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Dilemmas in New Testament Criticism

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For a century and a half the criticism of the New Testament has given rise to a variety of problems which have all too often been left unresolved. Of these problems one of the most notable is pseudonymity, which comes into focus immediately the authorship of any book which lays claim to a specific author is disputed. The only alternative is to regard the book as being published under an assumed name. But this latter alternative is not free from considerable difficulties; it must remain a valid subject for consideration whether these difficulties are not after all greater than those which criticism has found in the former alternative. There are a number of factors which deserve serious examination.

PSEUDONYMITY

A major problem is that of canonical pseudepigrapha. A survey of the history of New Testament criticism shows that the idea of pseudonymous books within the canon was the result and not the origin of doubts over the authenticity of the various books.[1] In other words, criticism did not first postulate the probability of pseudonymous works and then, on the basis of this, proceed to examine books ascribed to specific authors knowing that, if valid reasons for disputing authenticity were forthcoming, a reasonable alternative would be available. The reverse procedure was adopted with the result that criticism was satisfied with many inadequate grounds for disputing authenticity, without considering the necessity of establishing the probability of an alternative.[2] This was particularly true of the Tübingen school[3] whose principles of criticism made so deep an impression on subsequent scholars that their influence is still felt.[4] At the same time modern criticism is rather more sensitive to the problems involved and even to the method adopted. Indeed so far has the pendulum swung the other way that we are constantly being assured that pseudonymity was not merely a probability but even a process to be expected.[5]

Carried to its logical conclusion this virtually means that pseudonymity would be regarded as a normal and natural process. Indeed, the extremely sceptical school of Dutch critics at the close of the nineteenth century had asserted that pseudonymity was normative and authenticity non-existent.[6] Although this extreme position was rejected even by pronounced liberal schools of thought, the notion that pseudonymity was normal has experienced a modern revival among those who have felt the necessity for finding some justification for non-authenticity hypotheses. Obviously if it can be maintained that the early Christian Church would have considered it normal practice to publish Epistles in Paul's name, the disputing of Pauline authorship at once becomes a natural process and the *onus probandi* is at once transferred to the defendants of authenticity. But before the embarrassing *onus* can be transferred from the attackers to the defendants, indisputable proof must be produced that pseudonymity was normal practice within the early Christian Church and had the full sanction of the leaders. But is such proof forthcoming?

No-one would deny that pseudonymity was a widespread device during the period immediately before and after the emergence of the Christian Church. It was very popular among the Jews and was certainly used by some later Christian groups, although these were mainly heretical in tendency. The literary practices of the primitive Church cannot so easily be established since positive evidence is somewhat frugal. A common method of approach is to cite Jewish, Greek and later Christian parallels and then to conclude that the practice was so extensive that the primitive Church could hardly have escaped from it.[7] But there is a serious missing link in this argument. The mere extensiveness of pseudonymous practice is no proof that it would have been used, let alone condoned by the primitive Church. Nor is the mere extensiveness of a process any indication that it had become a generally accepted literary device. It needs to be seriously considered whether any factors were operative which would have prevented such a device being taken over by the primitive Christians. Neglect of such an enquiry may lead to inferences being drawn from the extensiveness of the phenomenon which are wholly fallacious. Immorality was widespread in the ancient world, but there were strong moral restraints in the very nature of Christianity which exclude the possibility that the primitive Church could ever have regarded immorality as a norm. In other words, by its essential character Christianity challenges the accepted conventions in human conduct. Are there any grounds for supposing that the same happened with regard to literary processes?

It must at once be recognized that none of the New Testament writers were primarily literary men. Their productions were not treatises in the accepted sense of the word, but are practical documents occasioned by the developing experience of the Church. Conformity to literary conventions was therefore no part of the purpose of any of the authors. They did not fix their eye on a literary audience at all. In view of this the prior assumption that they must have conformed to current literary conventions does not follow. This may be illustrated, for instance, by the fact that the New Testament Epistles did not conform to the contemporary category of an epistle, nor even to that of a letter, as Deissmann showed.[8] In fact, a new form was required which fell between the two types and we cannot imagine that the New Testament writers were in the least concerned whether or not their writings conformed to contemporary practice. What did concern them was the suitability of their writings for the purpose that they had in mind. The theory that pseudonymity was a literary convention to which the Christian writers would resort must be considered to lack probability.

But may it not be argued that some at least would have used pseudonymity to achieve their purpose, since the literary conventions of the time would not have condemned such a procedure? Here again it must be considered whether there were factors within Christianity which would have condemned a procedure which the non-Christian world saw no reason to challenge. In other words, were there no moral restraints in the use of pseudonymity? This reaches to the heart of the problem, although any suggestion of sub-Christian morality behind pseudepigrapha is generally strongly rejected by advocates of hypotheses which postulate pseudonymous authorship.[9] Kurt Aland, for instance, considers that ethics is not a proper category for this study.[10] It would certainly relieve the problem altogether if all moral aspects could be dispensed with as easily as this. But can they?

If a writer chooses to publish his work under a pseudonym the moral issue would not arise in all cases. The pseudonym may, for instance, be a non-descript self-created name, chosen for the sole purpose of exempting the writer from revealing his true identity. In this case there is presumably some specific reason why the author wishes to remain *incognito*. Any moral consideration must inevitably be connected with the author's motive. If, of course, he chose as his pseudonym the name of a well-known author instead of a name of his own creation this would at once raise a moral issue. Had he any right to use another's name? The Jewish pseudepigraphists all chose names of ancient Jewish heroes and apparently did not consider that there were any good reasons why they should not do this.[11] However, the time interval between the period in which the assumed author lived and the actual date of writing of the book was so long that the moral problem is correspondingly lessened.[12] But it is precisely here that no parallels exist for comparison with the alleged New Testament pseudepigrapha. In the case of any of the Pauline Epistles which are alleged to be pseudonymous it must be

assumed that some other writer or writers attributed them to Paul at a relatively small interval after Paul's lifetime. In these instances, if the hypotheses are correct, it is difficult to absolve the writers from all moral blame, for their motive would then have been to produce works ostensibly claiming Paul's authority although he had nothing to do with them. Quite apart from the fact that no evidence exists that a practice of this sort was considered normal and therefore acceptable to the Christian Church, it raises inherent difficulties. The very fact that the books concerned were incorporated into the canon suggests that the Churches generally were either completely deceived about their true origin or else knew that the Epistles were non-Pauline but nonetheless accepted them.

Attempts have been made to mitigate the moral problem by maintaining that pseudonymity was in reality an example of modesty.[13] Some devout follower of Paul, for instance, produced a work so dominated by Paul's doctrine and so permeated with echoes of Paul's Epistles that it would have been presumption had he published it in his own name. The pseudonymous device therefore becomes a virtue. Yet in spite of the fact that many scholars resort to this explanation,[14] it can never sound really convincing. It is strange, for example, to be told that an epistle is so unlike Paul's genuine Epistles that it must be regarded as pseudonymous and then to be assured that the author made it pseudonymous because it was so much like Paul's true letters. It is difficult to define such fine distinctions.

It is important to consider how far the dilemma over pseudonymity affects conservative criticism. If the practice itself appears to leave something to be desired from a moral point of view, can any pseudonymous hypotheses ever be entertained? If the answer is in the negative, does this not close the matter in favour of the authenticity of all the New Testament books? It would seem so.[15] Yet there may be another possibility. If the internal evidence should make it difficult to maintain authenticity for any of the books it would need to be assumed that the early Christians were mistaken in including a pseudonymous book in the canon. But in this case the only logical procedure would be to revise the canon so as to exclude such books. Yet no modern critical school has ever done this. Some books, like 2 Peter and Jude have virtually ceased to hold an effective place in the canon through lack of usage. But most advocates of pseudonymous theories see no need to exclude the books provided their pseudonymous character is recognized. Even so there is some embarrassment over the practical use of such books in church worship, for one who does not accept, for instance, such an Epistle as Ephesians as being by Paul is obliged to use it with considerable mental reservations.[16]

COMPUTER TECHNIQUES

This willingness to accept pseudepigrapha into the canon provides the background against which the most recent attack upon the Pauline Epistles has been launched. In A. Q. Morton's computer method of approach this presupposition is made plain.[17] Indeed, it must be assumed before any other line of attack can be regarded as valid. Morton imagines that authenticity may be overthrown mathematically. He bases his calculations on data which he considers to be neutral, such as sentence length and the occurrences of such a word as *kai*. He claims to have established that every author has an average for these, which does not vary by more than a marginal amount through all his works.[18] This he maintains on the basis of examining, with the aid of the computer, various samples from a number of ancient authors, such as Isocrates and Hippolytus. When Paul's Epistles are subjected to the same treatment discrepancies are found which indicate, according to Morton, that one author could not have produced them all. In fact Morton postulates several authors for these Epistles, allocating only Romans, Galatians, 1 and 2 Corinthians and Philemon to Paul.[19] In this he clearly follows in the footsteps of the nineteenth-century critic F. C. Baur. It should, of course, be noted that from a statistical point of view there was no reason why he should have chosen these as genuine instead of one of the other groups.[20]

Does this computer method of criticism provide a dilemma for the conservative critic? If it could be maintained that the computer has now provided a conclusive and thoroughly objective test of authorship and the results were adverse to authenticity it would certainly be problematical. But the conservative critic is bound to examine the presuppositions and principles on which this mathematical criticism is based before he can be satisfied with the validity of the dilemma. Morton proceeds on the definite assumption that differences in sentence length or in the frequency of *kai* are an indication of dissimilar authorship, but this needs more adequate proof than Morton has yet provided. In any case the basis of assessment seems too narrow, and the amount of text available for examination in the case of Paul's Epistles is too small in most cases even for Morton's own requirement of samples of not less than 100 sentences.[21] It is highly questionable whether any statistical tests can be devised which can take account of such small samples as exist in most of the New Testament Epistles. This is obviously a crucial matter for which no answer can be given by the computer, which can do no more than point to differences. It cannot, moreover, account for or interpret those differences.[22] In view of this the conservative critic is justified in refusing to admit the dilemma. Stylistic criteria are far from being a satisfactory method of determining authorship, however scientifically the data may be expressed.

One thing which emerges from these considerations is the need for an adequate enunciation of principles of criticism. It is significant that this has never been done in spite of the obvious importance of such a step. A good deal of misunderstanding on the part of both liberal and conservative critics would have been avoided if there had been a clearer formulation of these principles. Many hypotheses would at once have appeared methodologically unsound if they had been examined according to stated principles. Baur's hypothesis may be cited as an example, but the process has been repeated many times since. The most modern example of a scholar whose critical principles are confused is Bultmann, who often draws from evidence irrespective of its chronological applicability (as for instance in his theories of Gnostic influence in New Testament books[23]). But it must also be pointed out that some advocates of conservative opinions have been guilty of the same basic kind of mistake when they have allowed dogmatic considerations more weight than is legitimate in critical matters.[24]

POSITIVE PRINCIPLES

Is it possible to suggest any definite principles for a true approach to New Testament criticism which would well repay careful examination? First of all, the value of external evidence must be determined. Is it to be written off as definitely inferior to internal evidence? To do this as a general principle must be considered faulty criticism. External witness must be allowed to stand until proved false or unreliable.[25] Of much greater importance is a clear definition of the value to be placed on eye-witness testimony. A true approach to New Testament origins demands that full weight should be given to eye-witness testimony during the primitive period. Any hypothesis which assumes that early traditions not only circulated but were created without restraint from eye-witnesses is contrary to what might be reasonably expected. Acceptance of this principle will clearly condition the approach to all questions of Christian origins, and is especially relevant in the assessment of form criticism.[26]

It may further be claimed that a factual theory, although fraught with certain difficulties, is preferable to an unsupported hypothesis. Indeed, a theory which raises more problems than it solves must at once be regarded as suspect. It is not sufficient to displace an existing theory without establishing the greater probability of the alternative view proposed, a feature which has been notoriously lacking from a great number of adverse hypotheses throughout the last century and a half of criticism. An example which may be cited is the notion of interpolations.[27] Difficult passages may not be excised without adequate explanation of how they came to be inserted in the first place, but if this principle had been observed few such theories would ever have seen the light of day.

Perhaps the most important necessity for a true approach is a reverent attitude, which must always exert considerable restraint on sincere scholarship. It may be said that criticism of spiritual literature requires a spiritual quality. It is a fallacy to suppose that criticism can proceed on the assumption that there is no essential difference between the books of the New Testament and any other book. There are no exact parallels to a collection of books which have exerted such a profound influence and for this reason appeal to literary analogies and parallels must proceed with reserve. Too many hypotheses have been built on the assumption that what was true of other writers must have been true of the biblical writers. But the New Testament writers were concerned with a unique subject — Jesus Christ — and this must have exerted an

influence wholly unlike the influence to which literary men were normally subjected. If Thucydides in writing history composed speeches, it does not automatically follow that Luke must have done the same.[28]

To conclude, it may be said that many of the dilemmas of New Testament criticism arise from a failure to recognize the processes of the Spirit of God behind the literary phenomena. His activities cannot be disposed of by maintaining that they do not fit into the normal categories of literary criticism. Since the writers claimed to be men of the Spirit the part played by the Spirit in the production of the writings must form a valid *datum* in all critical assessments.

Notes

1 For a brief survey, *cf.* the reviewer's article in *Vox Evangelica (1962)*, pp. 42-59, reprinted in the *SPCK Theological Collections, Vol. 4, The Authorship and Integrity of the New Testament*, 1965.

2 A notable early example is Schleiermacher who was influenced more by his aesthetic feeling to reject 1 Timothy than by solid evidence in support of an alternative view. *Cf.* his *Uber den Sogenannten ersten Brief des Paulus an den Timotheus* (1807). *Cf.* also A. Schweitzer's critique, *Paul and His Interpreters* (1912), p. 8.

3 F. C. Baur, *Paulus der Apostel Jesu Christi* (1845, English translation from the 2nd German edition, 1875) made the first thorough-going suggestion that there were multiple pseudepigrapha in the NT, with little regard to examining the probabilities behind such suggestions. He and his followers were too much dominated by dogmatic considerations.

4 As evidence of the continuation of Baur's influence, *cf.* S. F. D. Brandon's, *The Fall of Jerusalem and the Christian Church*[2] (1957). For an exposure of his influence on current Pauline criticism, *cf.* J. Munck, *Paul and the Salvation of Mankind* (1959).

5 Recent examples of this approach may be seen in C. L. Mitton, *The Epistle to the Ephesians* (1951), pp. 111ff.; F. D. Gealy, *I and II Timothy and Titus (Interpreter's Bible)* (1955), p. 372.

6 *Cf.* W. C. van Manen, *Encyclopaedia Biblica*, iii, 3634.

7 *Cf.* for instance the approach of J. Moffatt, *Introduction to the Literature of the New Testament*[3] (1918), pp. 40ff.; A. Jülicher and E. Fascher, *Einleitung in das Neue Testament*[7] (1931), pp. 54-56; M. Dibelius, *A Fresh Approach to the New Testament and Early Christian Literature* (1937), pp. 140, 141.

8 *Cf.* A. Deissman's discussions on NT epistolography, *Bible Studies* (1901), pp. 16, 42-55; and *Light from the Ancient East* (1923), pp. 233-245. He maintained the distinction between real letters and Epistles within the NT, but while this is true, the differences from contemporary conventions require that the NT Epistles should be placed in a category by themselves.

9 The disinclination among most scholars to accept that pseudonymous writings should be classified as forgeries is due to the feeling that the word itself bears a moral stigma. *Cf.* C. L. Mitton, *op. cit.*, pp. 111ff. Against, *cf.* J. I. Packer, *Fundamentalism and the Word of God* (1958), p. 183.

10 'The Problem of Anonymity and Pseudonymity in Christian Literature of the First Two Centuries', *JTS* n.s. 12 (1961). p. 39. The article is reprinted in *SPCK Theological Collections, Vol. 4*, mentioned under Note 1 above.

11 One of the major factors in the use of ancient names among Jewish pseudepigraphists was the closure of the Canon, particularly as it related to the books of the Law. For a discussion of this, *cf.* R. H. Charles, *Religious Development between the Old and New Testaments* (1914), pp. 1ff. For other proposals, *cf.* D. S. Russell, *Between the Testaments* (1960), p. 116; and H. H. Rowley, *The Relevance of Apocalyptic* (1944), pp. 38ff.

12 It would be true to say that a considerable time interval was integral to the design of the apocalyptists to give validity to their prophetic powers. If, in the *Apocalypse of Ezra*, Ezra can accurately portray the history of the period beyond his own time to the real author's time, more attention might be given to any predictions in the near future.

13 *Cf.* J. Moffatt, *op. cit.*, p. 41.

14 The most reasoned advocacy of this is in Mitton's discussion, *op. cit.*, pp. 259, 260.

15 This is emphatically asserted by J. I. Packer, *op. cit.*, p. 184.

16 *Cf.* J. C. Fenton's article, 'Pseudonymity in the New Testament', in *Theology* (1955), pp. 51ff.

17 *Cf. Christianity and the Computer* by A. Q. Morton and J. McLennan (1964), p. 22, where the ascriptions in the letters are lightly brushed aside on the grounds that for seventy years the Epistles lay hidden from view and the traditions of authorship which we have are only what second-century Christians *thought*. But these grounds are open to dispute: *cf.* the reviewer's *New Testament Introduction : the Pauline Epistles* (1961), pp. 255ff.

18 *Cf.* his very brief summary of his method, *op. cit.*, pp. 24-35.

19 Philemon is too short to be assigned to Paul on statistical grounds and Morton and McLennan therefore are influenced entirely by its contents.

20 If, for instance, Philippians had been chosen, all the rest would presumably have been chosen as pseudonymous. The choice of the major Epistles is again influenced by other considerations than statistical.

21 *Op. cit.*, pp. 27f.

22 The inability of statistical enquiry to interpret differences is clearly admitted by K. Grayston and C. Herdan in their article, 'The Authorship of the Pastorals in the Light of Statistical Linguistics', *NTS* 6 (October 1959), pp. 1-15.

23 This is most noticeable in his commentary on John's Gospel, *Das Evangelium des Johannes (KEK)*[13] (1953).

24 This was true, for instance, of some of the older conservative scholars who introduced dogmatic arguments into critical discussions and virtually excluded the latter altogether. It seemed sufficient to assert divine origin without proceeding to investigations of historical situation, but there is obviously a place for both.

25 This principle is frankly admitted by C. L. Mitton in his discussion of the authenticity of Ephesians (*op. cit.*, pp. 7, 160), when he accepts the need to prove the non-Pauline character of the Epistle.

26 All thoroughgoing form critics accept as a necessary presupposition that eye-witnesses had nothing to do with the control of the tradition. *Cf.* D. E. Nineham's articles in *JTS* n.s. 9 (1958), pp. 13-25, 243-252; 11 (1960), pp. 253-264.

27 Another example is the resort to fragment theories, as for instance in P. N. Harrison's theory for the Pastoral Epistles (*cf. The Problem of the Pastorals* (1921) and see the reviewer's critique, *op. cit.*, pp. 224ff.).

28 In such a case reasons must be given for assuming that Luke follows the Thucydidean tradition, before an effective analogy can be established.