

# Lecture Sixteen

## Forgeries in the Name of Paul

**Scope:** A number of letters survive from Christian antiquity that claim to be written by the apostle Paul but that were, in fact, clearly fabricated at a later time. This lecture considers two sets of pseudonymous Pauline correspondence. The first is, like the exploits of Thecla, part of the Acts of Paul. It consists of a letter from the Corinthians asking for Paul's help with some heretical teachers who advocate a docetic Christology (maintaining that Christ was not really a flesh-and-blood human and that there would not be a resurrection of the flesh) and Paul's response, in a letter traditionally called "3 Corinthians." The second is an exchange of fourteen letters between Paul and the famous first-century philosopher Seneca. Although evidently forged in the fourth century, these letters were meant to show that Paul was equal to the greatest minds of his day.

### Outline

- I. To this point, we have examined two genres of early Christian pseudepigrapha: gospels and acts.
  - A. These are two of the four genres of writings found in the New Testament and account for most of the surviving early Christian forgeries.
  - B. The third genre, however, is the most common in the New Testament: epistles (twenty-one of twenty-seven books). Epistles are not widely found among the early Christian pseudepigrapha (even though they are the most common form of pseudepigrapha within the New Testament).
- II. A large number of epistles in the New Testament are pseudepigrapha or anonymous.
  - A. Of the twenty-one epistles in the New Testament, thirteen were allegedly written by Paul. Six of those thirteen are heavily disputed by scholars.
    1. There are debates over whether Paul wrote the letters to Ephesians, Colossians, and Thessalonians, now labeled the Deutero-Pauline Epistles.
    2. Three other letters—the Pastoral Epistles (letters of 1 and 2 Timothy and Titus)—are regarded by scholars as not having been written by Paul.

- B. The Book of Hebrews is included in the New Testament but is considered to be anonymous.
  - C. The Book of James was accepted into the canon because people thought it was written by Jesus' brother, even though the author does not claim to be that James.
  - D. The Books I and 2 Peter claim to be written by Simon Peter, but most scholars agreed that 2 Peter was not written by him.
  - E. The Book of Jude claims to be written by someone named Jude and was brought into the canon because it was thought that Jesus' brother wrote it.
  - F. The Books 1, 2, and 3 John were included because they were thought to be written by John, the son of Zebedee, even though no such claims had been made.
- III. In this lecture, we will consider several of the most interesting letters, allegedly written to and by the apostle Paul. These are conveniently called 3 Corinthians and the correspondence of Paul and Seneca.
- A. Readers of the New Testament are familiar with 1 and 2 Corinthians but have, by and large, never heard of 3 Corinthians.
  - B. The book is nonetheless found in a number of ancient manuscripts and was part of the New Testament canon accepted by the churches of Syria and Armenia. It is now found in the manuscripts of the "Acts of Paul" (cf. Paul and Thecla).
  - C. The letters to the Corinthians in the New Testament are themselves a series of letters that Paul sent (2 Corinthians may represent five different letters sent at different times, later cut and pasted together).
    - 1. These letters show numerous problems in the church in the city of Corinth that Paul tries to deal with, including, prominently, the disunity of the church and the problem of other "apostles" who arrived after Paul, teaching doctrines that he disagreed with, especially that it is the soul, not the body, that is saved.
    - 2. Some of these same problems are evident in the later correspondence of 3 Corinthians, as well.
  - D. In the Acts of Paul, the letter is introduced by a letter from the Corinthians

to Paul.

1. The Corinthians write that they have been disturbed by the teachings of two teachers, Simon and Cleobius, who maintain that the Old Testament prophets are not valid; that the God of this world is not the true God; that he did not create humans; that there is no future resurrection of the flesh; that Jesus was not really flesh and blood and was not really born of Mary.
2. In other words, the opponents are some kind of docetists, like Marcion, whom we discussed earlier, or possibly, some kind of Gnostic.
3. But for early proto-orthodox Christians (including the forger of 3 Corinthians), it was important to think not only that God created this material world, but also that he would redeem this world, including the human body, which would be raised from the dead, not left to corrupt.

E. The letter of 3 Corinthians is a response that takes on all these points one by one.

1. "Paul" (that is, the forger writing in Paul's name to address these second-century heretical views) claims that Jesus really was born of Mary (something the real Paul never mentions); that he was true flesh: and that God was the creator of all there is, who sent the Jewish prophets and Jesus to overcome the Devil, who had corrupted the flesh.
2. He ends the letter with an attempt to demonstrate that the flesh is actually raised from the dead by pointing to three analogies: the sowing of wheat (which goes into the ground naked but emerges as a new plant); Jonah (who appeared again in the flesh after disappearing into the great fish); and an apocryphal tale of the prophet Elisha (whose dead bones could bring bodies back to life).

F. The letter of 3 Corinthians is, then, a mid-second-century forgery in Paul's name in which a proto-orthodox Christian appealed to the apostle's authority to counteract doctrinal problems caused by heretical teachers of his own day.

IV. The dispute against heresy was not the only reason to pen letters in Paul's name, however, as can be seen in the correspondence between Paul and the famous Roman philosopher Seneca.

A. Seneca was probably the most well known and most influential

philosopher of Paul's day: tutor and later political advisor to the Emperor Nero and highly prolific author of moral essays, philosophical tractates, poetical works, and scientific treatises.

- B. At a later time (fourth century), Christians were puzzled that the important figures in their religion, especially Jesus and Paul, were completely unknown to major political and intellectual leaders of their day (neither of them, in fact, is ever mentioned by any Roman author of the first century).
- C. The pseudepigraphic correspondence between Paul and Seneca works to redress this situation.
  - 1. There are some fourteen letters that survive, eight allegedly from Seneca to Paul and six from Paul to Seneca.
  - 2. In them, Seneca and Paul are portrayed as close companions, with Seneca expressing admiration and astonishment at Paul's brilliance and learning, and Paul acting as a teacher who has convinced Seneca of the truth of the Christian message.
  - 3. More than that, in these letters, Seneca indicates that he has read Paul's writings to the Emperor Nero, who is amazed and moved by Paul's learning.
  - 4. Several references in these forged letters attempt to provide verisimilitude for their claims to authenticity, especially letter 11, which mentions the fire in Rome that Nero blamed on the Christians.
  - 5. The point of the letters, then, is to show that Paul was known and acknowledged by one of the greatest and most influential thinkers of his day, that his views were superior to the pagan philosophical traditions, and that his influence reached to the very upper echelons of Roman power and authority.
  - 6. The letters, though, were clearly forged, evidently sometime in the fourth century.
- V. In sum, 3 Corinthians and the correspondence between Paul and Seneca are two sets of forged epistles that meet two major items on the proto-orthodox agenda: showing that their points of view are grounded in apostolic authority and that the founders of their faith were recognized for their brilliance and authority by the greatest minds of their day.

**Essential Reading:**

Bart Ehrman, *After the New Testament*, readings 46-47.

Bruce Metzger, "Literary Forgeries and Canonical Pseudepigrapha," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 91 (1972): 3-24.

**Supplementary Reading:**

Dennis McDonald, *The Legend and the Apostle: The Battle for Paul in Story and Canon*.

**Questions to Consider:**

1. We have seen a number of forgeries in this course to this point, and some of the forged documents urge their recipients to engage in ethical behavior, but is forgery ethical? How do you explain the irony that authors who were trying to deceive readers about their own identities were also trying to have them behave in morally upright ways?
2. Given the extensive forgeries from early Christianity that are outside the New Testament, is there any reason to think that there could not be forgeries within the New Testament?