preferring A.D. 120, but for the sake of argument accepts a later date of A.D. 135.⁵¹ And while he acknowledges that the earlier letters of Clement of Rome and Ignatius of Antioch contain some possible allusions to the PE, he says they are uncertain, identifying Polycarp as the first post-

⁴⁹ Donald Guthrie, *The Pastoral Epistles: An Introduction and Commentary*, Tyndale New Testament Commentaries (Nottingham, UK; Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1990), 20.

⁵⁰ Alexander Roberts, James Donaldson, and A. Cleveland Coxe, eds., *The Ante-Nicene Fathers: Translations of the Writings of the Fathers Down to A.D. 325*, 8 vols. (Buffalo, NY: The Christian Literature Company, 1885–6), 1:32.

⁵¹ Kenneth Berding, "Polycarp of Smyrna's View of the Authorship of 1 and 2 Timothy," *Vigiliae Christianae* 53, no. 4 (November, 1999), 349–50.

canonical Christian writer to clearly quote from them.⁵² Berding argues that by clustering such quotations together with others from the undisputed letters, after explicitly mentioning Paul's name, Polycarp definitively exhibits belief in the Pauline authorship of the PE. For example, in chapters 3 and 4, after referring to "the wisdom of the blessed and glorified Paul," Polycarp draws from two undisputed Pauline epistles, writing of "that faith which . . . is the mother of us all" (compare Gal 4:26, "the Jerusalem above is . . . our mother") and of "the armor of righteousness" (compare 2 Cor 6:7, "the weapons of righteousness," and Rom 6:13, "instruments for righteousness"). Sandwiched between these two references are two quotations from 1 Timothy. Polycarp writes that "the love of money is the root of all evils" (compare 1 Tim 6:10, "the love of money is a root of all kinds of evils"), and that "as we brought nothing into the world, so we can carry nothing out" (compare 1 Tim 6:7, "we brought nothing into the world, and we cannot take anything out of the world").⁵³

According to Berding, Irenaeus of Lyons is the next in history to clearly identify Paul as the author of the PE, some fifty years later.⁵⁴ Robertson, Donaldson, and Coxe date Irenaeus' *Against Heresies* to between A.D. 182 and 188.⁵⁵ In it, Irenaeus ascribes Pauline authorship to Titus, writing of men "Paul commands us, 'after a first and second admonition, to avoid'" (compare Titus 3:10, "after warning him once and then twice, have nothing more to do with him"), and to 1 Timothy, writing of those Paul says use "novelties of words of false knowledge"

⁵² *Ibid.*, 350.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 356; Robertson, Donaldson, and Coxe, *The Ante-Nicene Fathers*, 1:33–34.

⁵⁴ Berding, "Polycarp of Smyrna's View of the Authorship of 1 and 2 Timothy," 351–2.

⁵⁵ Robertson, Donaldson, and Coxe, *The Ante-Nicene Fathers*, 1:312.

(compare 1 Tim 6:20, “Avoid the irreverent babble and contradictions of what is falsely called ‘knowledge’”).⁵⁶

As Rutherford observes, “in regard to the genuineness of the [PE] there is abundant external attestation. Allusions to them are found in the writings of Clement and Polycarp. In the middle of the [second century, they] were recognized as Pauline in authorship, and were freely quoted.”⁵⁷ Rutherford rhetorically asks, “Can it be believed that the church of the [second century], the church of the martyrs, was in such a state of mental decrepitude as to receive [epistles] which were spurious, so far as the greater portion of their contents is concerned?”⁵⁸ And this historical Christian consensus continued beyond the second century into the third and fourth. The Muratorian Canon is a fragment dating to the late second or early third century.⁵⁹ It says Paul wrote the PE, which “are hallowed in the esteem of the Catholic Church, *and* in the regulation of ecclesiastical discipline.”⁶⁰ The historian Eusebius completed his history of the church in the early fourth century.⁶¹ Included among the “undisputed writings” of his time were

⁵⁶ Ibid., 1:341, 378.

⁵⁷ Rutherford, “Pastoral, Epistles, The,” 2258.

⁵⁸ Ibid., 2262.

⁵⁹ Arthur G. Patzia dates it to the late second century (*The Making of the New Testament: Origin, Collection, Text & Canon*, 2nd ed. [Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2011], 96. I. Howard Marshall dates it there or to the very beginning of the third (“John, Epistles Of,” in *New Bible Dictionary*, eds. D. R. W. Wood, et al., 3rd ed. (Leicester, UK; Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1996), 596. Guthrie appears to date it to the early third century, offering it “in addition to . . . second-century evidence” (*The Pastoral Epistles*, 21–22).

⁶⁰ Robertson, Donaldson, and Coxe, *The Ante-Nicene Fathers*, 5:603; emphasis in original.

⁶¹ Philip Schaff and Henry Wace, eds., *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church: Second Series*, 14 vols. (New York, NY: The Christian Literature Company, 1890–1900), 1:45.

the PE.⁶² In fact, Wilder notes that “The Pauline authorship of the Pastorals was not seriously questioned until the nineteenth century.”⁶³

In contrast, the pseudepigraphal third epistle of Paul to the Corinthians finds its earliest attestation in the third- or fourth-century Bodmer X Papyrus, apart from which very few witnesses exist. Meanwhile, Tertullian identified it as a forgery in the late first or early second century.⁶⁴ Ellis thus concludes that in light of plausible answers to challenges posed to the Pauline authorship of the PE, “the critical student [must] give primary weight to the opening ascriptions in the letters and to the external historical evidence, both of which solidly support Pauline authorship.”⁶⁵ And as Guthrie writes, “when credence is given to the strength of the external evidence, the onus of proof in discussions of authenticity must rest with those who regard these Epistles as non-Pauline.”⁶⁶

Stated Recipients

Ben Witherington observes the relevance of genre in discussing whether the PE are pseudepigraphal. “It is clear,” he writes, “that there were pseudepigraphal apocalyptic works both in early Judaism (e.g., portions of the *Enoch* corpus) and in early Christianity (e.g., the *Apocalypse of Peter*). . . . One cannot, however, demonstrate that about ancient ad hoc letters”

⁶² Ibid., 1:134–5.

⁶³ Wilder, “Pseudonymity and the New Testament,” 326.

⁶⁴ Benjamin Laird, “Corinthians, Third Letter to the,” in *The Lexham Bible Dictionary*, eds. John D. Barry, et al. (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2016).

⁶⁵ Ellis, “Pastoral Letters,” 661.

⁶⁶ Guthrie, *The Pastoral Epistles*, 23.

like the PE, “situation-specific letters written to a particular audience.”⁶⁷ One reason early Christianity did not contain pseudonymous, situation-specific letters is because, as Richard Bauckham explains, if a post-apostolic author wishes to instruct and exhort his intended readers pseudonymously and with the weight carried by genuine NT epistles, “he needs to find some way in which material that is ostensibly addressed to supposed addressees in the past can be taken by his real readers as actually or also addressed to them.”⁶⁸ After all, if the allegedly-intended readers are still around, they can probably assure the truly-intended readers that the letter is not genuine. And so “any pseudepigraphal letter which has the didactic aims of NT letters must find some such way of bridging the gap between the supposed addressee(s) and the real readers.”⁶⁹ While this is fairly easy to accomplish in a letter intended for a general readership, it is much more difficult in a letter modeled after the undisputed letters of Paul, containing “material of specific relevance to specific churches in specific situations.”⁷⁰ As Witherington puts it, such a letter “would likely have to be situation and content specific, but for a situation and with a content that did not actually address the putative audience, but rather another and later one.”⁷¹

Bauckham offers a possible answer to this challenge. “A useful means of bridging the gap,” he explains, “between the supposed addressee(s) and the real readers of a pseudepigraphal

⁶⁷ Ben Witherington III, *Letters and Homilies for Hellenized Christians, Volume 1: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary on Titus, 1–2 Timothy and 1–3 John* (Downers Grove, IL; Nottingham, UK: IVP Academic, 2006), 24.

⁶⁸ Richard Bauckham, “Pseudo-Apostolic Letters,” *JBL* 107, no. 3 (September, 1988), 476.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 477.

⁷¹ Witherington, *Titus, 1–2 Timothy and 1–3 John*, 37.

letter was the letter whose contents are explicitly meant to be passed on to others by the named addressee.”⁷² Bauckham cautions that letters ostensibly intended to be so passed on are only *possibly* pseudepigraphal, since authentic letters so intended exist outside the NT. However, he argues that the presence in the PE both of this feature (e.g., 1 Tim 4:11; 2 Tim 2:2; Titus 2:15) and, in a manner reminiscent of pseudepigrapha like the *Epistle of Peter to James*, of warnings against future false teaching and apostasy (e.g., 1 Tim 4:1–3; 2 Tim 3:1–5), “amounts to a careful and deliberate attempt to bridge the gap between the situation at the supposed time of writing and the real contemporary situation of the author and his readers.”⁷³

On the other hand, as Bauckham himself observes, “the authentic real letter can take for granted the situation to which it is addressed,” but pseudepigrapha “must *describe* the situation of their supposed addressee(s) sufficiently for the real readers, who would not otherwise know it, to be able to recognize it as analogous to their own.”⁷⁴ And while he suggests that in the PE “the false teachers, supposed to be already active at the supposed time of writing, are described perhaps a little more fully than would be necessary for Timothy and Titus themselves,” he admits that this is “not decisively so.”⁷⁵ Indeed, it would seem that the PE could contain neither too much detail nor too little for skeptics of their Pauline authorship, for whereas Bauckham sees evidence against it in the former, Robert Wall notes that others see evidence against in the latter,

⁷² *Ibid.*, 488–9.

⁷³ *Ibid.*, 493.

⁷⁴ Bauckham, “Pseudo-Apostolic Letters,” 490; emphasis in original.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*

“the imprecise description of Paul’s opponents” argued to be evidence “that they are fictionalized and used for rhetorical ends.”⁷⁶

As has already been argued, the descriptions of the faith’s opponents in the PE appear to be too indefinite and underdeveloped to serve as the kind of clear descriptions of second-century Gnosticism necessary to bridge the gap to readers from the author’s fictional first-century recipients. As such, the likelier explanation is that the author’s recipients were truly Timothy and Titus, dealing with an early emerging Jewish-Christian forerunner to Gnosticism they could identify from the author’s incomplete descriptions thereof, and that the author is therefore Paul.

Undesigned Coincidences

Ehrman points out that “forgers typically added elements of verisimilitude to their works . . . designed to make the writing appear to have come from the pen of its alleged author.”⁷⁷

Points of *obvious* connection between the PE on the one hand, and the undisputed epistles and other NT books on the other hand, are therefore not generally seen as strong evidence for Pauline authorship, for they may have been intentionally included to deceive readers. However, there are *less obvious* points of such connection that are unlikely to have been intentional, and thus serve as evidence for Pauline authorship of the PE.

McGrew defines an “undesigned coincidence” as “a notable connection between two or more accounts or texts that doesn’t seem to have been planned by the person or people giving the accounts. Despite their apparent independence, the items fit together like pieces of a puzzle.”⁷⁸

⁷⁶ Robert W. Wall and Richard B. Steele, *1 and 2 Timothy and Titus*, Two Horizons Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI; Cambridge, UK: Eerdmans, 2012), 5.

⁷⁷ Ehrman, *The New Testament*, 436.

⁷⁸ McGrew, *Hidden in Plain Sight*, 12.

Because such connections are apparently unintentional, and thus cannot be explained away as intentionally-added verisimilitude intended to deceive, their presence in multiple documents serves as evidence that said documents are genuine, in the same way that independently-questioned eyewitnesses to a crime will be deemed reliable if their accounts fit together in seemingly unintended ways.

The author of 2 Timothy writes that his ostensibly-intended recipient has been taught the Scriptures from his childhood (2 Tim 3:14–15) by his faithful grandmother and mother (1:5). Knight observes that the phrase “sacred writings” is how Greek-speaking Jews referred to the OT.⁷⁹ Its use nowhere else in the NT, Knight suggests, points to the recipient’s Jewish background. These details fit together well with those recorded in Acts 16:1–3, where Timothy is said to be the son of a believing Jewish woman and a Greek man, which would explain why in 2 Timothy the author indicates his recipient is familiar with the Torah since he was a child, and mentions his grandmother and mother but not his father. Yet neither set of details appears to be added to connect it with the other; the author of Acts makes no mention of Timothy’s grandmother, and does not name her or Timothy’s mother, while the author of 2 Timothy makes no mention of the nationality of his recipient’s parents. This “undesigned coincidence,” McGrew concludes, “has the ring of truth. Timothy’s father was a Greek and his mother Jewish, he was raised from childhood in the knowledge of the Old Testament Scriptures, and both [the author of 2 Timothy] and the author of Acts knew about him and described him accurately.”⁸⁰

⁷⁹ Knight, *The Pastoral Epistles*, 443. See also Marshall and Towner, *Commentary on the Pastoral Epistles*, 419.

⁸⁰ McGrew, *Hidden in Plain Sight*, 200.

The author of 2 Timothy also writes of his recipient's familiarity with the persecution met by the author in Antioch, Iconium, and Lystra (3:11). As McGrew observes, "Paul had undergone so many persecutions in his missionary travels in so many different places that the specification of Antioch, Iconium, and Lystra in this verse should capture the attention. Why," she asks, "did he mention *those* persecutions as the ones that would be familiar to Timothy?"⁸¹ Acts 16:1 suggests Timothy was already a well-known believer by the time Paul came to Derbe and Lystra, in one of which Timothy must have resided, and both of which were near Iconium. Leading up to this passage, Acts records the persecution of Paul during his first missionary journey in Antioch (13:44–52), then Iconium (14:5), and then Lystra (v. 19), persecutions in a region and period of time of which Timothy, a resident of Lystra or Derbe and a young disciple, would have heard word shortly before being enlisted by Paul. Moreover, the author of 2 Timothy, calling Timothy "my beloved child" (1:2), implies that he was converted by Paul, and probably therefore during Paul's missionary travels to that region. McGrew thus concludes:

Notice how indirect all of this is. One *infers* from II Timothy that Paul had some special reason to mention those persecutions to Timothy and to say that they were known to Timothy. One *notes* the point in Acts 13–14 where the narrative describes persecutions in those towns. One then *infers* from Acts 16 that Timothy was already a disciple from that region and had been converted during Paul's previous visit to the region, described in Acts 13–14, during which the persecutions took place.⁸²

It is unlikely, therefore, that either the author of Acts or that of 2 Timothy are intentionally including elements of verisimilitude they hope will convince readers of their genuineness. Such elements would surely be more obvious and less dependent upon inference. Rather, the apparently unintended coincidences between the two strongly suggest that the author and

⁸¹ Ibid., 201.

⁸² Ibid., 203; emphasis in original.

intended recipient of 2 Timothy are truly the Paul and Timothy whose meeting and travels are recorded in Acts.

Similarities to Undisputed Epistles

Of course, it goes without saying—though George Knight III says it—that “the [PE] all claim to be by Paul the apostle of Christ Jesus” (1 Tim 1:1; Tit 1:1; 2 Tim 1:1), “and this assertion is made in salutations similar to those in the other Pauline letters.”⁸³ In all of them, as in the PE, Paul speaks of “grace” and “peace” being “from God the Father and Christ Jesus our Lord,” and with few exceptions likewise calls himself “an apostle of Jesus Christ.”⁸⁴ Significantly, the opening greetings of 1 and 2 Corinthians contain all of these elements, but as reproduced in Ehrman’s own work, so-called 3 Corinthians contains none of these elements apart from Paul’s name, even though its occasion and motivation, in Ehrman’s estimation, are virtually identical to those of the author of the PE.⁸⁵ If the similarities between the greetings of the PE and those of Paul’s undisputed letters can be chalked up to intentional verisimilitude, one wonders why that of 3 Corinthians is so dissimilar from them all.

Douglas, Tenney, and Silva argue that arguments against the authenticity of the PE based on style are “self-defeating, for candid examination of the actual facts clearly points to Paul as the author of the Pastorals.”⁸⁶ They summarize said facts as follows:

These three picture the same kind of person reflected in the others: one who is deeply interested in those whom he addresses, ascribing to God’s sovereign grace whatever is

⁸³ George W. Knight III, *The Pastoral Epistles: A Commentary on the Greek Text*, New International Greek Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1992), 4.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, 57.

⁸⁵ Ehrman, *The New Testament*, 436.

⁸⁶ Douglas, Tenney, and Silva, “Pastoral Letters,” 1079.

good in himself and/or in the addressees, and showing wonderful tact in counseling. Again, they were written by a person who is fond of litotes or understatements (2 Tim. 1:8 [“do not be ashamed”]; cf. Rom. 1:16), of enumerations (1 Tim. 3:1–12; cf. Rom. 1:29–32), of plays on words (1 Tim. 6:17; cf. Phlm. 10–11), of appositional phrases (1 Tim. 1:17; cf. Rom. 12:1), of expressions of personal unworthiness (1 Tim. 1:13, 15; cf. 1 Cor. 15:9), and of doxologies (1 Tim. 1:17; cf. Rom. 11:36).⁸⁷

So conclusively does this evidence point to a genuinely Pauline style in the PE that “many critics now grant that Paul may be the source of some, though not all, of their contents. But this theory does not go far enough in the right direction, for those who hold it are unable to show where the genuine material begins and the spurious ends.”⁸⁸

Given the reasonableness of rebuttals to arguments against the Pauline authorship of the PE, any lines drawn between their authentic portions and their allegedly inauthentic ones must surely be arbitrary. Put crassly, they simply reek of Pauline origin, and in the absence of compelling evidence to the contrary, they must be accepted as genuinely Pauline.

Conclusion

Johnson observes that prior to the nineteenth century, the PE “had been construed as Pauline and, even more important, as Scripture.”⁸⁹ Since then, the tables have so turned that “the term ‘debate’ is surely too strong for the present situation, which is closer to a fixed academic consensus. Little real discussion of the issue of authenticity still occurs.”⁹⁰ The evidence here examined, however, does not appear to warrant such an unquestioned consensus. On the one hand, evidence offered against the authenticity of the PE is overstated and plausibly explained by

⁸⁷ Ibid.

⁸⁸ Ibid.

⁸⁹ Johnson, *The First and Second Letters to Timothy*, 42.

⁹⁰ Ibid., 55.

defenders of Pauline authorship. On the other hand, the external and internal evidence in favor of Pauline authorship is powerful and difficult to refute.

Why, then, the consensus? Johnson reminds readers that “this consensus resulted as much from social dynamics as from the independent assessment of the evidence by each individual scholar. For many contemporary scholars, indeed, the inauthenticity of the PE is one of those scholarly dogmas first learned in college and in no need of further examination.”⁹¹ So unquestioned is this “reigning hypothesis” that Marshall and Towner warn it “is in danger of uncritical acceptance.”⁹² This state of affairs is not unlike that facing students of geology, biology, and climatology, who from very early on are indoctrinated to uncritically accept that the universe is billions of years old, that all forms of life have evolved from a common ancestor, and that humans are responsible for dangerous climate change, respectively.

Christians troubled by the prospect of pseudepigrapha in the NT, and by the possible impact of their presence on its authority and reliability, should find the conclusions of this examination very encouraging. Ehrman writes that whereas “scholars continue to debate the authorship of the Deutero-Pauline epistles”—that is, 2 Thessalonians, Colossians, and Ephesians—“when we come to the Pastoral epistles, 1 and 2 Timothy and Titus, there is greater scholarly unanimity.”⁹³ Thus, if the consensus against Pauline authorship of the PE is unjustified, and if the reasons it offers are highly questionable, then one ought all the more to be skeptical of arguments against the Pauline authorship of the other disputed letters.

⁹¹ Ibid.

⁹² Marshall and Towner, *Commentary on the Pastoral Epistles*, 58.

⁹³ Ehrman, *The New Testament*, 449.

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