

A Brief Defense of the Pastoral Epistles' Authenticity

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Scholars cast more doubt on the authenticity of the Pastoral Epistles than on any of the other Pauline letters. Some argue that the Pastorals were written after Paul's death by a writer who used the apostle's name to strengthen the authority of these letters.¹ Others suggest that these writings were composed by a disciple or later admirer of Paul who included some genuine notes from Paul in his work.²

Those who argue against the Pauline authorship of the Pastorals do so on the basis of the following (or at least similar) criteria.³ First, they stress that the vocabulary and style of these letters differ from the other Pauline epistles. Many words found in the Pastorals do not occur in the other Pauline writings⁴—for example, the term “godliness” (eu0se/beia, 1 Tim 6:11). Moreover, 175 different *hapax legomena* appear in the Pastoral Epistles which are found nowhere else in the New Testament⁵—for example, the terms “slavetraders” (a0ndrapodisth=j, 1 Tim 1:10), “perjurers” (e0ti/orkoj, 1 Tim 1:10) and “integrity” (a0fqori/a, Titus 2:7). Stylistic differences also exist between the Pastorals and the rest of the Pauline corpus—for example, several particles are absent from the Pastoral Epistles but present in the other Paulines.⁶ Such contrasts lead

¹ For example, Lewis R. Donelson, *Pseudepigraphy and Ethical Argument in the Pastoral Epistles* (Tübingen, Mohr, 1986). See also David Meade (*Pseudonymity and Canon* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1986]) who argues that the pseudonym is an attribution of authoritative tradition.

² For example, P. N. Harrison, *The Problem of the Pastoral Epistles* (London: Oxford, 1921). More recently, see I. Howard Marshall, in collaboration with Philip H. Towner, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Pastoral Epistles*. ICC (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1999). He believes the Pastorals are not pseudonymous but allonymous, i.e. a later compiler arranged Pauline traditions and materials without any intention to deceive his readers.

³ The arguments used against the Pauline authorship of the Pastorals are extensive and quite technical and cannot be taken up in full here.

⁴ D. Guthrie, *New Testament Introduction* (Downer's Grove, IL.: IVP, 41990), 619.

⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶ *Ibid.*

many to believe that Paul did not write the Pastoral Epistles. However, this argument does not consider that the variations in subject-matter, occasion, purpose, and addressees may account for many of these differences.⁷ The use of a secretary by Paul may also explain the presence of many words in the Pastorals. Stylistic arguments tend to be quite subjective and unimpressive. Differences exist within the other Pauline letters that are just as extensive as those between the Pastorals and the rest of the Pauline corpus.⁸ Furthermore, the Pastoral Epistles are simply too brief to determine with accuracy the writing habits of a particular author.⁹

Second, defenders of pseudonymity in the Pastorals contend that the church structure in these letters is too advanced for Paul's time.¹⁰ That is to say, the Pastorals are said to correspond to a later period when church government was more organized and controlled.¹¹ Moreover, opponents of authenticity often argue that the Pastoral Epistles reflect a church government of monarchical bishops. However, the fact that Paul appointed elders at the start of his missionary work strongly shows his concern for orderly church government (cf. Acts 14:23).¹² Other biblical passages also indicate that church structure played a key part in Paul's ministry (cf. Acts 20:17-28; Phil 1:1; etc.). Furthermore, the instructions regarding bishops in 1 Timothy and Titus simply do not reflect the monarchical church government which began to develop in the second century.¹³ For example, in Titus 1:5-7 the word "overseer" is used interchangeably with "elder," and since elders are to be appointed in every town, there is no indication of monarchical government.

Third, those who argue against the Pauline authorship of the Pastorals date the heresy opposed in these letters later than Paul's lifetime. In the second century, gnostic heretics came on the scene denying the resurrection of Christ and practicing both a moral license and rigid

⁷ Ibid., 633.

⁸ For example, Paul's letter to the Philippians contains many words that are not found in Paul's other writings nor in the whole of the NT. Do we then conclude that Philippians is pseudonymous? No scholar that I know of is willing to do so. The unique words found in Philippians, like those in the Pastorals, can be plausibly explained by Paul's specific purpose for writing these letters. For more examples, see Guthrie, *Introduction*, 635.

⁹ Thomas D. Lea, "Pseudonymity and the New Testament," *New Testament Criticism and Interpretation* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1991), 535-559; 553. Lea's article was considerably updated by me in "Pseudonymity and the New Testament," *Interpreting the New Testament*. eds. David Alan Black and David S. Dockery (Nashville: Broadman and Holman, 2001), 296-335.

¹⁰ Guthrie, *Introduction*, 615.

¹¹ Ibid. 616.

¹² Ibid., 625.

¹³ Ibid., 627.

asceticism.¹⁴ Advocates of pseudonymity in the Pastorals argue that the words “myths” and “genealogies” in 1 Timothy 1:4 pertain to a developed Gnosticism of the second-century.¹⁵ They also contend that the Greek term for “opposing arguments” (*aōntiqe/seij*, another *hapax*) in 1 Timothy 6:20 referred to the title of a second-century work written by the heretic Marcion. However, those who defend the Pauline authorship of the Pastorals point out that Gnosticism in its incipient form stretched back into the first century and likely operated in Paul’s time.¹⁶ Moreover, they note that the false teaching in these letters contained many Jewish elements (1 Tim 1:7; Titus 1:10, 14; 3:9) as well as gnostic characteristics.¹⁷ Consequently, the heresy combated in the Pastoral Epistles is not a developed Gnosticism which requires a date later than Paul’s lifetime.

Fourth, supporters of pseudonymity contend that the Pastorals do not emphasize characteristic Pauline doctrines like the Fatherhood of God, the believer’s union with Christ, the work of the Holy Spirit, and the cross.¹⁸ Many also suggest that too much of a concern for the transmission of “sound teaching,” i.e. tradition (1 Tim 2:4), and the use of creeds (cf. 1 Tim 3:16; 2 Tim 1:13-14; 2:2; Titus 2:11-14, etc.) in the Pastorals reflect Christianity at the end of the first century.¹⁹ However, standards of this nature are not accurate criteria for determining authenticity. The so-called absence of typical Pauline themes is overstated. For example, the lack of references to the Holy Spirit in the Pastoral Epistles (found only in 1 Tim 4:1; 2 Tim 1:14; Titus 3:5) is not as big a problem as it first may seem. Colossians and 2 Thessalonians mention the Holy Spirit only once; Philippians also refers to the Spirit very few times. Moreover, the emphasis on Christian doctrine in the Pastorals does not require a later date. During his ministry, Paul stressed holding firmly to tradition (cf. 1 Cor 11:2), and often cited credal sayings and hymns in his letters (cf. 1 Cor 15:3-5; Phil 2:6-8; Col 1:15-17, etc.).²⁰

Finally, opponents of the Pauline authorship of the Pastoral Epistles argue that these letters contain historical allusions to Paul’s life which cannot be placed within the book of Acts. For example, Paul has been with Timothy and left him in Ephesus to combat false teachers while he went to Macedonia (1 Tim 1:3); similarly, he has left Titus in Crete (Titus 1:5); Paul also referred to Onesiphorus who had been seeking for

¹⁴ Lea, “Pseudonymity and the New Testament,” 554; Guthrie, *Introduction*, 617.

¹⁵ Lea, “Pseudonymity and the New Testament,” 554.

¹⁶ Guthrie, *Introduction*, 617.

¹⁷ Lea, “Pseudonymity and the New Testament,” 554; Guthrie, *Introduction*, 628.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 618.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 619.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 632.

him in Rome (2 Tim 1:16-17); and he is now a prisoner (2 Tim 1:8, 16; cf. 4:16). This objection suggests that only what is recorded in the book of Acts may be considered authentic. Traditionally, defenders of the authenticity of the Pastorals respond to this argument with the theory that Paul was released from his imprisonment in Acts 28, travelled back to the East, and was later arrested and imprisoned in Rome again.²¹ Under this view, the references to Paul in the Pastorals cannot be placed within the data of Acts because they happened at a later date. Those who hold to the Pauline authorship of the Pastorals also point out that the book of Acts does not record many details of Paul's life (cf. 2 Cor 11).²² Thus, the fact that Acts does not record a second Pauline imprisonment in Rome is not unusual. If Paul had been martyred at the end of his imprisonment recorded in Acts 28, it is difficult to imagine that the author would have completed his work without mentioning this event.²³ Moreover, the fact that Paul expected to be released from prison in Philippians (1:19, 25; 2:24), while he did not in the Pastorals (2 Tim 4:6-8), also suggests a subsequent Roman imprisonment. Furthermore, a social-historical study of Paul in Roman custody in Acts 28 indicates that Paul was likely released.²⁴

External evidence from the early church also attests to the Pauline authorship of the Pastoral Epistles. Several early church leaders accepted these letters as canonical and Pauline—for example, Ignatius, Polycarp, Clement of Alexandria, Tertullian and Irenaeus. Eusebius, the early church historian, said, “The epistles of Paul are fourteen, all well known and beyond doubt.”²⁵ These “fourteen epistles” included the Pastorals. Furthermore, the Pastoral Epistles are listed among the Pauline letters in the Muratorian Canon. The Pauline authorship of the Pastorals was not seriously questioned until the nineteenth century.

The external evidence above is in keeping with the only extant documentation of known early Christian responses to pseudonymity, which shows that the church squarely rejected it when discovered. For example, Tertullian recorded that Asian church elders ousted a colleague from his post for writing out of “love for Paul” the apocryphal *Acts of*

²¹ As Lea (“Pseudonymity and the New Testament,” 555) has succinctly summarized.

²² Guthrie, *Introduction*, 622.

²³ *Ibid.*, 624.

²⁴ Brian Rapske, *Paul in Roman Custody. The Book of Acts in its First Century Setting*, Vol. 3, ed. Bruce W. Winter (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans/Carlisle: Paternoster, 1994), 191. He states, “The custody in Rome as Luke reports it and the probable material basis of the deliberations leading to that custody . . . constitute a significant and highly-placed Roman estimate of the trial's probable outcome; i.e., that Paul will be released.”

²⁵ Eusebius, *Hist eccl* 3.3.

Paul, which included the pseudo-apostolic letter of *3 Corinthians*.²⁶ Despite the presbyter's profession that he had meant well when he wrote the work, his action warranted removal from office. The elders did not condemn the man because, in the apocryphal story, he had allowed a woman to baptize; rather, they removed him for either writing a work that fictitiously bore Paul's name or for composing a fiction about the apostle. Likewise, Serapion, bishop of Antioch, rejected the use of the apocryphal *Gospel of Peter* in the church at Rhossus.²⁷ He had initially allowed the church to read the book because he thought it was authentic. However, when he further examined the work, he discovered that it contained false teaching and forbade its use. Serapion rejected the *Gospel of Peter* because of its heresy and its pseudonymous authorship.

In light of all the evidence, a resort to a pseudonymous authorship for the Pastoral Epistles is not necessary. They, like the rest of the New Testament writings, may be relied upon as authentic and trustworthy. Those who say that the Pastorals are pseudonymous need to take a closer look at the evidence for the onus of proof weighs heavily upon them.

²⁶ Tertullian, *On Baptism* 17.

²⁷ Eusebius, *Hist eccl* 6.12, 2ff.