



Ehrman, Bart D.

Forged: Writing in the Name of God—Why the Bible's Authors Are Not Who We Think They Are

Uncorrected Proof.¹

New York: HarperOne, 2011. Pp. viii + 291. Paper. \$25.99.
ISBN 9780062012616.

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Rightly Dividing the Word of Truth

New Jersey

If one wanted to forge a document in order to make people think it was written by Bart Ehrman what might he or she do? Well, first of all, the forger would claim to be Bart D. Ehrman. This goes without saying. Secondly, if the forger wanted to mimic one of Ehrman's popular volumes he or she would certainly give it a provocative/sensational title. Ehrman's past popular works have been called things like, *Misquoting Jesus: The Story Behind Who Changed the Bible and Why*; *God's Problem: How the Bible Fails to Answer Our Most Important Question—Why We Suffer*; *Jesus, Interrupted: Revealing the Hidden Contradictions in the Bible (and Why We Don't Know About Them)*. More than likely the forger would begin with a personal testimony about their teenage conversion to Evangelicalism and their subsequent studies at Moody Bible Institute, Wheaton College, and Princeton Theological Seminary where they would begin their retreat from Evangelicalism (see *Misquoting Jesus*, 1-15; *Jesus Interrupted*, v-viii; *God's Problem*, 1-3).

Perhaps they'd even choose a topic that Ehrman has written about and simply beef it up a little bit and jazz up the rhetoric while maintaining a strong stylistic resemblance to Ehrman's earlier works. They might even choose a topic like forgery and discuss ways that forgers try to throw people off the trail in order to throw the unsuspecting reader off their trail! And they'd naturally

¹ Page numbers refer to the uncorrected proof of this book and may vary from the published hardcover edition.

publish their fabrication with one of HarperCollins' many divisions. But what would motivate such deception? Money? Definitely. Ehrman has made a killing with three *New York Times* best-selling books aimed at general audiences. Forging a book and attributing it to Ehrman could definitely generate some cash. How about influence? Yup. Ehrman is a legitimate scholar, and when he speaks, people listen. Can't get your own ideas a fair hearing? Pass them off as Ehrman's.

So let's see how this might work out in practice. Someone claiming to be Bart D. Ehrman ✓ publishes a book with HarperOne ✓ sensationally titled *Forged: Writing in the Name of God—Why the Bible's Authors Are Not Who We Think They Are* ✓, which begins with a personal testimony about Ehrman's Evangelical conversion in high school and his subsequent studies at Moody, Wheaton, and Princeton (1-5) ✓ and proceeds to elaborate on the topic of forgery, which Ehrman has written about previously in a number of books (*Lost Christianities*, chapters 1-4, 11; *Lost Scriptures*, 1-4; and *Jesus Interrupted*, chapter 4) ✓. Said book is getting plenty of press and is almost guaranteed to make a lot of money for the author. It seems that all of the items on our checklist have been checked off; what we have here is the perfect recipe for a good forgery!

But all levity aside, Ehrman has popped out another book on a well-worn scholarly issue at a "layperson's level" with promises of a future "detailed scholarly monograph that deals with the matter at length." (10) For now we'll have to content ourselves with Ehrman's distillation of modern (i.e., 19th century to present) historical-critical scholarship. The opening chapter introduces us to Ehrman's major claims, i.e., pseudepigrapha is forgery; forgery is lying; forgery/lying was frowned upon in the ancient world; the Bible (especially the NT) is full of forgeries. We're also equipped with some definitions (orthonymous = rightly named; homonymous = same named; anonymous = having no name; pseudonymous = falsely named), the most important being Ehrman's definition of forgery, which is "a writing that claims to be written by someone (a known figure) who did not in fact write it." (24)

Chapters two and three take up the standard arguments² for the Petrine letters and the so-called deutero-Pauline letters as forgeries while also informing the reader about works both written

² So we're told that Peter was illiterate and that even if he could read and write the letters attributed to him were written after his death because they contain ideas that rely on the destruction of Jerusalem in A.D. 70 and also that 2 Peter borrows from Jude, so he couldn't have possibly written them. Paul, on the other hand, never used certain terms and phrases that appear in the Pastoral letters and some of the ideas and concepts in the Pastorals are at odds with the genuine letters, so he couldn't have authored those. His audience is also different. In the genuine letters he writes to entire congregations of gifted believers while in the Pastorals he writes to leaders. 2 Thessalonians has a different eschatology than 1 Thessalonians and tries a little too hard to convince its audience that it was written

about them and works written *in their names* that have been traditionally considered forgeries (e.g., *The Gospel of Peter* or *3 Corinthians*). The fourth chapter challenges the idea that writing in someone else's name was an acceptable practice in antiquity by noting a dearth of evidence supporting such proposals, which take their shape in three major arguments: "Pseudepigraphy in the Spirit" (writing in another's name under supposed divine inspiration); "Reactualizing the Tradition" (representing a school of thought under the name of its founder); "Philosophical Schools" (signing one's teacher's name to their writing). Ehrman also dispenses with the notion that secretaries could be responsible for the variations in style, language, and theology.

Chapters five and six take up the use of (both canonical and non-canonical³) forgeries, which Ehrman labels "weapons of deceit" (145), in conflict with various groups (Jews & Pagans and false teachers respectively). Christians and their Jewish, Pagan, Gnostic, and even fellow Christian opponents employed forgeries (i.e., they lied) in order to prove themselves right and their opposition wrong. Chapter seven discusses various other forms of literary misinformation such as false attributions, which are technically pseudepigrapha, but not forgeries since there is no intention to deceive; fabrications, which are made up stories about important figures (e.g., the *Acts of Peter*; the *Proto-Gospel of James*; or the *Infancy Gospel of Thomas*) disseminated by anonymous authors; falsifications, which involves adding or omitting material to something that was already written; and finally, plagiarism, which, as we all know, is passing off someone else's work as one's own. The final chapter turns to modern forgeries about Jesus before pondering if and when it might be acceptable to lie. Twenty-four pages of endnotes complete this volume.⁴

As already noted, Ehrman hasn't said anything that hasn't been said before, in fact, he's said plenty of it himself (!); he's just popularized it for the *New York Times* best-seller audience this time around. Admittedly, the people most likely to pick up this book haven't spent much time in

by Paul while Ephesians and Colossians both have different writing styles and differ theologically from the authentic letters.

³ The forgeries of focus in chapter five are all non-canonical: *The Gospel of Peter*; *The Gospel of Nicodemus*; and the "*Pilate Gospels*" in opposition to the Jews, as well as Sibylline Oracles, which unknown Christian writers had taken over from earlier Jewish authors and inserted their own prophecies into them, in opposition to Pagans. The forgeries under discussion in chapter six include canonical forgeries (Colossians; Jude) in opposition to unknown opponents, as well as a mixture of non-canonical (*Epistle of Peter*; *Pseudo-Clementine Writings*) and canonical (James) forgeries in opposition to Paul. In addition to this, Ehrman once again discusses 1 Peter and 2 Peter as forgeries written in support of Paul. Gnostic forgeries (*Coptic Apocalypse of Peter*; *Book of Thomas the Contender*) and anti-Gnostic forgeries (*3 Corinthians*; *Epistula Apostolorum*).

⁴ The copy in my possession contains no indices. These will undoubtedly be included in the published hardcover version.

NT studies, and probably even less time in studying non-canonical literature, so they're likely to be very impressed with the subject matter. But anyone who has read a decent NT introduction (e.g., Ehrman's own *The New Testament: A Historical Introduction to the Early Christian Writings*) or standard commentaries should be somewhat familiar with the issues of authorship for the NT writings. And if you've spent any time studying the formation of the Biblical canon then you've more than likely encountered some material on non-canonical literature.

Where Ehrman separates himself from the pack is in his certitude. To rework a line from Alexander Pope's famous poem "An Essay on Criticism," only Ehrman rushes in where most scholars fear to tread. Ehrman isn't nearly as cautious as he should be when making claims about forgeries and intentional deceit. Ehrman repeatedly states things as certain when the vast majority of scholars, conservative and liberal alike, remain agnostic.⁵ There may be some very good reasons to believe that Peter did not write 1 Peter or 2 Peter (although in truth, if 2 Peter is pseudonymous it actually argues in favor for 1 Peter's authenticity) but they're not conclusive. Even the best guess is still guesswork, and sans some major new discovery, readers of the Bible will just have to content themselves with not knowing for sure who wrote all of the books they revere. I'd also note that Ehrman is inconsistently certain. At times he uses terms such as "probably," "think," "possible," and other words of the like. I have much more respect for this kind of language.

⁵ For example: "...I'm interested in books that claim to be written by Peter *but in fact were forged in his name...*" (49) "Whoever wrote 2 Peter, *it was not Simon Peter.*" (68) "Was Peter in Josephus's or Justus's class? *No, not even close.*" (73) "*Peter was an illiterate peasant.* [...] I should point out that the book of 1 Peter is written by a highly literate, highly educated, Greek-speaking Christian who is intimately familiar with the Jewish Scriptures in their Greek translation, the Septuagint. *This is not Peter.*" (75) "*Peter could not have dictated this letter in Greek to a secretary any more than he could have written it in Greek.*" (76, cf. 139) "It's just that *those terms were not terms used by Paul.*" (98) "He did all this *by pretending to be Paul.*" (103) "For one thing, *the writing style is not Paul's.*" (110) "The Book of Daniel claims to be written, in part, by the prophet Daniel during the Babylonian captivity in the sixth century B.C.E. But *there's no way it was written then.*" (117) "We're not sure who wrote Isaiah 40-55, *other than to say that, first, it was not Isaiah of Jerusalem...*" (127) "*These letters were not produced by secretaries. They were produced by later Christian authors claiming to be Paul.*" (139) "Whoever wrote 1 Timothy *knew full well that he wasn't really the apostle Paul. He made that part up.*" (232) "There *never* was a census under Caesar Augustus that compelled Joseph and Mary to go to Bethlehem just before Jesus was born; there *never* was a star in the that mysteriously guided wise men from the East to Jesus; Herod the Great *never* did slaughter all the baby boys in Bethlehem; Jesus and his family *never* did spend several years in Egypt." (239) "The authors who called themselves Peter, Paul, John, James, Philip, Thomas, or—pick your name!—*knew full well they were not these people. They lied about it in order to deceive their readers into thinking they were authority figures.*" (262) (All emphasis mine)

I have no interest in debunking Ehrman—a thousand apologists have written books on this subject in attempts to disprove these exact types of arguments—but I do want to warn potential readers that there isn't much that's special or unique about this book. In fact, if you've read Ehrman's other popular books, you've read this one under different covers. *Forged* is little more than a rehash of things he's said elsewhere, only this time he decided to ~~blowiate a bit more~~ wax a little more eloquent. I do have some questions about the overall purpose of this book though, e.g., what's the point? If Ehrman makes an airtight case for forgery in the NT and non-canonical literature then what are we supposed to actually do with that information? Should those of us who hold the NT as an authoritative text suddenly reject its authority?

I'm also curious about how/why a self-professed agnostic would write so much about honesty and deception as if those concepts actually have concrete meaning to a non-theist. In other words, Ehrman can talk about truth and lies all he wants, but I'm left wondering why he cares or how he grounds any kind of belief in such concepts without grounding them in God. It seems that he has to borrow from a worldview that is not his own in order for the issues he raises to even begin to be considered problematic. Ironic? Perhaps. Inconsistent? Definitely. Worth a read? Only if you've never read anything like this before, but even then, make sure you get the opposing viewpoint, which Ehrman doesn't really present in its fullness.

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