

I have rarely - ever? - been so pleased with the appearance of a publication in my life. Last night when I got home from running some errands, a box was waiting for me, from Oxford University Press. It had my ten author's copies of Forgery and Counterforgery: The Use of Literary Deceit in Early Christian Polemics. I'm very excited about it, like a kid who has just gotten a fantastic present. In my opinion, this is the best book I've ever written, years in the making. As I have said before on this blog, it is written for scholars, although a number of people have commented that it seems, from the quotations I've given, to be accessible to laypeople as well (normal people, as opposed to abnormal scholars). I'll say a bit more about it in the next post, for now, I thought I would simply give you a taste, by quoting the very first, opening, paragraphs (without the footnotes):

Arguably the most distinctive feature of the early Christian literature is the degree to which it was forged. Even though the early Christians were devoted to the truth- or so their writings consistently claimed - and even though "authoritative" literature played a virtually unparalleled role in their individual and communal lives, the orthonymous output of the early Christians was remarkably, even astonishingly, meager. From the period of the New Testament, from which some thirty writings survive intact or in part, only eight go under the name of their actual author, and seven of these derive from the pen of one man. To express the matter differently, only two authors named themselves correctly in the surviving literature of the first Christian century. All other Christian writings are either anonymous, falsely ascribed (based on an original anonymity or homonymity), or forged.

Matters begin to change with the second Christian century, even though orthonymity continues to be the exception rather than the rule. It is worth considering, for example, what Pre-Enlightenment scholars accepted as the writings of apostolic and subapostolic times. There were the Homilies and Recognitions of Clement, now known not to be works of the one who was reputedly the fourth bishop of Rome, but to be forged in his name. There were the writings of the early Pauline convert Dionysius the Areopagite, also forged. There were the letters of Paul himself to and from Seneca, likewise forged. And there were the thirteen letters of Ignatius of Antioch, six of them forged and the others falsely and severely interpolated. When we move deeper into the second century and on into the third and fourth, we see a heightened interest in the production of "apostolic" works — Gospels by Peter, Thomas, Philip, all forged; Paul's letters to the Alexandrians and Laodiceans, forged; Jesus' correspondence with Abgar, forged; Apocalypses of Peter and Paul, forged. We can move backwards into writings forged in the names of the greats from antiquity, Isaiah or the Sybil, or forward into the writings forged in the names of orthodox church fathers - Basil, Augustine, Jerome. The list goes a very long way.

Matching the abundant materials for the study of early Christian forgery is the remarkably sparse attention paid to it - as a broader phenomenon - in modern scholarship. Apart from studies of individual instances, which do indeed abound, and discussions of the relationship of pseudepigrapha to issues of canon, there is no full length study of the phenomenon in the English language, and only one reasonably comprehensive study in German. There is none in any other language of scholarship.

The study of individual cases is, of course, crucial for the understanding of the broader phenomenon and so need continually to be carried out with rigor and focus. But somewhat ironically, these examinations are often conducted precisely apart from a knowledge or appreciation of the wider phenomenon of early Christian forgery. Surely an individual instantiation of the practice cannot be studied in isolation, apart from its wider historical and cultural context.

The studies of forgery and canon are also vital in many ways, especially in assisting in the evaluation of the practices of and attitudes toward forgery in the early Christian tradition. Inevitably such studies draw on materials taken from the wider Jewish and pagan environments, often, though not always, with broad coverage and clarity of insight. But a focus on issues of canon can skew the discussion in certain ways, and there are other important questions that need to be addressed.

What are needed are fuller studies of the historical phenomenon, not only in relation to a set of theological concerns and not only with eyes focused on the early Christian forgeries that were eventually deemed to be Scripture. The canonical forgeries participated both in the broader stream of literary practices of antiquity and, more narrowly, in the literary practices of the early Christian communities. These broader practices should not be seen merely as background to the object of ultimate (theological) concern (the question of canon), but should be explored as a matter of intellectual inquiry in their own right. That is the intent and goal of the present study.

The focus of my concern will be the Christian literary forgeries of roughly the first four centuries CE. Later texts will be discussed only when they are in some way compelling, relevant, and especially noteworthy. In particular, for the purposes of this study, I am interested in forgeries that were engendered in the context of early Christian polemics. One could easily argue that these comprise the majority of the relevant texts, but that statistical question is of no concern to me here. I am interested in polemics because they played such a major role in the history and development of the early Christian tradition and, as a consequence, in the production of early Christian forgeries. We know of numerous polemical contexts from the early Christian centuries, of course, and I am not restricting my vision to just one of them....

And it goes from there. It's a long book - well over 600 pages - and it attempts to be thorough in its coverage. I'll explain more what's in it in the next post.



[Forgery and Counterforgery](#)
[The Apocryphal Gospels: Texts and Translations](#)