I have decided to go ahead and post the address I gave last week to an academic conference in Quebec on “Pseudepigraphy” in the ancient world. If you’re not familiar with the term (why would you be??) it refers to a book written by an author who falsely claims to be someone else (like if I wrote a book and claimed to be Stephen King) (which maybe I should do….). Most scholars seem to think this was an acceptable practice in the ancient world. I don’t. My lecture was meant to show why.

This will take about four posts. Here’s the beginning of the lecture (it came as the keynote at the end of two days of meetings/papers). In the post itself I have translated the foreign language terms I use.

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Over the past three days we have enjoyed a wide range of papers on numerous important texts, specific instantiations of ancient pseudepigraphy. In this final address I will not be discussing a specific text but rather the broader phenomenon of pseudepigraphy itself, with two overarching questions. The first, and more important, is how we conceptualize the practice. Was it, in fact, understood to constitute a form of lying in the ancient Greek, Roman, Jewish, and Christian contexts with which we here are principally concerned? The answer to that question will help us resolve the thorny second issue of what we actually call the practice. In briefest terms, is it reasonable to call it “literary forgery,” or is that too crass a term, involving an outlook much too modern to be appropriate?

My answer to both questions will be the same: anyone in antiquity who produced and “published” a writing – that is, placed it in public circulation – under another name, the name of some other person who was famous either widely or locally, was normally understood to ...

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