WHO WROTE THE NEW TESTAMENT?

The Making of the Christian Myth

BURTON L. MACK
church. The Roman church was soon to become the major player as Christians learned to accommodate the Romans and their empire. It needed both Paul and Peter to make sure of its gospel moorings.

**PAUL'S LETTERS TO TIMOTHY AND TITUS**

Christian scholars refer to Paul's letters to Timothy and Titus as the *pastorals* because they offer instruction for the overseers of Christian congregations. In the long course of the history of the Christian church, the Greek term for overseer (*episkopos*) was transliterated into Vulgar Latin (*ebiscopus*), Old Saxon (*biskop*), and Old English (*biscop*), eventually becoming *bishop*, and it was used to refer to the ecclesiastical administrator of a diocese. Since bishops came to be understood as shepherds of their flocks, Paul's letters to Timothy and Titus came to be called “pastoral epistles,” and they have taken their place in the Christian imagination as evidence for the early emergence of the episcopal form of church governance. At the time these letters were written, however, *episkopos* did not have the connotation of shepherd, and the office of an overseer was hardly distinct from that of an elder. Nevertheless, the concern for church order and for defining the duties of an overseer is clearly manifest.

The three letters were written at different times, undoubtedly during the first half of the second century. They were not included in Marcion's list of Paul's letters (ca. 140 C.E.), nor do they appear in the earliest manuscript collection of Paul's letters (P46, ca. 200 C.E.). Quotations first appear in Irenaeus' *Against Heresies* (180 C.E.), and their content fits nicely into the situation and thought of the church in the mid-second century. Their attribution to Paul is clearly fictional, for their language, style, and thought are thoroughly un-Pauline, and the “personal” references to particular occasions in the lives of Timothy, Titus, and Paul do not fit with reconstructions of that history taken from the authentic letters of Paul. The mention of Crete in Titus (Titus 1:5, 12–13), of Ephesus in 1 Timothy (1 Tim. 1:3), and clues from the later legends about Paul, make an Aegean provenance likely (MacDonald 1983).

Mythmaking on either flank of the centrist position was apparently proceeding apace. Titus and Timothy are warned against becoming involved in “quarrels about the law” on the one hand (Titus 1:9–16; 1 Tim. 1:4–7), and in the idle talk of ascetics and gnostics on the other (1 Tim. 4:1–3; 6:20; 2 Tim. 2:18). For the author of these letters, conversations with people who did not agree on the “truth” of the gospel “entrusted” to the apostles was dangerous. Titus and Timothy were to stay true to the “sound doctrine” they had received, knowing that the church was the “bulwark of truth” (Titus 1:1–3; 2:1; 1 Tim. 1:10–11; 2:4–5; 3:15). “The mystery of our religion is great,” the author wrote, namely that:

He [Jesus] was revealed in flesh,
vindicated in spirit,
seen by angels,
proclaimed among Gentiles,
believed in throughout the world,
taken up in glory. (1 Tim. 3:16)

Period. That is all anyone need know about Jesus. What this “mystery” meant for persons should also be clear. They should “lead a quiet and peaceable life in all godliness and dignity” (1 Tim. 3:7) and so accept the invitation to “eternal life” offered by the gospel (1 Tim. 6:12, 18–19; 2 Tim. 1:10; Titus 1:1–3). And they should learn to obey the instructions of their overseer!

The letters say that Titus and Timothy had been commissioned as overseers of congregations and that Paul was writing to remind them of his instructions to them. But then it appears that just as Paul had been an example for them, they were to be examples for other overseers. These overseers had to be upstanding citizens, “well-thought-of by outsiders,” “subject to the kings and authorities,” and able to manage their own households (Titus 1:5–9; 1 Tim. 3:1–7). They were also to be charged with managing the congregation just as they managed their own household. Not to be left to their own devices in making judgments about such matters, “Paul” spells out in detail what he expects, demands, allows, and disallows regarding the behavior of overseers, deacons, widows, women, elders, young men, and the slaves in a congregation. Women, for instance, would have to be subject to their husbands, be silent at church, dress modestly, and not wear their hair braided (1 Tim. 2:9–15). There is also instruction for prayers, public reading of the scriptures, enrolling widows on the list of those in need of welfare, teaching, baptism, and the “laying on of hands,” a second-century ritual of ordination. Thus the author created a marvelous fiction in order to place a church manual of discipline from the mid-second century at the very beginning of the apostolic tradition. One wonders whether Paul would have been pleased by this honor.

THE EPISTLES OF PETER AND JUDE

The letters attributed to Peter and Jude have been called the catholic epistles (from katholikos, general), because they are addressed to Christians in general, not to a particular congregation. First Peter is addressed to the “exiles of the dispersion”; Jude to “those who are called, who are beloved in God the Father and kept safe for Jesus Christ”; and 2 Peter to “those who have received a faith as precious as ours.” They were written at different times, most likely during the first half of the second century, but they can be discussed together as Petrine because of the pseudonym common to two of them, and because 2 Peter is related to Jude by incorporating almost all of it in its new rendition.

Exactly when these letters were written cannot be established. Polycarp refers to 1 Peter in his Letter to the Philippians (135 C.E.), so a date earlier in the second century can be assigned to it. But for Jude, the only clues we have are that it matches
Appendix A: Early Christian Literature

Appendices
THE AUTHENTIC LETTERS OF PAUL

A New Reading of Paul’s Rhetoric and Meaning

THE SCHOLARS VERSION

TRANSLATED BY

Arthur J. Dewey
Roy W. Hoover
Lane C. McGaughey
Daryl D. Schmidt

POLEBRIDGE PRESS
Salem, Oregon
## Canonical vs. Authentic Paul

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* Items in italic are interpolations into an authentic letter.
RE-CLAIMING THE BIBLE FOR A NON-RELIGIOUS WORLD

John Shelby Spong

HarperOne
An Imprint of HarperCollinsPublishers
Bible as a revelation of God that dropped from heaven, fully written, divided into chapters and verses and bearing the divine imprimatur.

We know now that the Bible is a small library of books composed over a period of about one thousand years between roughly 1000 BCE and 135 CE. Many of these biblical books did not have a single author. Some of them were edited and re-edited over as long a period of time as five hundred years before they reached the form in which they found inclusion in the Bible. Can the "Word of God" actually be edited? Why did God not get it right the first time? What human being would have had the hubris to add to or delete from the "Word of God"? Yet that kind of editing happened, we now know, probably in every book in the Bible. Another fact to embrace is that none of the authors of the books in the Bible wrote thinking that they were writing the "Word of God." That was something decided much later by someone else. Have we ever wondered by whom these decisions were made and on what basis? Among those who still make this claim for the literal sacredness of the entire Bible, we need to know whether they are suggesting that each book of the Bible is equally holy, or that each reflects the "Word of God" with equal fidelity. The mainstream Christian churches do not seem to believe that, for the lectionaries that guide the reading of the scriptures in their worship leave out some books altogether! Can one skip a portion of the "Word of God" as no longer worthy of being heard? Such attitudes reflect uninformed claims for the Bible that are universally dismissed in the circles of biblical scholarship. Why is this scholarship not communicated to the Sunday worshipers of the world?

Let me be specific with certain popular assumptions: Moses did not write the documents we call the "books of Moses," or the Torah (Genesis to Deuteronomy)! Indeed, Moses had been dead some three hundred years before the first word of the Torah was put into written form. David did not write the book of Psalms! Solomon did not write Proverbs! The gospels were not written by eyewitnesses, but by at least the second and, in the case of the
Fourth Gospel (as the book of John is often called), perhaps even the third generation of believers. The book of Revelation does not predict the end of the world or convey any hidden messages about modern-day history! Why do we still allow ourselves to be tyrannized by this kind of uninformed biblical non-sense, regardless of the “authority” claimed for that book by the mouths that still utter these claims?

During the era in which the books of the Bible were written almost everyone believed—indeed, did not even question—the assumed fact that the earth was the center of a three-tiered universe and that God lived just above the sky. How else could God vigilantly watch human behavior and keep the divine record books up to date and ready for Judgment Day? No one in that time had any idea that the sun was part of a galaxy that contained two hundred billion other stars. No one had ever heard of a germ or virus, so in the Bible sickness was interpreted as punishment from the all-seeing God. The bubonic plague in the fourteenth century was viewed as a particularly violent expression of God’s anger and was popularly blamed on a scandal in the papacy, which produced a pope in Rome and a pope in Avignon. Weather patterns, from heat waves to hurricanes and tornadoes, which seemed to come out of the same sky that God was thought to inhabit, were regarded as expressions of this same divine wrath. Even today this perspective remains in fundamentalist religious circles. The killing earthquake that rocked Haiti in January 2010, causing the death of some two hundred and thirty thousand people and devastating the whole nation, was explained by one televangelist as God punishing the Haitians for “making a pact with the devil and throwing the French out,” events that occurred in the early years of the nineteenth century! In the Bible mental illness and epilepsy were also assumed to be (and were interpreted as the result of) demon possession. Can any modern doctor believe that?

Given these realities, we need to ask just how the claim made by anyone that the Bible in any sense is the “Word of God” can be sustained even for a moment without violating every rational
faculty that human beings possess. Yet this claim is still made by religious voices, and it is frequently made without apology. Religious representatives not only say these things, but they also act them out in public with neither embarrassment nor shame. In fact this biblical mentality, frequently worn as a badge of honor, has played a large role in America's national life.

In the history of the United States in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries it was the Democratic Party that wore this badge, nominating on three different occasions (1896, 1900 and 1908) a biblical fundamentalist named William Jennings Bryan to be their presidential candidate. Three different Republicans, William McKinley, Theodore Roosevelt and William Howard Taft, defeated him and thus kept this attitude from getting established in the highest political office of this country. In the early years of the twenty-first century, however, this mentality shifted to Republican candidates, and one president, George W. Bush, actually asserted that God had chosen him to be president! President Bush's mentality was not an isolated claim in his party, as those who came to be called "the religious right" found a home in religious Republicanism, packaged as "family values," and they produced a plethora of candidates who opposed evolution, saw the turmoil in the Middle East as the fulfillment of biblical prophecy and sought to impose a narrow religious agenda on this complex nation. An Arkansas Baptist preacher actually became a viable presidential candidate.³

How is it possible that such irrational and, at least in scholarly circles, such universally dismissed attitudes toward the Bible can still in the twenty-first century have such power and even appeal? To answer these questions we will have to journey deep into our religious origins.

A worthy starting place would be to seek to understand why we have historically built around the Bible such a firm aura or defense shield to protect it from any serious investigation. That aura is quite distinguishable and that defense shield is far

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³ Mike Huckabee, former governor of Arkansas and an ordained preacher.
more powerful than most of us can imagine, for it is constantly reinforced.

Look first at how the Bible is treated in church. In the more liturgical churches the choir and the officiants process in at the start of worship, and one of them will normally carry the Bible high as if it is to be worshiped or adored. If this action registers at all on the worshipers it heightens a definition that this book itself somehow participates in the holiness of God, which would of course preclude anyone from being critical of it in any way without facing the charge of being sacrilegious. Next, when the gospel selection for the day is read there is frequently a second procession, this time into the congregation, with the Bible or a book of gospel readings once more elevated. Then the reader, who is normally an ordained person, a practice that seems to say that only officially designated "holy people" can read the "holy gospel," will announce: "The Holy Gospel of our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ, according to _____," filling in the blank with the name of the evangelist to whom that day's reading is ascribed. The congregation responds with the words: "Glory be to you, O Lord." While this is going on the reader may make the sign of the cross on the gospel and then on his or her head, lips and heart. The reader may even spread the smoke of incense over the gospel book. It is hard to know what these magical gestures mean to the reader or to the congregation, but they do all tend to communicate that the reading about to be heard is of the greatest and gravest significance, thereby enhancing the aura around the Bible. When the gospel reading is complete, the reader then proclaims: "This is the Gospel of the Lord," to which the congregation responds: "Praise be to you, Lord Christ." With that much folderol gathered around the simple reading from the gospels week after week, month after month, year after year, it seems clear that the claim of special sanctity for the Bible would be riveted deep into the people's conscious and subconscious life. Are we not assuming in these activities that this book has a kind of unearthly power that we fail to respect at our peril? When those practices become the tradition
of a lifetime, are we not making it all but impossible to study the Bible in a modern and rational way?

Now add to these practices the way the Bible is traditionally published. It is not like other books. It normally has a black, floppy leather cover, frequently with a gold cross embossed upon it. It is traditionally printed on tissue-thin pages that are gilt-edged. The words of Jesus are frequently printed in red ink. They are presumably the “holy of holies” and leap off the page demanding attention. Until fairly recently most Bibles were kept in the Elizabethan English of the past, peppered with words like “thee” and “thou,” phrases like “believest thou this” and many other verbs ending in “eth” and “est.” It was as if the Bible had a special holy language that we were not supposed to translate. Indeed, until the time of the Reformation it was a crime to put the words of the Bible into the common language of the people, so the text remained in Latin long after Latin ceased to be used in common speech. The leaders of the church did not want the uneducated to know the content of the Bible. John Wycliffe, an English vicar in the fourteenth century, who did translate the Latin Vulgate into English, was rewarded after his death for this heresy: the powers that be had his exhumed body burned at the stake. The hiddenness of the biblical text kept the “myth” of the Bible’s sanctity from ever being challenged by anyone outside the church hierarchy.

To keep the Bible shrouded in unapproachable mystery was easy so long as education was considered the privilege of the ruling classes and not the right of the masses. There was no need to prevent people from reading the Bible since most of the people could not read, period. Universal education is a relatively modern accomplishment. So in this pre-literate time people got the content of the Bible, not from reading it, but from seeing works of art that ranged from paintings, to stained glass in houses of worship, to the “Stations of the Cross.” People then, not having the biblical text before them, made the assumption that these artistic

4 John Wycliffe lived from 1328 to 1384 and completed his translation of the Bible into English in 1382.
pieces reflected accurately the historical occasions that were being depicted. Biblical literalism was thus once again burned deeply into the psyches of Western people. I recall one portrait of Matthew writing his gospel, painted by Caravaggio, which shows an angel guiding Matthew’s hand so that he would record only the “Word of God” in the words of the gospel. No one in that world knew, for example, that the virgin birth was a ninth-decade addition to the Christian story or that the ascension of Jesus was a tenth-decade addition. No one understood the fact that the narratives of the crucifixion are quite different in each gospel, that almost all of the details of the Easter story appearing in one gospel are contradicted in another. Even the educated people of this time did not always have the ability to read the gospels side by side. No one knew that there were not “seven last words” spoken from the cross, that one of the thieves did not become penitent until Luke was written about sixty years after the crucifixion, or that Judas became more evil and Pontius Pilate more holy with the writing of each gospel and thus with the passing of time. Literalism was not only encouraged, but it was also seen to be the only possibility for understanding the Bible. It thus served to keep biblical knowledge quite limited. We are the inheritors of these traditions.

The final symbol of how this aura or defense shield around the Bible was shaped is seen in the fact that the Bible has traditionally been printed with two columns on each page. This has resulted in the Bible being quite different from all other books except for dictionaries, encyclopedias or other reference and resource books. No one simply reads the dictionary. No one reads the encyclopedia. One goes to these two resources to get answers. Moreover, one does not normally argue with the answers of a dictionary or an encyclopedia. By printing the Bible in this format are we not forcing into the subconscious minds of the people the conclusion that the Bible too is a book to which we go for answers, an authority that cannot be and must not be doubted?

Around the Bible for centuries this aura has been encouraged
and this defense shield created. This is what accounts for the almost tenacious hold that biblical literalism has had on the people of the Western world. We have in our world today the reality that many people are still clinging quite frantically to the biblical formulations of their past. Some spend enormous energy fighting Darwin, attacking secular humanism as it arises in the society and liberalism, all of which are symptoms of the lack of scholarship available in many churches. That is why in the United States we continue to take seriously the religious vote, the television evangelists, and even a pope who visited Africa with its civil strife, its rampant spread of AIDS and its poverty, and conveyed as his only message a condemnation of the use of condoms! Religious leaders seem to believe that if they allow one crack in their carefully constructed religious or biblical defense system, then the whole thing will collapse in ruins. That is the stance of hysteria, not the stance of either faith or hope, though it masquerades as both.

The primary response to this mentality, and it is a response that is growing rapidly, is to abandon all religion and to take up citizenship in the “secular city.” Proponents of this stance no longer see any relevance in religion or the Bible for their lives today. They are not interested in twisting their minds into first-century pretzels, in order to read the Bible or into fourth-century pretzels, in order to say the creeds or into thirteenth-century pretzels, in order to engage in contemporary forms of worship. They find it impossible in their modern frame of reference to conceive of a theistically understood deity, living somewhere external to this world, endowed with supernatural power and ready to invade history to come to our aid, to answer our prayers. They find the concepts of miracle and magic to be outside their worldview. They dismiss readily ideas like that of a “fall” from perfection into “original sin,” which is supposed to account for evil and which requires an external rescuer to save us from our sins. These ideas are completely foreign to what they now know about the origins of life and its evolution. They see no alternative to dismissing all religion in general and Christianity in particular, regarding it as something left over from the childhood of our
humanity, and they want little to do with it. For such questioners either biblical literalism or the rejection of all religion seem to be their only choices.

One factor that both of these responses have in common is that they share a similar profound ignorance about the Bible. The fundamentalists who quote the Bible as their final authority clearly know little about how the Bible came into being and, thus, why that approach is so totally incompetent. Those who do not find any value in the biblical tradition wind up rejecting the very things that biblical scholars themselves almost totally reject, but these secularists know so little about the Bible that they are not aware of this fact. When I read books written by the new breed of militant atheist writers, who have become both best-selling authors and household names, I find myself perplexed as to how to respond to them. I have no desire to attack them or to rise to God's defense. The religion, the Christianity and the Bible that they reject are the same religion, Christianity and Bible that I reject. My problem with such writers is not located there. It is rather in the apparent fact that they do not seem to know that there is any other way. Why should they, since the church has worked so hard not to allow other possibilities to become visible?

My desire is to work in that very arena and to close that gap in knowledge at least in regard to the Bible. I am not the enemy of the Bible. I am the enemy of the way the Bible has been understood and the way the Bible has been used. I do not think for one moment that the Bible is in any literal sense the "Word of God." It is a tribal story, as this book will reveal—a pre-modern story, an ever-changing and ever-growing story. It came into existence, as every other book does, out of the experience of human beings seeking to make sense out of the life they are living and the things they are experiencing. I want to take my readers into this Bible in a new way. I want to plumb its depths, scale its heights and free its insights from the debilitating power of literalism. I want to make some of its characters come alive—those who probably have vestiges of history attached to them, like Moses, Joshua, Elijah and Elisha, even though that kernel of history is well
hidden under layers of myth and fantasy, as well as some who are surely pure literary creations, like the Samaritan woman by the well, Lazarus who was raised from the dead, the "beloved" disciple, and even the figures of Joseph the earthly father of Jesus, Joseph of Arimathea who provided Jesus’ tomb, and Judas the betrayer. I want people to see how the God of the Bible changes through its pages from a supernaturalized, warlike tribal chief into a more abstract personification of the realities of love, justice and universalism, a God who calls us beyond our security walls into a new experience of what it means to be fully human and into dimensions of a new consciousness.

I have wrestled with the Bible for more than sixty years. I have broken open my own fundamentalism, walked through valleys of meaninglessness in which I was certain that God had died and then found my way back, not to the security of yesterday's religious certainty, but to an understanding that does not hesitate to go through the Bible in order to transcend it, and thus that provides no security. I want to help people to develop a faith that goes so deeply into the essence of Christianity that they can walk beyond Christianity into that toward which Christianity can only point. I seek to enter and to introduce others to what Paul has called “the glorious liberty of the children of God.”

I ask no one to agree with my conclusions, but rather to journey with me toward a new place and to see both the Bible and Christianity from that new context. I want to re-claim the Bible for a non-religious world. In this process I hope people will be open to those understandings of the Bible that are commonplace in academic circles, but still almost unknown in the pews of churches. If we see in religion a way to certainty in our religious convictions, then there will inevitably be great disillusionment with religion. If, however, religion can be seen as the quest to find

5 Deliberately and by choice I am using a hyphen in the word “re-claim.” I do so for these reasons. First it matches the usage in the title and second it is used in the title to capture a more action-oriented meaning. The hyphen and the capitalizing of “claim” is designed to catch the attention of the reader. Without the hyphen and capital letter the word “reclaim” sounds like something that would occur at a local lost and found.
integrity in our spiritual pilgrimages, then we can walk together and in this process discover, I am sure, some Bible stories "that you've never heard before," as the old camp song had it, and even be led to the Gershwin conclusion that some things, perhaps even most things, in the Bible "ain't necessarily so," at least not in the literal sense that we have learned them. The stage is thus set for our journey to begin.

It is a journey that will probe the sources out of which the Bible's words originated and the liturgical uses to which the Bible's words were put and by which their meaning was compromised, shaped and expanded. It will be a journey that leads us to make clear distinctions between the human experience of the divine and the human words used to describe and explain that experience. It will be a journey in which we will learn that human words are limited. They can only point to truth; they can never capture it, a fact that is demonstrably true of scripture, creed and doctrine. This journey will force us to embrace insecurity as a virtue and to dismiss security as a vice. Finally, it will be a journey into the depths of human life, serving my conviction that the only road into divinity is through humanity and the only doorway into eternity is through time.

So we raise the curtain, watch the drama unfold, and step boldly into the content of what is clearly the most influential book the world has ever known.
Thus far, as we have explored the origins of the various books of the New Testament, we have not yet come across that familiar form of human religion that asserts: “We have the truth! If you disagree with us, the truth is not in you. It is our God-given duty to define truth, defend truth and impose truth.” Up until this point in the biblical story, the Christian movement has basked in the wonder of the Christ experience, sought words that could convey the power of that experience to others and dealt with conflict only in the attempt by believers to clarify what this Christ experience really meant. Since, however, religious systems almost always devolve into security-giving systems in which “my understanding of God” is assumed to be the same as God, we should not be surprised to discover this negativity making its appearance within the Christian movement. When we turn to the pastoral epistles, the ones we have named I and II Timothy and Titus, our wait comes to an end. This suggestion that any person can possess “ultimate truth” in his or her propositional statements permeates almost every verse of these particular writings. This attitude is so ap-
parent that it actually helps us to date these works. That, in turn, forms the data that make us absolutely certain Paul is not the author of any of these epistles.

The pastoral epistles are clearly the product of a later period of church history, when missionaries, prophets and teachers have been replaced by hierarchical and authoritative figures called bishops, priests or presbyters and deacons—all institutional functionaries. Even more, the office of a senior bishop, elder, or archbishop has had time to develop. The primary task of this official, it seems, is to impose order on the life of the various congregations in a given geographical region and to guarantee conformity in both their worship and their teaching. From other sources, we can identify this ecclesiastical structure as reflecting the period in church history no earlier than 90 CE and possibly as late as 120 CE.

While these dates alone rule out Pauline authorship, they also make us aware that enough time has passed so that Paul is regarded as a respected, but not a controversial figure. In these works, Paul is portrayed as a revered elder statesman-apostle possessing great authority—indeed, such authority that the words of these epistles were thought to be buttressed by the claim that they had been written in his name. Timothy and Titus, the younger companions of the historical Paul—men who were named in Paul’s own authentic letters (Timothy in Romans, I and II Corinthians, Philippians and I Thessalonians, and Titus in II Corinthians and Galatians)—have been transformed into symbols of the next generation of Christian leaders who listen eagerly to the elder Paul’s advice. While the Paul of history could write his ode to love in I Corinthians 13 and speak about his own conversion in Romans 8:38–39, the Paul of the pastoral epistles is interested only in order, “sound” teaching, proper obedience and the need to drive away erroneous and false teaching. In the pastoral epistles “orthodoxy” has been defined in inflexible ways.

In content, the pastorals are quite similar to the five letters of Ignatius of Antioch, written between 110 and 113 CE while he was on his way to his own martyrdom. They reflect similar church
structures and lines of authority and issue similar warnings against false teachers, once again demonstrating that the pastoral epistles are the products of about the same time and history. The chief function of a bishop in both of these sources is to defend the faith and to establish orthodoxy, a word that means simply “right thinking.” Words like “doctrine” and “teaching” are a major concern of these books that clearly favor the developing church doctrinal order that would later be referred to as “Christian orthodoxy” or “Catholic teaching.”

It is also apparent in these writings that something is threatening this sound doctrine. Historians have identified the enemy as a group of Christians who called themselves Gnostics. The pastoral epistles exhort younger leaders to protect the “true faith” by confronting evil, rebuking or silencing these false teachers who are disparaged as imposters, unbelievers and deceivers (II Tim. 3:10ff). The battle grew quite hostile with words like “stupid,” “unprofitable” and “futile” being used (II Tim. 2:23). God-given authority was claimed for established church leaders. These leaders alone were authorized to determine what constitutes “true doctrine” and they alone had the power to ordain new leaders, who, in order to qualify for ordination, had to take vows to be faithful to the established tradition. Those who, in a previous generation, had themselves been “revisionists” in the synagogue were now determined to allow no “revisionists” in the church. The language of the pastorals is replete with familiar religious hostility. Titus 1:13 refers to Cretans as “liars, evil beasts and lazy gluttons.” I Timothy calls those opposed to sound doctrine “immoral persons, sodomites, kidnappers, liars and perjurers” (1:10). II Timothy says that these enemies of Christian truth engage in “godless chatter” and likens their talk to “gangrene” (2:16).

Gnostics were people who claimed to possess secret knowledge or even special revelatory insights. They thus challenged orthodox authority on the basis of this source of truth, which lay outside hierarchical control. With the discovery of authentic gnostic writings at Nag Hammadi, they do not look nearly so evil or threatening as some of their critics portrayed them as being. I think I could make the case that many elements found in the Protestant Reformation represent a revival of Gnosticism.
Church fights can frequently be anything but Christian! By this time in church history the disciples of Jesus seem to have moved rather far from Jesus’ admonition to “love your enemies”! Yet in the midst of this rather rampant hostility we are startled to find familiar and treasured passages, words that have enriched our vocabulary and are frequently repeated, but about whose origin we have generally had no clue. I refer to such phrases as: “A little wine is good for your stomach” (I Tim. 5:23); “The love of money is the root of all evil” (I Tim. 6:10); “We brought nothing into this world and it is certain that we can carry nothing out” (I Tim. 6:7). Christianity so often blends good and evil.

Someone once said that Christianity probably would not have survived had it not become institutionalized and that it might not continue to survive because it did become institutionalized. Institutions, certainly including the Christian church, always subvert truth to institutional needs. That is why the various factions within Christianity have developed irrational power claims such as, “My pope is infallible,” or “My Bible is inerrant,” or “There is only one true church, and it is mine” or “No one comes to the Father except through my church or my faith tradition.”

These assertions always arise in religious movements when the decision is made that the wonder, truth and mystery of God can in fact be captured inside human words that originated inside human minds. God and my understanding of God become the same. The power needs of religious institutions become identified with the truth of God and the well-being of church leaders. This mentality almost inevitably produces religious wars and religious persecution, resulting in atrocities such as the Inquisition and other incredible cruelties that we Christian people have inflicted on our victims over the centuries. It also finds expression in the rudeness frequently seen in religious debate.

Two stories will serve to make this point clear and to reveal why I have no great appreciation for the pastoral epistles, which not only introduced but also attempted to justify these attitudes and helped to make them part of the life of institutional Christianity.
I have been on a number of book tours to Australia. In the Anglican Archdiocese of Sydney, Christianity has been captured by a Northern Irish Protestant fundamentalism of an eighteenth-century variety and frozen in time in the South Pacific. The Bible to that group of Christians has to be read literally, women cannot be ordained or have authority over men and homosexuality is an abomination! So my arrival there appeared to frighten Sydney’s Anglican leaders and had regularly resulted in a “call to arms” against one who might (they seemed to suggest) be the Antichrist. When in the 1990s I went on a lecture tour for my book Resurrection: Myth or Reality? these leaders quickly wrote and published a fundamentalist paperback rebuttal that hit the bookstands the day my plane landed. In addition to that, they devoted a number of pages in their archdiocesan newspaper The Southern Cross to arming their people with the “facts” necessary to resist the onslaught of this non-fundamentalist, and thus non-true-believing Christian. Finally, they appointed a “truth squad” headed by one of their bishops, Paul Barnett, to follow me around Australia to “correct my errors” publicly, lest the people be corrupted. They contacted any radio or television station on which I was scheduled to appear to demand “equal time” for “the truth.” One noonday TV program decided to book us together rather than accede to their “equal time” request. The conversation went well, at least from my point of view, until Paul Barnett exploded with the words, “Jack, you’re nothing but a Gnostic.” I responded, “Paul, the wonderful thing about that charge is that ninety-nine percent of our Australian viewers do not know whether you have just insulted me or complimented me.” I apparently bothered Paul Barnett as much as the Gnostics had bothered the authors of the pastoral epistles.

The second story happened in a public lecture in western North Carolina some years ago. The pastor and some members of a “Community Bible Church” expressed great alarm about the fact that I had been invited to do a lecture series in that town, so they planned, unbeknownst to me, a public counterattack.

In the question and answer session following the lecture I
recognized a man who was holding his hand high. He was perhaps the fourth questioner who spoke on that night. When the microphone got to him, he said “Bishop Spong, I’m sick.” I immediately responded that nothing we were doing that night was more important than his health and asked what we could do for him. “You don’t understand,” he replied, “I’m sick of you!” and then he began to rehearse the familiar line about those who, in his opinion, defiled the inerrant word of God by looking at the scriptures in a non-fundamentalist way. After listening to him for a few minutes, I interrupted him to ask the audience if they would like for this man to be allowed, in the name of fairness, to address the whole audience. They shouted back with loud denials, and the man took his coat and departed. It is of interest to me that in my life I have received sixteen death threats. None came from an atheist! None came from a Buddhist! All of them came from those who claimed to possess “the true faith” or to be “born-again Bible-believing Christians.” It is amazing that rude and even potentially murderous behavior can so easily be justified with appeals to God. The scriptures may well point to the reality of a transcendent God. The scriptures, however, do not, cannot and will not ever capture the truth of God. It is into that limitless truth of God that we walk. The one essential prerequisite for being on this journey is that each of us must relinquish the popular religious fiction that we already, in our religious systems, possess that truth.

Ultimate truth can never be fully captured in propositional statements made in human history by time-warped and time-bound human words. To claim that it can be is to admit to idolatry. The destructive idea that truth is contained in any religious form was first introduced to the Christian movement by the pastoral epistles. Christianity has been compromised by this strange idea from that day to this.
meant to his fellow believers, many of whom had seen Jesus in his earthly lifetime or after his Resurrection, without having written their stories down for us. Paul did write. But he was writing about a shared experience, not a single and idiosyncratic one. If Paul was such a foe and underminer of Jesus, why was he accepted so soon and broadly by those who knew Jesus? The answer is that Paul was not a counterforce to Jesus but one of the early believers who together bore witness to him. The Jesus gatherings in the Diaspora proved more fertile and lasting than those in Judaea itself, not because of any one man's brilliance, energy, or deceptions, but because they were more vitally expressive of what Jesus meant. Paul was part of this explosion of belief. His letters are dispatches from that hurricane of activity.

*The Pauline Writings*

**Thirteen Letters** are attributed to Paul in the New Testament, and for centuries they were all accepted as his. But modern scholarship has reached a consensus that some were definitely not written by him and others are of dubious authenticity. Only seven are now accepted as certainly by him. The seven in their probable order of composition are

- 1 Thess  Letter to the Thessalonians
- Gal    Letter to the Galatians
Phil  Letter to the Philippians
Phlm  Letter to Philemon
1 Cor  First Letter to the Corinthians
2 Cor  Second Letter to the Corinthians
Rom  Letter to the Romans

Two letters seem to be written by followers of Paul who had a profound understanding of what could be made of his teaching:

Col  Letter to the Colossians
Eph  Letter to the Ephesians

One letter seems a clumsy restatement of a genuine one:

2 Thess  Purported Letter to the Thessalonians

Three later letters are written in circumstances and from standpoints clearly not Paul’s:

Tit  Letter to Titus
1 Tim  First Letter to Timothy
2 Tim  Second Letter to Timothy

For understanding what Paul meant, one must rely on the letters accepted by almost all scholars as authentic. This book will use only those seven letters.
Paul’s own opposition to marriage is not misogynist but eschatological. He is against women marrying as well as men, and that does not make him a misanthrope. His stand is part of his general social passivity. He says that slaves, though they may welcome freedom if it is given them, should not agitate for it (1 Cor 7.20–21). “As a person was when called by God, so let him continue” (7.24). In the same way, he is against political agitation or reform (Rom 13.1–7). The spread of the revelation is so pressing a duty, as history reaches its conclusion, that all else is to be considered a distraction from that single concern. Paul has enough trouble with the Roman authorities just in carrying out his mission. He does not want to get entangled in any other concerns.

I tell you this, Brothers: the crisis impends. During what time is left, let those with wives be as if they had none, let those who mourn be as not [having time for] mourning, let those celebrating be as if not celebrating, let those who buy be as if not possessing, and those using this world be as if not using it. For the whole frame of this present order is about to go. (1 Cor 7.29–31)

In this eschatological context, Paul can imagine only one condition where he thinks marriage preferable—if one is so enflamed by passion that this in itself is a distraction from the
work of the revelation: “Better to marry than to stay enflamed” (1 Cor 7.9). Neither here nor elsewhere does Paul connect marriage with having children, the later Christian rationale. Since history is ending, the raising of children is no longer a concern in Paul’s eyes. The only reference he makes to children is to say that the child of one Holy parent can be considered Holy, even if the other parent is a nonbeliever (1 Cor 7.14). Paul’s frame of thought is far from what would be ascribed to him in the supposedly Pauline letters to Timothy and Titus, where the disciplining of bishops’ children is addressed (1 Tim 3.4–5, Tit 1.6).

Despite Paul’s preference, he himself gives evidence that married people were able to be intensely devoted to the Lord. Prisca even went to prison with him. In his Letter to the Romans, he names four married people who “worked hard” for the Lord. In Philippians, he adds another two, Euodia and Syntyche, who were his “fellows in the struggle” (Phil 4.3). Phoebe is his protectress. Another Sister is like his mother. Chloe’s establishment keeps him informed. His crack team assembled in Rome for the Spanish campaign includes ten women, at least three of them married. He knows a woman emissary (apostolos), a woman attendant (diakonos), and women prophets. He knows two women leaders in Philippi, Euodia and Syntyche, who have become rivals, and he begs for their reconciliation (not their condemnation) at Philippians
4.2–3. The later misogyny of the Christian churches would never have occurred if the spirit of Paul had continued in them.

NOTES

2. Ibid., pp. 20, 59.
Jesus, Interrupted

Revealing the Hidden Contradictions in the Bible (and Why We Don’t Know About Them)

Bart D. Ehrman
And so we have an answer to our ultimate question of why these Gospels are so different from one another. They were not written by Jesus' companions or by companions of his companions. They were written decades later by people who didn't know Jesus, who lived in a different country or different countries from Jesus, and who spoke a different language from Jesus. They are different from each other in part because they also didn't know each other, to some extent they had different sources of information (although Matthew and Luke drew on Mark), and they modified their stories on the basis of their own understandings of who Jesus was.

The fact that the Gospels were not actually written by apostles does not make them unusual in the New Testament. Quite the contrary, it makes them typical. Most of the books of the New Testament go under the names of people who didn't actually write them. This has been well known among scholars for the greater part of the past century, and it is taught widely in mainline seminaries and divinity schools throughout the country. As a result, most pastors know it as well. But for many people on the street and in the pews, this is "news."

**ARE THERE FORGERIES IN THE NEW TESTAMENT?**

Of the twenty-seven books of the New Testament, only eight almost certainly go back to the author whose name they bear: the seven undisputed letters of Paul (Romans, 1 and 2 Corinthians, Galatians, Philippians, 1 Thessalonians, and Philemon) and the Revelation of John (although we aren't sure who this John was).

The other nineteen books fall into three groups.

- **Misattributed writings.** As we have already seen, the Gospels are probably misattributed. John the disciple did not write John, and Matthew did not write Matthew. Other anonymous books have been wrongly attributed to someone famous. The book of Hebrews does not name Paul as its author, and it
almost certainly was not written by Paul. But it was eventually admitted into the canon of Scripture (see chapter 7) because church fathers came to think it was written by Paul.

- **Homonymous writings.** The term “homonymy” means “having the same name.” A “homonymous writing” is one that is written by someone who has the same name as someone who is famous. For example, the book of James was no doubt written by someone named James, but the author does not claim to be any particular James. It was an extraordinarily common name. Later church fathers accepted the book as part of Scripture because they claimed that this James was James the brother of Jesus. In the book itself there is no such claim.

- **Pseudepigraphic writings.** Some books of the New Testament were written in the names of people who did not actually write them. Scholars have known this for well over a century. The term for this phenomenon is “pseudepigraphy”—literally, “writing that goes under a false name.” Scholars have not been overly precise in their use of this term and tend to use it because it avoids the negative connotations associated with the term “forgery.” Whichever term they use, biblical scholars have argued for a long time that there are New Testament books whose authors knowingly claimed to be someone other than who they were.

**Pseudepigraphy in the Ancient World**

To make sense of this situation we need to learn more about authorship and false authorship in the ancient world.

**Definitions**

To begin with, it is important to be precise in our terminology. The term “pseudepigraphy” can refer to any writing that has a false
name attached to it. They may be false attributions, and they may be writings whose authors falsely claim to be someone else.

There are two kinds of falsely attributed writings. Some are books written anonymously that later readers, editors, or scribes wrongly claim to have been written by someone famous; others are books written homonymously, by someone who happens to share the name of someone else who was famous. In the ancient world, most people didn’t have last names, so “John” could refer to any one of hundreds or thousands of people. If an author named John wrote a book and someone later claimed that this John was in fact John the son of Zebedee (as some people claimed for the book of Revelation), then it would be a false attribution based on homonymity.¹²

There are also two kinds of “pseudonymous” writings, writings written under a “false name.” A pen name is a simple pseudonym. When Samuel Clemens wrote The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn and signed off as Mark Twain, he didn’t intend to deceive anyone; he simply was choosing a different name to publish under. There are very few instances of this kind of pseudonymity in the ancient world, although it did happen on occasion. The Greek historian Xenophon wrote his famous work, The Anabasis, under a pen name, “Themistogenes.” More frequently in antiquity we find the other kind of pseudonymous writing, where the author uses the name of someone else who is well known in order to deceive his audience into thinking that he really is that person. This kind of pseudonymous writing is literary forgery.

Prevalence of Forgery in the Ancient World

Literary forgery was a common phenomenon in the ancient world. We know this because ancient authors themselves talk about it, a lot. Discussions of forgery can be found in the writings of some of the best-known authors from antiquity. Among the Greeks and Romans you can find references to and discussions of forgery in such far-flung authors as Herodotus, Cicero, Quintillian, Martial, Suetonius,
Galen, Plutarch, Philostratus, and Diogenes Laertius. Among Christian authors there are discussions in the writings of such well-known figures as Irenaeus, Tertullian, Origen, Eusebius, Jerome, Rufinus, and Augustine.

It is sometimes argued by scholars of the New Testament that forgery was so common in the ancient world that no one took it seriously: since the deceit could normally be easily detected, it was never really meant to fool anyone. I have spent the past couple of years examining the ancient discussions of forgery and have come to the conclusion that the only people who make this argument are people who haven’t actually read the ancient sources.

Ancient sources took forgery seriously. They almost universally condemn it, often in strong terms. How widely was it condemned? Odd as it might seem, the practice of forgery is sometimes condemned even in documents that are forged. Furthermore, the claim that no one was ever fooled is completely wrong. People were fooled all the time. That’s why people wrote forgeries—to fool people.

I don’t need to give a detailed account of the ancient discussions of forgery here; there is plenty of scholarship on the problem, although unfortunately the most exhaustive works are in German. But I can illustrate the point by giving one particularly telling anecdote.

In second-century Rome there was a famous physician and author named Galen. Galen tells the story that one day, as he was walking through the streets of Rome, he passed by a bookseller’s stall. There he saw two men arguing over a certain book for sale, written in the name of . . . Galen! One man was insisting that the book really was Galen’s, and the other was equally vociferous in claiming that it could not be, since the writing style was completely different from Galen’s. This, needless to say, warmed the cockles of Galen’s heart, since he had not in fact written the book. But he was more than a little perturbed that someone was trying to sell a book under his name. And so he went home and composed a small book called “How to Recognize the Books of Galen.” We still have the book today.
to be written by Peter that were not written by him—for example, a Gospel of Peter, a letter of Peter to James, several “Acts” of Peter, and three different apocalypses of Peter. Forging books in Peter’s name was a virtual cottage industry.

CONCLUSION: WHO WROTE THE BIBLE?

I return now to my original question: Who wrote the Bible? Of the twenty-seven books of the New Testament, only eight almost certainly were written by the authors to whom they are traditionally ascribed: the seven undisputed letters of Paul and the Revelation of John, which could be labeled homonymous, since it does not claim to be written by any particular John; this was recognized even by some writers of the early church.

My views about the authors of the New Testament are not radical within scholarship. To be sure, there are debates among scholars about this book or that. Some very fine scholars think that Paul wrote 2 Thessalonians, or that Jesus’ brother James wrote James, or that Peter wrote 1 Peter. But the majority of critical scholars has long doubted these ascriptions, and there is scarcely any debate about some of the books of the New Testament, such as 1 Timothy and 2 Peter. These books were not written by their putative authors.

Doubts about the authorship of writings that became the canon were raised in the early church, but in the modern period, starting in the nineteenth century, scholars have pressed the arguments home with compelling reasoning. Even now many scholars are loath to call the forged documents of the New Testament forgeries—this is, after all, the Bible we’re talking about. But the reality is that by any definition of the term, that’s what they are. A large number of books in the early church were written by authors who falsely claimed to be apostles in order to deceive their readers into accepting their books and the views they represented.

This view that the New Testament contains books written under false names is taught at virtually all the major institutions of higher
learning except strongly evangelical schools throughout the Western world. It is the view taught in all the major textbooks on the New Testament used in these institutions. It is the view taught in seminaries and divinity schools. It is what pastors learn when they are preparing for ministry.

And why isn't this more widely known? Why is it that the person in the pew—not to mention the person in the street—knows nothing about this? Your guess is as good as mine.