Dilemmas in New Testament Criticism

By DONALD GUTHRIE BD MTH PHD. Lecturer in New Testament Language and Literature at the London Bible College.

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 having been 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 pseudographs. A survey of the history of New Testament criticism shows that the idea of canonical pseudographs within the canon was the result and not the original cause of the autheni city 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, proceeded 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 con sidering the necessity of establishing the probability of an alternative.2 This was particularly true of the Tübingen school’s3 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 on 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 prominent 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 under a name other than that of their author, it must be considered whether the phenomenon which are wholly falla cious in the light of the primitive Church could ever have had signiﬁcance.7 Neglect of this 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.8 Although it considers that ethics is not a proper category for this study, it would certainly relieve the problem altogether if all moral restraints could be equated 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 example, be a self-created name, chosen for the sole purpose of exempting the writer from revealing his true identity. In this case there is 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 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 pseudo epigraphists all chose names of ancient Jewish heroes and apparently did not consider that there were any good reasons why they should not do so. 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. But it is precisely here that no parallels exist for comparison with the alleged New Testament pseudographs. In the case of any of the New Testament Epistles which are alleged to be pseudonymous it must be

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 it was not always strictly adherent to Christian tendency. The literary practices of the primitive church cannot so easily be established since positive evidence is somewhat fragmentary. 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? But there is a serious missing link in this argument. The mere extensiveness of pseudonymous practice is no proof that it was used 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.8 It must therefore be concluded that pseudonymity could even have regarded immorality as a norm. In other words, by its essential character Christianity challenges the accepted conventions of the time would not have achieved their purpose, since the literary procedure which the non-Christian world saw no reason to challenge. In other words, were there no moral constraints in the use of pseudonymity? This raises the problem altogether if all moral constraints could be equated with as easily as this. But can they?

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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 hypothoses are correct, it is difficult to absolve the writer from blame, for their motive would then have been to produce works ostensibly claiming Paul’s authority although he had nothing to do with their writing. 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 confused 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. Some devout follower of Paul’s, induced by love of his authority although he had nothing to do with the writing, would have5 written an epistle in his master’s 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 writing that it must be regarded as pseudonymous and then to be assured that the made it pseudonymous because it was so much like Paul’s. It is difficult to define such distinctives.

It is important to consider how far the dilemma over pseudonymity affects conservative criticism. If the practice is real, then 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 cast the matter of the difficulty of maintaining the authenticity of all the New Testament books? It would seem so.15 Yet there may be another possibility. If the evidence is not clear, it may be that Paul’s work was the result of efforts of interpolations. 27 Difficult passages may not be excised without adequate explanation. But the same type of criticism 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 to a reverent attitude, which must always exert consider- in the light of the new evidence may be said that criticism of the New Testament 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 or analogies, but there have exerted such a profound influence and for this reason appeal to literary analogies and parallels must proceed with a certain caution. Yet many have been built on the assumption that what was true of other writers must have been true of the biblical writers. But New Testament criticism has always been concerned with a unique subject — Jesus Christ — and this must have exerted an


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 the results of methodological testing are in. Yet another important is a clear definition of the value to be placed on eye-witness testimony. A true approach to New Testament criticism must therefore come to an appropriate conclusion for each individual case, and the amount of weight should be given to eye-witness testimony during the primitive period. Any hypothesis which assumes that early Christians not only circulated but were created without restraint from eye-witnesses is contrary to what might be reasonably expected. Acceptance of this attitude will enable a conservative approach to all questions of Christian origins, and is especially relevant in the assessment of form criticism.25

In order to claim that a factual theory, although fraught with certain difficulties, is preferable to an unsupported hypothesis, indeed, it has not been proposed so that it solves must at once be regarded as suspect. It is not sufficient to displace an existing theory without establishing an alternative. A reasonable explanation of how they came to be in the canon provides the back up the problem of the New Testament Epistles. This is obviously a crucial matter. Attempts have been made to mitigate inherent difficulties. Statistical tests can be devised which can provide adequate enunciation of principles of criticism.26 It is significant that this has never been done in spite of the obvious importance of the question. A good deal of misunderstanding on the part of both liberal and conservative critics would have been avoided if there had been a clearer definition of these principles. Many hypotheses would at once have appeared methodologically unsound if they had been examined according to stated principles. But this hypothesis may be cited as an example, but the process has been repeated many times since. The most modern example of a scholar whose 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 books23). But it must also be pointed out that some advocates of conservative opinions have been guilty of a kind of mistake when they have allowed dogmatic considerations more weight than is legitimate in critical matters.4

POSITIVE PRINCIPLES

Is it possible to suggest any definite principles for a true approach to New Testament criticism which would be worthy of careful examination? First of all, the value of external evidence must be
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.

To conclude, it may be said that many of the dilemmas of New Testament criticism arise from a failure to recognize the acceptance of Christ 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
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 Über den Sagenannten 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 pseudopigrapha in the NT, with little regard to examining the probabilities behind such suggestions. He and his followers were too much dominated by dogmatic considerations.
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.
8 Cf. A. Deissman's discussions on NT epistemology, Bible Studies (1901), pp. 46, 42-55; and 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 disincarnation 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.
12 It would be true to say that a considerable time interval was integral to the design of the apocalypticists 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.
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.
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 Philenom 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, Philenomians 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.
23 This is most noticeable in his commentary on John's Gospel, Das Evangelium des Johannes (KEK) (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 situations, 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.
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 Pastoral epistles (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.