

What is Pseudonymous Literature?

Scholars call literature that attests its authorship to another writer *pseudonymous*, literally translated as “falsely named,” or *allonymous*, meaning “named after another.” The practice of writing literature and attributing it to a former person of significance to lend the message legitimacy was a common practice in antiquity, seen as far back as the Persian period (4th c. BCE). An example from Jewish literature is *The Testament of the Twelve Patriarchs* (2nd c. BCE), a work that presents itself as written by the Patriarchs. An example from later Christian literature is the Gospel of Peter (2nd c. CE).



This is an issue for New Testament studies as several books have been identified by scholars as possibly being pseudonymous including Colossians, Ephesians, 2 Thessalonians, James, 1 Peter, 2 Peter, Jude and the Pastoral Epistles (1 & 2 Timothy, Titus). This determination has been championed by some scholars based on three types of evidence: writing style, theological development, and historical/literary issues in the text that lend doubt to the authorship or date of the text. How should we understand this issue within the larger historical framework and the criteria for judging a NT letter as pseudonymous or allonymous?

What Did Pseudepigraphy Mean in the Ancient World?

The study of ancient writers' approach to pseudepigrapha has yielded several ideas as to why this was such a common literary feature. First, there was no modern sense of copyright in the ancient world. Writers felt free to include others' ideas as needed to support their own arguments. Second, putting a long-dead author's name on a contemporary work lent prestige to the author. It has been shown by scholars that the readers of the time would have recognized the work had not been written by Moses, Adam, or another figure from the distant past. Third, we can trace the Jewish tradition of writing to restate or expand the historical teachings of previous leaders for the purpose of promulgation or defense against critics. For example, appending Paul's name to a later letter serves to summarize his teachings and explain their significance to a new social or historical situation. In all three of these explanations, the intent of the author is not to “lie” or “deceive.” Thus, some scholars have suggested *allonymous* as the proper term for this literature.

What Criteria Determine a Work is Pseudonymous?

Scholars have traditionally used three types of arguments to categorize a book as pseudonymous – writing style, including vocabulary and grammar; theological development in

terms of doctrine or church structure; and the appearance of literary/historical/theological misnomers in the text that cause suspicion.

Writing style. This criterion seems in some ways both definitive and high subjective. It is definitive because we can compare texts to see their differences – the use of particular terms, the presence of participial phrases to the exclusion of verbs such as found in classical Greek grammar, and the adoption of Greek rhetoric formats. For Petrine letters, the appeal to Acts 4:13 (“uneducated and ordinary men”) represents a common refrain on the inability of the individual writers to produce high quality Greek texts. However, this also is subjective. Who decides what is “educated” and “uneducated?” The volume of Petrine material we have is so small that a baseline cannot be established. Other factors might be at play such as the presence of an amanuensis. At the end, while this criterion seems to offer firm ground, it fails to deliver in a definitive way.

Theological development. Much of the suspect Pauline corpus is considered pseudepigrapha under this rubric. The methodology looks for differences in several areas between the accepted earlier writings of Paul and the later letters. One major area is the development of ecclesial leadership structures that represent a formalizing of the organization (elders, deacons, overseers) in the following second and third generation of believers. The formalizing of theological beliefs and doctrine is another area of contrast. When Timothy is instructed to follow “sound teaching” and “faithful teachings,” it appears that the church has crystalized a set doctrinal structure that would have been foreign to the Paul of Galatians, fighting for the right of Gentiles to not become Jewish. Some scholars find these arguments convincing.

“Other” features. This category includes a large number of items specific to each letter including literary dependence upon other works, an explicit presentation of “past traditions” for defense, the inclusion of foreign terms, ideas, or phrases, or poor attestation from the early church. An in-depth analysis is too lengthy for this space, but the presence of several “tells” in a work can point in a certain direction towards pseudepigraphy.

An Unsettled Issue in the Church

The issue of pseudepigraphy remains unsettling in the conservative evangelical church, where canonicity is tied explicitly with the *ipsa verba* of Scripture. Evangelicals have generally adopted one of several strategies – reject pseudonymity to maintain the current traditional understanding (sometimes paired with a rejection of the higher biblical critical methodologies described above); accept pseudonymity as within the bounds of the early church’s cultural background while pairing it with acceptance of higher biblical critical methodologies; or accept pseudonymity on a limited basis along with limited acceptance of some of the higher biblical criticism methodologies. The lack of consensus in evangelical theology today demonstrates the need to build a more consistent dialogue around critical methodologies with shared assumptions and language to explore this issue.