

Forged

Writing in the Name of God—
Why the Bible's Authors Are Not
Who We Think They Are

Bart D. Ehrman

 HarperCollins e-books

Contents

[Introduction: Facing the Truth](#)

- [1. A World of Deceptions and Forgeries](#)
- [2. Forgeries in the Name of Peter](#)
- [3. Forgeries in the Name of Paul](#)
- [4. Alternatives to Lies and Deceptions](#)
- [5. Forgeries in Conflicts with Jews and Pagans](#)
- [6. Forgeries in Conflicts with False Teachers](#)
- [7. False Attributions, Fabrications, and Falsifications: Phenomena Related to Forgery](#)
- [8. Forgeries, Lies, Deceptions, and the Writings of the New Testament](#)

[Notes](#)

INTRODUCTION: **FACING THE** **TRUTH**

ON A BRIGHT SUNNY DAY in June, when I was fourteen years old, my mom told me that she and my dad were going out to play a round of golf. I did a quick calculation in my head. It would take them twenty minutes to get to the country club and about four hours to play eighteen holes. After a bit of downtime, they would drive home. I had five hours.

I called up my friend Ron down the street to tell him my parents would be gone all afternoon, and that I had snuck a couple of cigars out of my dad's consistently full stash. Ron liked what I was thinking and said that he had clobbered a few cans of malt liquor and hidden them out in his bushes. The joys of paradise opened before us.

When Ron came over, we headed upstairs to my bedroom, where we threw open the windows, lit up the cigars, popped the cans of brew, and settled in for an afternoon of something less than intellectual discourse. But after about ten minutes, to my horror, we heard a car pull into the driveway, the back door open, and my mom yell up the stairs that they were home. The golf course was crowded, and they had decided not to wait forty minutes to tee off.

Ron and I immediately switched into emergency gear. We flushed the cigars and the beer down the toilet and hid the cans in the trash, then pulled out two cans of deodorant and started spraying the room to try to cover up the smoke (which was virtually billowing out the window). Ron snuck out the back door, and

I was left alone, in a cold sweat, certain that my life was soon to be over.

I went downstairs, and my dad asked me the fated question. “Bart, were you and Ron smoking upstairs?”

I did what any self-respecting fourteen-year-old would do: I lied to his face. “No, dad, not me!” (The smoke was still heavy in the air as I spoke.)

His face softened, almost to a smile, and then he said something that stayed with me for a long time—forty years, in fact. “Bart, I don’t mind if you sneak a smoke now and then. But don’t lie to me.”

Naturally I assured him, “I won’t, dad!”

A Later Commitment to Truth

FIVE YEARS LATER, I was a different human being. Everyone changes in those late teenage years, of course, but I’d say my change was more radical than most. Among other things, in the intervening years I had become a born-again Christian, graduated from high school, gone off to a fundamentalist Bible college, Moody Bible Institute, and had two years of serious training in biblical studies and theology under my belt. At Moody we weren’t allowed to smoke (“Your body is the temple of the Holy Spirit,” the New Testament teaches, and you don’t want to pollute God’s temple!), drink alcoholic beverages (“Be ye not drunk with wine,” says the Bible; it didn’t occur to me that it might be okay to be drunk with bourbon)—or, well, do lots of other things that most normal human beings at that age do: go to movies, dance, play cards. I didn’t actually agree with the “conduct code” of the school (there was also a dress code, and a hair code for men: no long hair or beards), but my view was that if I decided to go there, it meant playing by the rules. If I wanted other rules, I

could go somewhere else. But more than that, I went from being a fourteen-year-old sports-minded, better than average student with little clue about the world or my place in it and no particular commitment to telling the truth to a nineteen-year-old who was an extremely zealous, rigorous, pious (self-righteous), studious, committed evangelical Christian with firm notions about right and wrong and truth and error.

We were heavily committed to the truth at Moody Bible Institute. I would argue, even today, that there is no one on the planet more committed to truth than a serious and earnest evangelical Christian. And at Moody we were nothing if not serious and earnest. Truth to us was as important as life itself. We believed in the Truth, with a capital T. We vowed to tell the truth, we expected the truth, we sought the truth, we studied the truth, we preached the truth, we had faith in the truth. "Thy Word is truth," as Scripture says, and Jesus himself was "the way, the truth, and the life." No one could "come to the Father" except through him, the true "Word become flesh." Only unbelievers like Pontius Pilate were confused enough to ask, "What is truth?" As followers of Christ, we were in a different category altogether. As Jesus himself had said, "You shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free."

Along with our commitment to truth, we believed in objectivity. Objective truth was all there was. There was no such thing as a "subjective truth." Something was true or it was false. Personal feelings and opinions had nothing to do with it. Objectivity was real, it was possible, it was attainable, and we had access to it. It was through our objective knowledge of the truth that we knew God and knew what God (and Christ, and the Spirit, and everything else) was.

One of the ironies of modern religion is that the absolute commitment to truth in some forms of evangelical and fundamentalist Christianity and the concomitant view that truth is

objective and can be verified by any impartial observer have led many faithful souls to follow the truth wherever it leads—and where it leads is often *away* from evangelical or fundamentalist Christianity. So if, in theory, you can verify the “objective” truth of religion, and then it turns out that the religion being examined is verifiably *wrong*, where does that leave you? If you are an evangelical Christian, it leaves you in the wilderness outside the evangelical camp, but with an unrepentant view of truth. Objective truth, to paraphrase a not so Christian song, has been the ruin of many a poor boy, and God, I know, I’m one.

Before moving outside into the wilderness (which, as it turns out, is a lush paradise compared to the barren camp of fundamentalist Christianity), I was intensely interested in “objective proofs” of the faith: proof that Jesus was physically raised from the dead (empty tomb! eyewitnesses!), proof that God was active in the world (miracles!), proof that the Bible was the inerrant word of God, without mistake in any way. As a result, I was devoted to the field of study known as Christian apologetics.

The term “apologetics” comes from the Greek word *apologia*, which does not mean “apology” in the sense of saying you’re sorry for something; it means, instead, to make a “reasoned defense” of the faith. Christian apologetics is devoted to showing not only that faith in Christ is reasonable, but that the Christian message is demonstrably true, as can be seen by anyone willing to suspend disbelief and look objectively at the evidence.

The reason this commitment to evidence, objectivity, and truth has caused so many well-meaning evangelicals problems over the years is that they—at least some of them—really *are* confident that if something is true, then it necessarily comes from God, and that the worst thing you can do is to believe something that is false. The search for truth takes you where the evidence leads you, even if, at first, you don’t want to go there.

The more I studied the evangelical truth claims about Christianity, especially claims about the Bible, the more I realized that the “truth” was taking me somewhere I very much did not want to go. After I graduated from Moody and went to Wheaton College to complete my bachelor’s degree, I took Greek, so that I could read the New Testament in its original language. From there I went to Princeton Theological Seminary to study with one of the great scholars of the Greek New Testament, Bruce Metzger; I did a master’s thesis under his direction and then a Ph.D. During my years of graduate work I studied the text of the New Testament assiduously, intensely, minutely. I took semester-long graduate seminars on single books of the New Testament, studied in the original language. I wrote papers on difficult passages. I read everything I could get my hands on. I was passionate about my studies and the truth that I could find.

But it was not long before I started seeing that the “truth” about the Bible was not at all what I had once thought when I was a committed evangelical Christian at Moody Bible Institute. The more I saw that the New Testament (not to mention the Old Testament, where the problems are even *more* severe) was chock full of discrepancies, the more troubled I became. At Moody, I thought that all discrepancies could be objectively reconciled. But eventually I saw that in fact they could not be. I wrestled with these problems, I prayed about them, I studied them, I sought spiritual guidance, I read all I could. But as someone who believed that truth was objective and who was unwilling to believe what was false, I came to think that the Bible could not be what I thought it was. The Bible contained errors. And if it contained errors, it was not completely true. This was a problem for me, because I wanted to believe the truth, the divine truth, and I came to see that the Bible was not divine truth without remainder. The Bible was a very human book.

But the problems didn't stop there. Eventually I came to realize that the Bible not only contains untruths or accidental mistakes. It also contains what almost anyone today would call lies. That is what this book is about.

Truth in the History of Christianity

ONE COULD ARGUE THAT the obsession with truth in parts of evangelical Christianity today was matched by the commitment to truth in the earliest years of Christianity. This is one of the features of Christianity that made it distinctive among the religions of antiquity.

Most people today don't realize that ancient religions were almost never interested in "true beliefs." Pagan religions—by which I mean the polytheistic religions of the vast majority of people in the ancient world, who were neither Jewish nor Christian—did not have creeds that had to be recited, beliefs that had to be affirmed, or scriptures that had to be accepted as conveying divine truth. Truth was of interest to *philosophers*, but not to practitioners of religion (unless they were also interested in philosophy). As strange as this may seem to us today, ancient religions didn't require you to believe one thing or another. Religion was all about the proper practices: sacrifices to the gods, for example, and set prayers. Moreover, because religion was not particularly concerned with what you believed about the gods and because all of these religions allowed, even encouraged, the worship of many gods, there was very little sense that if one of the religions was right, the others were wrong. They could *all* be right! There were many gods and many ways to worship the gods, not a single path to the divine.

This view—the dominant view of antiquity—stands completely at odds with how most of us think about religion today, of

course. In our view, if Free-will Baptists are right, Roman Catholics are wrong; if Jews are right, Buddhists are wrong; if Muslims are right, Christians are wrong; and so on. But not in the ancient world. The worship of Zeus was no more “right” than the worship of Athena, Apollo, your city gods, or your family gods.

Another key difference between religions today and in antiquity is that the ancient polytheistic religions were not overly concerned with the afterlife. They were concerned about the present life, how to survive in a hard and capricious world, and how to live well: how to make sure the rain came and the crops grew; how to survive illness or combat; how to get enough to eat and drink; how to lead productive and fruitful lives; how to make the boy or girl next door fall madly in love with you.

Among the many things that made Christianity different from the other religions of the Roman Empire, with the partial exception of Judaism, is that Christians insisted that it did matter what you believed, that believing the correct things could make you “right” and believing the incorrect things could make you “wrong,” and that if you were wrong, you would be punished eternally in the fires of hell. Christianity, unlike the other religions, was exclusivistic. It insisted that it held the Truth, and that every other religion was in Error. Moreover, this truth involved claims about God (there is only one, for example, and he created the world), about Christ (he was both divine and human), about salvation (it comes only by faith in Christ), about eternal life (everyone will be blessed or tormented for eternity), and so on.¹

The Christian religion came to be firmly rooted in truth claims, which were eventually embedded in highly ritualized formulations, such as the Nicene Creed. As a result, Christians from the very beginning needed to appeal to authorities for what they believed. Do you believe that this view is true instead of that one? What is your authority for saying so? The ultimate authority was God, of course. But the majority of Christians came to think that

God did not speak the truth about what to believe directly to individuals. If he did, there would be enormous problems, as some could claim divine authority for what they taught and others could claim divine authority for the completely opposite teaching. Thus most Christians did not stress personal revelation to living individuals. Instead, they insisted that God had revealed his truth in earlier times through Christ to his apostles. The apostles at the beginning of the church were authorities who could be trusted. But when the apostles died out, where was one to go for an authority?

One could claim—and many in fact did—that the leaders of the churches who were appointed by the apostles could pass along their teachings, so that these leaders had authority equal to God himself. God sent Jesus, who chose his apostles, who instructed their successors, who passed along the sacred teachings to ordinary Christians.² Several problems with this view arose, however. For one thing, as churches multiplied, each of them could no longer claim to have as its leader someone who had known an apostle or even someone who knew someone who once knew an apostle. An even bigger problem was the fact that different leaders of churches, not to mention different Christians in their congregations, could claim they taught the apostolic truths. But these “truths” stood at odds with what other leaders and teachers said were the teachings of the apostles.

How was one to get around these problems? The obvious answer presented itself early on in the Christian movement. One could know what the apostles taught through the writings they left behind. These authoritative authors produced authoritative teachings. So the authoritative truth could be found in the apostolic writings.³

Even though this might sound like a perfect solution to the problem, the solution raised problems of its own. One involves a reality that early Christians may not have taken into account, but

that scholars today are keenly aware of. Most of the apostles were illiterate and could not in fact write (discussed further in Chapter 2). They could not have left an authoritative writing if their souls depended on it. Another problem is that writings started to appear that claimed to be written by apostles, but that contained all sorts of bizarre and contradictory views. Gospels were in circulation that claimed to be written by Jesus's disciples Peter, Philip, and Mary and his brothers Thomas and James. Letters appeared that were allegedly written by Paul (in addition to ones that he actually did write), Peter, and James. Apocalyptic writings describing the end of the world or the fate of souls in the afterlife appeared in the names of Jesus's followers John, Peter, and Paul. Some writings emerged that claimed to be written by Jesus himself.

In many instances, the authors of these writings could not actually have been who they claimed to be, as even the early Christians realized. The views found in these writings were often deemed "heretical" (i.e., they conveyed false teachings), they were at odds with one another, and they contradicted the teachings that had become standard within the church. But why would authors claim to be people they weren't? Why would an author claim to be an apostle when he wasn't? Why would an unknown figure write a book falsely calling himself Peter, Paul, James, Thomas, Philip, or even Jesus?

The answer should seem fairly obvious. If your name was Jehoshaphat, and no one (other than, say, your parents and siblings) had any idea who you were, and you wanted to write an authoritative Gospel about the life and teachings of Jesus, an authoritative letter describing what Christians should believe or how they should live, or an inspired apocalypse describing in detail the fate of souls after death, you could not very well sign your own name to the book. No one would take the Gospel of Jehoshaphat seriously. If you wanted someone to read it, you called

yourself Peter. Or Thomas. Or James. In other words, you lied about who you really were.

It is often said—even by scholars who should know better—that this kind of “pseudonymous” (i.e., falsely named) writing in the ancient world was not thought to be lying and was not meant to be deceitful. Part of what I’ll be showing in this book is that this view is flat-out wrong (see Chapter 4). Ancient authors who talked about this practice of writing a book in someone else’s name said that it was both lying and deceitful and that it was not an acceptable practice.

Many early Christian writings are “pseudonymous,” going under a “false name.” The more common word for this kind of writing is “forgery” (I give more precise definitions of these terms in Chapter 1). In the ancient world forgery was a bit different from today in that it was not, technically speaking, against the law. But even though it was not an illegal activity, it was a deceitful one that involved conscious lying, as the ancients themselves said.

The crucial question is this: Is it possible that any of the early Christian forgeries made it into the New Testament? That some of the books of the New Testament were not written by the apostles whose names are attached to them? That some of Paul’s letters were not actually written by Paul, but by someone claiming to be Paul? That Peter’s letters were not written by Peter? That James and Jude did not write the books that bear their names? Or—a somewhat different case, as we will see—that the Gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John were not actually written by Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John?

Scholars for over a hundred years have realized that in fact this is the case. The authors of some of the books of the New Testament were not who they claimed to be or who they have been supposed to be. In some instances that is because an anonymous writing, in which an author did not indicate who he was, was later named after someone who did not in fact write it.

Matthew probably did not write Matthew, for example, or John, John (see Chapter 7); on the other hand, neither book actually claims to be written by a person named Matthew or John. In other instances it is because an author lied about who he was, claiming to be someone he was not. As I have already intimated, some scholars have long been reluctant, and even opposed, to calling this authorial activity lying and to call the literary products that resulted forgeries. As I will explain at length in the following chapters, most of the scholars who have actually read what ancient authors say about the phenomenon have no such hesitancy.

It is true that the ancient authors who lied about their identity may well have felt they had a clear conscience, that what they did was completely justified, that they were ultimately in the right. They may have thought and believed, at least in their own minds, that they had very good reasons for doing what they did. But as we will see in later chapters, by ancient standards these authors engaged in fraudulent activities, and the books they produced were forgeries.

Let me conclude this introduction simply by saying that I have spent the past five years studying forgery in the ancient Greek and Roman worlds, especially but not exclusively within Christianity. My goal all along has been to write a detailed scholarly monograph that deals with the matter at length. The book you're reading now is *not* that scholarly monograph. What I try to do in the present book is to discuss the issue at a layperson's level, pointing out the really interesting aspects of the problem by highlighting the results of my own research and showing what scholars have long said about the writings of the New Testament and pseudonymous Christian writings from outside the New Testament. The scholarly monograph to come will be much more thoroughly documented and technically argued. The present book, in other words, is not intended for my fellow scholars, who, if they read this one, will be doing so simply out of curiosity. It is,

instead, intended for you, the general reader, who on some level is, like me, interested in the truth.