

***Pauline Authorship and  
the Pastoral Epistles:  
A Response to S. E. Porter***

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*This brief essay suggests an alternative to modern critical orthodoxy which equates historical authorship with canonicity. Rather than settling the issue of authorship on historical grounds, a canonical approach shifts the reference point of exegesis to the biblical Sitz im Leben, where authorship of a document posits it in an authoritative theological tradition. In this case, the Pauline address of the Pastorals locates these letters within (and not outside) the Pauline corpus and so supplies additional details and perspective to the authorized (i.e., canonical) witness of Paul for today's church.*

*Key Words: canon, authorship, pseudepigraphy, Pastoral Epistles, hermeneutics*

Porter rightly asserts the modern opinion that the canonical status of the Pastoral letters is usually reduced to a question of their Pauline authorship—an “orienting concern” with which he evidently agrees. During this century, scholars have raised various reasons against Pauline authorship of the Pastoral Letters, including their chronology (does not fit well with other Pauline writings and Acts), literary form (lack of specific detail and other conventions of epistolary literature) and style (an idiosyncratic vocabulary), advice (including directives regarding church governance and false teaching), and theology (including different titles used for Jesus, the piety and quietism of Christian witness, and the lack of an imminent parousia). For these internal reasons, when coupled with the lack of a clear textual witness to them prior to the third century<sup>1</sup> most scholars think that

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Paul did not write them, even though the letters directly attribute authorship to him. Without apostolic authorship, then, most question their “authenticity” and so canonical authority.

Porter summarizes the standard countervailing arguments to these various problems with uncommon clarity and bite. Although he claims otherwise, implicit in Porter's assessment of the historical data and the different direction it takes him are those prior judgments about the canonicity (and, indeed, the Pauline authorship) of these writings, which he seems eager to defend. His work once again demonstrates that different convictions about scripture's

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<sup>1</sup> Porter (following Tertullian) interprets the omission of the Pastorals from Marcion's canon as a recognition of their existence but a rejection of their authority. However, Marcion's omission could more simply have resulted from not knowing of them. Further, Porter is much too selective when considering the evidence from the second century (what about Gnostic lists, such as found in *The Gospel of Truth*). Few scholars, even those who accept Pauline authorship, are as glib as Porter when he asserts that their “inclusion (in the Pauline corpus) must have been early since attestation of the letters is... apparently well established by the third quarter of the second century.”

authority often result in different exegetical conclusions, and illustrates the practical difficulty of reaching a consensus in matters of historical reconstruction. At the very least Porter reminds us that we should guard against the easy acceptance of one or another opinion on this or any other historical issue; indeed, the competent scholar must consider all the available data since the stakes are high indeed.

Porter's essay is concentrated by the critical calculus that equates historical authorship with canonicity. In this regard, his methodological interests are no different than those he attacks—a point well illustrated by his serious objection to A. Lincoln's worry over "authorial fallacy" and by his own worry whether pseudepigraphal writings should be a part of our canonical witness. While I can appreciate this approach to the authorship question, its meta-theological project fails to convince me: why then should we settle a book's canonicity by the historical identity of the author?

Quite apart from historical circumstances, however, are theological considerations, especially when relating together the issues of authorship and canonicity. Porter's approach to authorship and canon is strictly historical and fails to recognize that "the heart of the controversy over authorship does not lie with the problem of historicity but with the nature of its referentiality."<sup>2</sup> The author's address within Scripture may well locate a composition within an authoritative tradition and thereby legitimize its reading as theologically formative. The Pauline authorship of the Pastorals, then, is a theological judgment about their continuing authority within the faith community—a judgment, by the way, that is proven by the community's experience with these texts and recognition of their inspiration. From this perspective, the historical question is really secondary: whether or not

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the historical Paul wrote the Pastorals has nothing to do with the authority of their subject matter in supplying details to scripture's Pauline witness.

By stating the issue of authorship in this fashion, I suspect a more approximate relationship between the Pastorals and the anonymous gospels (or even the anonymous Old Testament) than does Porter. The titles provided the biblical gospels are canonical (and not authorial) properties and function theologically to locate their biographies of Jesus within authoritative traditions. In fact, the "naming" of the gospels almost certainly took place *after* the church recognized their divine inspiration. In this sense, then, authorship only confirmed the normative quality of their content to their subsequent readerships, and not the other way around.

I found Porter's struggle with the supposed pseudepigraphy of the Pastorals especially insightful, although finally not sufficiently robust: he failed to raise significant hermeneutical implications. For example, if the Pastorals are someone's work fifty years after Paul, then Paul becomes the object rather than the subject of these letters. The pseudepigrapher becomes an interpreter of authoritative (Pauline) tradition, who extends its range of meaning for a later period and for other addressees—perhaps in a way analogous to other biblical writers who interpret sacred tradition for their particular communities of faith. The effect on the

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<sup>2</sup> B. S. Childs, *New Testament as Canon* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1984) 381.

interpretation of the Pastorals has been to lose their canonical distinction as members of the Pauline corpus and to treat them in the same way as other post-apostolic (and non-canonical) writings.

At the same time, a canonical referentiality will make different assessments of an historical conclusion in favor of pseudepigraphy. If the author is a pseudepigrapher, as most scholars insist, a canonical approach might legitimize his hermeneutics and universalize his *Sitz im Leben* as normative for all Pauline traditions for all time. From this angle, the Pastorals do not reinterpret and update Pauline theology for a particular post-Pauline *Sitz im Leben*; rather, the Pastorals present a hermeneutical model by which Paul's gospel might continue to find practical significance in spite of his personal absence.<sup>3</sup>

Such a framework enables the interpreter to recover the significance of "the strange mixture of genuine continuity with the undisputed Pauline letters and those elements of great dissimilarity"<sup>4</sup>—in particular, the line of continuity found in the Pastorals' consideration of Paul's continuing authority as an apostle of Jesus Christ

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and the line of discontinuity found when considering the continuing role his gospel performs even in his absence. In agreement with all the Pauline letters, the Pastorals portray Paul as an authoritative interpreter of Jesus traditions: the "sound words of our Lord Jesus Christ" (1 Tim 6:3) form the "pattern of sound words which you have heard from me" (2 Tim 1:13). And the subject matter of the Pauline gospel does not change; rather, what has changed in the Pastorals is the manner by which his gospel is treasured and toward what end. Rather than for missionary purposes as elsewhere in the Pauline corpus (esp. Rom 1:14-16), the subject matter of his gospel now supplies the "sound words" of the (institutional) church's paradosis, which is passed on from generation to generation through Pauline pastors like Timothy and Titus (2 Tim 2:2; 3:14). Since the canonical approach to differences between the Pastorals and the undisputed Pauline letters is not adversarial but complementary, I ask what are the implications when considering the Pauline corpus as a whole? The answer is that the teaching of Paul, preserved and collected in his canonical letters, must continue to be treasured from generation to generation ("from faith unto faith") as the normative witness to God whose salvation is present for us in Christ Jesus and by his Spirit.

A final comment on the ethics of reading Scripture, which may be determined by the author's motives. I found Porter's accusation of "deception" against the pseudepigrapher confusing in two ways. What if the pseudepigrapher did not intend to deceive the readers as Meade and others have argued, but was only following the literary practices of his religious community? Even though another reader, who is an outsider to these practices, might feel deceived, does this constitute the sort of moral deception that Porter objects to? I think not. Further, I find this species of argument rooted in a much too brittle sort of historicism. Are we to believe this about the canonical process: that a composition, first read and read again, then preserved and treasured as scripture, would be excluded from the biblical canon if the author was "exposed" as a pseudepigrapher? I do not think so. The unwritten hermeneutics that guided the canonical

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<sup>3</sup> See R. W. Wall and E. E. Lemcio, *The New Testament as Canon: A Reader in Canonical Criticism* (JNSTSup 76; Sheffield: JSCT Press, 1992) 142-60.

<sup>4</sup> Childs, *Canon*, 387.

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process and the decisions for or against specific books were much more dynamic and "practical" than this. The church's recognition of the Pastoral Epistles as apostolic and divinely inspired—and thus canonical—is the result of their actual performance in forming an infallible understanding of God within faithful readers. So it is today.

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