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## Book Review:

*Forgery and Counterforgery: The Use  
of Literary Deceit in Early Christian  
Polemics*

**Bart D. Ehrman**

Robert S. Boylan

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## BOOK REVIEW

*Robert Boylan*

*Review of Bart D. Ehrman. Forgery and Counterforgery: The Use of Literary Deceit in Early Christian Polemics. New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012). x + 628 pp, including bibliography and index. \$39.95. Hardback.*

Bart Ehrman's works have long been known to Latter-day Saint scholars, including his studies that reveal presumably theologically driven corruptions to various biblical passages;<sup>1</sup> his analysis of writings that some early Christian communities privileged as authoritative, though they never became part of the biblical canon; as well as the diverse nature of early Christianity itself.<sup>2</sup> *Forgery and Counterforgery* may well be another volume by Dr. Ehrman that will be referenced by both LDS and non-LDS interested in the question of alleged pseudepigraphic texts in the New Testament and early Christian literature.

Ehrman focuses upon both canonical and noncanonical works that he postulates are in various ways fraudulent. In his discussion of what appear to be forged noncanonical works in early Christianity, his investigation centers largely on texts that were influential in the development of both Christian history and

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1. Bart D. Ehrman, *The Orthodox Corruption of Scripture: The Effect of Early Christological Controversies on the Text of the New Testament* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993).

2. Ehrman, *Lost Scriptures: Books That Did Not Make It into the New Testament* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), and see also his *Lost Christianities: The Battles for Scriptures and the Faiths We Never Knew* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005).

theology, and not those of merely trivial importance. One such document is *The Apostolic Constitutions*, a work dealing with the matter of church order, allegedly written by the apostles of Jesus (hence its name), though in reality, the document was produced by an author “living three hundred years after they had been laid to rest in their respective tombs” (p. 14). Notwithstanding the spurious nature of this text, we read of how the Trullan Council in AD 692, a council convened to dogmatically define the topic of church discipline, “accepted as fully authoritative the eighty-five Apostolic Canons, which appear in 8.47 of the book” (p. 19).

Ehrman discusses the theory that the Epistle of James represents a forged New Testament text (see pp. 283–97), concluding that authorship of the Epistle was (1) falsely attributed to James, the brother of Jesus, to bolster its credibility and it (2) was used as the written medium through which “Paulinism,” that is, the abuse of Paul’s soteriology in Romans and Galatians (two epistles Ehrman accepts as genuinely Pauline) could be counteracted. One piece of evidence used to arrive at this conclusion is that James appears to be a pseudepigraphic text because this epistle seems dependent upon Paul’s letters specifically on the topic of justification and its relationship to the nature of “works” and “works of the law.” Ehrman notes the parallels in the Greek between James 2:24, Galatians 2:16 and Romans 3:28 (pp. 292–93):

- James 2:24, which reads: “We see that a man is justified by works, and not by faith alone.” (This is my translation, since Ehrman does not provide a translation of ὁρᾶτε ὅτι ἐξ ἔργων δικαιούται ἄνθρωπος καὶ οὐκ ἐκ πίστεως μόνον.)
- Galatians 2:16, which reads: “Knowing a man is not justified by works of the law but through faith in Jesus Christ” (again my translation of εἰδότες ὅτι οὐ δικαιούται ἄνθρωπος ἐξ ἔργων νόμου ἐὰν μὴ διὰ πίστεως Ἰησοῦ Χριστοῦ).

- Romans 3:28, which reads “We reckon that a man is justified by faith apart from works of the Law” (again my translation of λογίζομεθα γὰρ δικαιοῦσθαι πίστει ἄνθρωπον χωρὶς ἔργων νόμου).

The parallels between these three texts, Ehrman acknowledges, have been noted for many decades, though they still remain striking today: “all of them contain a verb of knowing, an indefinite *person*, the verb *justified* in the passive voice, and the antithetical contrast of *works* and *faith*. Nowhere else in all of early Christian literature are these elements combined. Yet the two authors take what appear to be—at least on the surface—opposite sides of the arguments.” In addition, these passages “are far too close to have been accidentally created in such similar yet contrary fashion” (p. 292). Ehrman recognizes that there are also important terminological differences between James and Paul with respect to the topic of “works”: “For James, ‘works’ are not the demands of the Law [of Moses] placed on Jews. Instead, they are good deeds. One needs to do good deeds in order to be justified . . . For Paul, too, there is no such thing as (‘true’) faith without obedience (Rom. 1:5) or active love (Gal. 5:6)” (p. 294).

While many will, of course, disagree that the letter attributed to James is pseudepigraphic, as well as reject the evidences used to arrive to such a conclusion, Ehrman’s comments about the relationship between James’s and Paul’s epistles on justification, works, and “works of Law” will, I believe, be welcomed by Latter-day Saints, since there are now a growing number of Latter-day Saint scholars who welcome N. T. Wright’s version of what is being called the New Perspective on Paul (NPP). Latter-day Saint scholars tend to accept Wright’s scholarly position on the apostle Paul. He holds a “covenantal nomism” which is that Paul taught that one becomes a disciple of Jesus Christ by entering into a New Covenant with God through grace, whose sign is faith rather than circumcision and dietary

restrictions. One maintains this covenantal relationship with God through an active faith by keeping the commandments and thereby undergoing sanctification ending with justification at the final judgment. Wright's position on this issue is now being seen by LDS scholars as an accurate account of both Pauline soteriology and one that fits rather comfortably with an informed Latter-day Saint soteriology—that is, one drawn from the Book of Mormon.

Other canonical works that are treated in depth by Ehrman include 2 Thessalonians (pp. 156–71) and the Pastoral Epistles (pp. 192–222). Ehrman argues that these particular texts were fabricated to explain concerns about the delay of the final coming of Christ and also to forward a particular ecclesiology in the fledgling church. While not everyone will reach the same conclusions as Ehrman does in *Forgery and Counterforgery*, there is no question that this is one of the best scholarly texts on these important and contentious issues. His grasp of the relevant topics, ranging from the intellectual history of the debate about pseudepigraphic writings in antiquity, the cultural and historical context of the texts in question, as well as their influence on the development of Christianity, in addition to his interactions with past and present critics of his hypotheses, make this scholarly work the equal to his masterful *The Orthodox Corruption of Scripture*. For informed Latter-day Saints interested in deepening their understanding of these issues within New Testament studies, this volume is a must-read.

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