

## ***Pauline Authorship and the Pastoral Epistles: A Response to R. W. Wall's Response<sup>1</sup>***

**Stanley E. Porter**

*Roehampton Institute London  
Southlands College*

[p.133]

*Robert Wall and I clearly disagree regarding the priority of historical and theological criteria that determined the final canonical shape of the New Testament. Wall, while recognizing that my approach is historical, essentially brackets out such concerns and pursues theological issues. I, on the other hand, believe that theological issues then and now have played too large a role in the issue of canon, and consequently believe that historical criteria must take priority. This is necessary in order to ensure that theological conclusions are grounded in historical reality.*

*Key Words: pseudonymy, canon, pastoral epistles, Paul*

Wall and I clearly disagree regarding the priority of historical and theological criteria that determined the final canonical shape of the New Testament. Wall, while recognizing that my approach is historical, essentially brackets out such concerns and pursues theological issues: "Quite apart from historical circumstances, however, are theological considerations, especially when relating together the issues of authorship and canonicity" (p. 126). I, on the other hand, believe that theological issues then and now have played too large a role in the issue of canon, and consequently believe that historical criteria must take priority. This is necessary in order to ensure that theological

[p.134]

conclusions are grounded in historical reality (incidentally, the traditional approach of orthodox Christian theology).

In Wall's response, however, there appears to be some ambivalence regarding the relation of historical and theological criteria. First, he points out that Porter's "methodological interests are no different than those [Porter] attacks" (p. 126). Of course, if this is meant as a refutation of my approach, it has no argumentative force. What it does illustrate is that I am carrying out the discussion on the level on which I believe it needs initially to be carried out—the historical level

---

<sup>1</sup> I appreciate the opportunity extended by the editor to respond to Robert W. Wall's "Pauline Authorship and the Pastoral Epistles: A Response to S. E. Porter;" *BBR* 5 (1995) 125-28, which is a response to my "Pauline Authorship and the Pastoral Epistles: Implications for Canon;" *BBR* 5 (1995) 105-23. I have learned much from Rob's work on canonical criticism, as well as his response. My comments are meant in the spirit of furthering discussion of these important issues regarding canonical formation, especially regarding the place of the Pauline letters.

(as I illustrate further below). The fact that scholars engaging in the historical discussion disagree and do not always conclude similarly does not mean that the task is inherently flawed; it may mean that more historical work is necessary, rather than simply shifting categories and abandoning the task. Secondly, Wall apparently rejects my concern with "whether pseudepigraphal writings should be a part of our canonical witness" (p. 126) by labeling it a "meta-theological project" that "fails to convince" him. Instead, he asks the question: "why then should we settle a book's canonicity by the historical identity of the author?" (p. 126). Although I am not sure that I have understood the point here, I believe that we should utilize the historical identity of the author as a primary (though not entirely exclusive) factor in determining canonicity, because that is in fact how canonicity of the New Testament was originally settled, at least for those books where authorship is ascribed. The discussion of canonical formation and criticism is a historical concern, of which authors of books are a distinct part. But this is only one of a number of important historical issues.

The priority of the historical dimension can be established quite properly and simply when several factors are taken into consideration. The first is the clear recognition that the issue of canon is a historical issue. We are discussing events that transpired in the first several centuries of the Christian church and that resulted in what we now call canonical writings. When the transpiration of events in the past is being discussed, a historical process is being discussed, which requires historical criteria of evaluation. Other means of evaluation may also be available, but when the result of a series of events is under consideration, the emphasis is clearly historical. The second factor is that the process of canonical formation, that is, the recognition and acceptance of a text into the canon, is a series of events that occurred over time, and is therefore a complex historical event. No matter how important theology may have been and the role it may have played in canonical formation, the process of acceptance of the Pastoral Epistles—which Wall attempts to describe in terms of later acceptance of authoritative interpretation of Pauline teaching—is a historical one. It took place in the past, over the course of time, involving a number of

[p.135]

people. The third factor is that one cannot neglect that some process of composition was responsible for production of the documents that we now know as the Pastoral Epistles.<sup>2</sup> Although Wall speaks repeatedly of events that must have occurred in the early church, he chooses to label these as theological considerations.

---

<sup>2</sup> Wall believes that there is a lack of a clear textual witness to the Pastoral Epistles prior to the third century, and accuses me of being glib when I assert that their inclusion must have been early since they appear to have been well established by the third quarter of the second century (pp. 125-26 n.1). To the contrary, I am re-stating the evidence consonant with conclusions found in several who dispute Pauline authorship, including W. G. Kümmel, *Introduction to the New Testament* (trans. H. C. Kee; Nashville: Abingdon, 1975) 370; F. Young, *The Theology of the Pastoral Epistles* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994) 142-43; cf. even H. Koester, *History and Literature of Early Christianity. II. Introduction to the New Testament* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press; Berlin: de Gruyter, 1982) 298. Regarding the Gnostic failure to use the Pastoral Epistles, this was already plausibly explained by N. J. D. White, *The First and Second Epistles to Timothy and the Epistle to Titus* (Expositor's Greek Testament; repr. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1980) 4.75 (with summary of the evidence before Irenaeus on pp. 75-81) and J. N. D. Kelly, *A Commentary on the Pastoral Epistles* (repr. Grand Rapids: Baker, 1981 [1963]) 4.

In dealing with theological issues, after labelling my approach as "strictly historical" (p. 126),<sup>3</sup> Wall cites approvingly the quotation of B. S. Childs: "the heart of the controversy over authorship does not lie with the problem of historicity but with the nature of its referentiality."<sup>4</sup> Wall explicates this apparently to mean that 'Paul' refers not to 'Paul the man converted on the Damascus Road who went on to become the great missionary, church planter and theologian,' but to "an authoritative tradition" which thereby legitimizes its canonical status within a faith community, one proven by the community's experience with the documents. From this Wall concludes that historical questions are secondary.

This analysis raises several important questions, however. First, since Wall is describing a historical process by which the Pastoral Epistles were accepted into the canon (although in theological language rather than historical terms),<sup>5</sup> one must ask the question of whether this is in fact what happened and whether the early church thought of such documents in this way. We must all admit that we know far less about the early church and the formation of the canon

[p.136]

than we would like, but to my mind the evidence points clearly away from such a scenario. As I stated in my original article, having rejected the various attempts to find parallels in the Old Testament,<sup>6</sup> I believe that closer parallels to canonical formation especially regarding issues of authorship are to be found in the literature of the Greco-Roman world.<sup>7</sup> In the rise of literary scholarship during the Greco-Roman period, there was distinct concern regarding whether works that appeared under an author's name were legitimately written by that author. This concern seems to have become evident within a very short time after an author's death, since false attribution for the sake of bolstering sales, etc., seems to have occurred almost immediately after an author's death. Despite what many who endorse pseudepigraphic authorship claim, there does not seem to have been a convention among contemporary writers of treating on the same level works not written by the purported author (and that is what we must say when we use the word pseudepigraph), where such knowledge was available.<sup>8</sup> So far as our limited evidence in the early

---

<sup>3</sup> I would prefer to say that my theological considerations only arise after consideration of historical issues. Since I believe that the historical issues have not been properly attended to, I have concentrated upon them to this point in my work.

<sup>4</sup> B. S. Childs, *The New Testament as Canon: An Introduction* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1994 [1984]) 381.

<sup>5</sup> This is a common fault of much canonical criticism, including especially that of Childs. See, for example, J. A. Barr, *Holy Scripture: Canon, Authority, Criticism* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1983) appendix II; idem, "Childs' Introduction to the Old Testament as Scripture," *JSOT* 16 (1980) 15; and M. G. Brett, *Biblical Criticism in Crisis? The Impact of the Canonical Approach on Old Testament Studies* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991) 27.

<sup>6</sup> I argue against D. Meade (*Pseudonymity and Canon* [WUNT 39; Tübingen: Mohr-Siebeck, 1986]) on p. 116.

<sup>7</sup> See esp. L. R. Donelson, *Pseudepigraphy and Ethical Argument in the Pastoral Epistles* (HUT 22; Tübingen: Mohr-Siebeck, 1986) esp. 7-66, cited in my article especially at pp. 113-15; and K. J. Dover, *Lysias and the Corpus Lysiacum* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1968) esp. 1-27, who discusses the recognition by the ancients, almost from the time of his death on into the Roman period, of the possible pseudepigraphal speeches of Lysias included in his corpus and the various efforts to determine authenticity in the ancient and modern worlds.

<sup>8</sup> Besides examples from the Hellenistic world of dispute over authorship (e.g., Lysias's speeches, Platonic and Cynic letters, Horace's letters, Hippocratic texts, and works of Galen, Dionysius and Nuna), the standard examples in

church indicates, there is no known pseudepigraph that was knowingly accepted into the New Testament canon. Since Wall accepts the pseudepigraphy authorship of the Pastoral Epistles, although he has a different understanding of pseudepigraphy that does not include the concepts of forgery or deception (see below), we are forced once more to ask the question of what historical process allowed this to happen with the Pastoral Epistles. The fact that Paul's name was used indicates that, like other well-known ancient authors, acceptance depended upon convincing the community that the actual historical Paul wrote the letters under consideration. It appears to me that the distinction between personal and canonical referentiality is one created by modern scholars and has little bearing on what actually happened in the early church.<sup>9</sup> One is free to accept such a model, but one must be

[p.137]

careful in representing it as something that the ancients would have recognized.

Secondly, when discussing the process of how the Pastoral Epistles were legitimated, Wall must speak in historical terms. Thus one is forced to ask whether the historical evidence at hand supports such a scenario (see the point above). The supposed parallel historical situations that he cites in fact point in a different direction than he desires. Wall introduces the purported parallels of the anonymous Gospels and the anonymous Old Testament (I have already referred to my position on the Old Testament above). Taking up the example of the Gospels, he then recreates the scenario as involving the titles (which are by his account canonical and not authorial) being placed on the gospels "almost certainly ... *after*" (p. 127) they were accepted as inspired. Thus authorship confirmed their normative canonical status. The analogy is far from convincing, however. First, the Pastoral Epistles, like all of the Pauline letters, are not anonymous. They have clear attribution to Paul in the text itself (the claim looks authorial, besides being canonical), at the outset, not as some later appendage. To my mind, the titles of the Gospels may or may not be accurate, but in any case they are not part of the documents themselves, and consequently have no privileged status for interpretation of these books in their original contexts.<sup>10</sup> The situations between the Pastoral Epistles and the Gospels are quite different. Secondly, the historical processes as outlined by Wall are virtually inverted. For the Pastoral Epistles, attribution preceded acceptance; for the Gospels (for Wall), acceptance preceded attribution. In the light of this, the evidence seems rather to indicate that the Pastoral Epistles were probably accepted not on the basis of being part of a tradition but on the basis of attribution to Paul. The conclusions that Wall draws from his canonical analysis in terms of the legitimating of the Pauline pseudepigrapher's hermeneutics and the universal application of his situation must therefore be called into question as well.

---

the early church are "3 Corinthians" (Tertullian, *On Baptism* 17), the *Gospel of Peter* (Eusebius, *H.E.* 6.12.1-6), and Salvian's pamphlet (Salvian's Ninth Letter).

<sup>9</sup> If I were a cynic, I might be tempted to say that diverting attention away from personal referentiality has been used by some to dodge the hard historical questions.

<sup>10</sup> This is not to say that these titles have not been influential in developing the interpretative traditions of these books, and that these titles have not regulated interpretation by some subsequent faith communities. In this sense they may have some interpretative value, but this is different from the issue being considered here. I wish to thank Kent D. Clarke for his comments at this point.

With historical processes removed from us by hundreds of years and full of uncertainty, it is sometimes easy to overlook difficulties that we would not accept in another context. In Wall's discussion of my view of deception and pseudepigraphy, I am reminded of the recent controversy regarding the authenticity of many of Rembrandt's drawings and paintings. In the late 1980's the corpus of Rembrandt's work was re-evaluated, in the light of apparent discovery that a significant number of works that had been attributed to Rembrandt were not in

[p.138]

fact by the great Dutch master. Large exhibitions were held to show the differences between legitimate and forged drawings and paintings. As a result, many museums and private owners who at one time had thought that they had invaluable art collections now had interesting curiosities worth only a fraction of their former value. Let us examine the kinds of questions Wall raises regarding pseudonymous authorship of the Pastoral Epistles in terms of the subject of Rembrandt's paintings.<sup>11</sup> What if the forgers of Rembrandt's work did not intend to deceive the public, but were only following the artistic practices of their artistic community? Even though another collector of art, who is an outsider to these practices, might feel deceived, does this constitute the sort of moral deception that one should object to? Apparently so, and the art community seems to concur. This kind of argument is rooted not in a brittle sort of historicism but in an attempt to face up to hard questions regarding whether Rembrandt actually painted the works attributed to him. Are we to believe this about the body of Rembrandt's work: that a painting or drawing, first appreciated and appreciated again, then preserved and treasured as part of Rembrandt's oeuvre, would be excluded from his canon if the painter was "exposed" as a forger? Apparently so. Thus, if the analogy holds,<sup>12</sup> no matter how dynamic and practical one might believe that the process of canonical formation may have been, it appears that the church's recognition of the Pastoral Epistles as apostolic and divinely inspired due to their performance in a faith community was predicated upon their first being accepted and read as having been written by the historical Paul. If the church (and the scholars within it) is no longer willing to accept the Pastoral Epistles as written by Paul,<sup>13</sup> perhaps it should, rather than creating strained theological justifications for their continued canonical presence, eliminate them as forgeries that once deceived the church but will do so no more. So it was then. So it perhaps should be today.

---

© 1995 *Bulletin for Biblical Research*. Reproduced by permission.

Prepared for the Web in September 2006 by Robert I. Bradshaw.

<http://www.biblicalstudies.org.uk/>

---

<sup>11</sup> In what follows I use Wall's wording on p. 128, but apply it to the analogy of Rembrandt's paintings.

<sup>12</sup> All analogies have inconsistencies, otherwise they would not be analogies but the thing in itself. I believe that this analogy is particularly insightful, however, because it removes discussion from the emotive arena of theology.

<sup>13</sup> On the basis of my historical-critical investigation of the Pastoral Epistles, I remain unconvinced that there is at present a better explanation of their origins than Pauline authorship.