

A THEOLOGICAL JUSTIFICATION FOR THE CANONICAL
STATUS OF LITERARY FORGERIES: JACOB'S DECEIT
(GENESIS 27) AND PETR POKORNÝ'S *SOLA GRATIA*
ARGUMENT

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More than 25 years ago, Petr Pokorný developed an innovative and promising theological vindication of canonical forgery.¹ His vindication is very attractive because Pokorný can refer to a key biblical passage on deception for scriptural support, has the teaching of the reformers on justification by faith alone on his side, and holds a position that differs favorably from the unhistorical understanding of revelation that is characteristic of the Muslim reading of the Koran.

Pokorný first published his thoughts on the justification of the canonicity of NT pseudepigraphy in 1984 in a German article entitled “The Theological Problem of New Testament Pseudepigraphy.”² Since then, he has repeated his view in his 1987 commentary on Colossians,³ his 1992 commentary on Ephesians,⁴ in a major contribution on pseudonymity to the *Theologische Realenzyklopädie*, the leading theological encyclopedia in German, in 1997,⁵ and most recently in an excursus on “The Problem of Pseudepigraphy” in his German *Introduction to the New Testament* in 2007.⁶

To my knowledge, Pokorný's theological argument concerning the canonicity of early Christian pseudepigrapha has not attracted much scholarly attention, either in German-speaking theology or in English-speaking scholarship. Therefore, in this paper I am going to (1) summarize Pokorný's decidedly theological approach; (2) refer to the few and relatively short comments others have made with regard to it; and finally (3) present my own evaluation of Pokorný's key arguments.

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² “Das theologische Problem der neutestamentlichen Pseudepigraphie,” *EvT* 44 (1984) 496; repr. in *Bibelauslegung als Theologie* (idem and J. B. Souček; WUNT 100; Tübingen: Mohr, 1997), 131.

³ *Der Brief des Paulus an die Kolosser* (THKNT X/1; 2d ed.; Berlin: Evangelische Verlagsanstalt, 1990) 11–14, 168–69 (ET S. S. Schatzmann, *Colossians: A Commentary* [Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1999]).

⁴ *Der Brief des Paulus an die Epheser* (THKNT X/2; Berlin: Evangelische Verlagsanstalt, 1992) 41–42.

⁵ “Pseudepigraphie I. Altes und Neues Testament,” *TRE* 27 (1997) 654.

⁶ *Einleitung in das Neue Testament: Seine Literatur und Theologie im Überblick* (Uni-Taschenbücher 2798; Tübingen: Mohr, 2007) 619–23.

canonical forgeries and its acceptance into the canon. Rather, in both cases one has to distinguish between the *actor* and his deed or the *result of his deed*.

That means that, in the strict sense, *there is nothing in the production of a pseudepigraphical book that corresponds to the specific blessing that pseudo-Esau received from God before he was born* (Gen 25:23). Neither Tertullian's report about the unmasking of the forger of the *Acts of Paul* nor any other source text about ancient pseudepigraphy I know contains an element that is comparable to God's unconditional election of Jacob the deceiver.

Only in a more general way it could be said that, just as God's promise that Jacob would "be stronger" than his brother Esau (Gen 25:23) remains valid in spite of Jacob's moral failure (Gen 27:33), so someone like the forger of the *Acts of Paul* who was unmasked in the second century did not because of his deceit become unworthy of God's unlimited grace. That is to say, as it were, that God hates forgery but loves the forger.

(3) *Status of the pseudepigraphical text.* If, accordingly, Jacob, the pseudo-Esau of Genesis 27, corresponds to an anonymous pseudo-Paul of the early Christian centuries there is nothing in Genesis 27 that corresponds to a pseudepigraphical book. Therefore, strictly speaking, Genesis 27 has nothing to contribute to the justification of a literary forgery, let alone to the justification of the canonical status of a literary forgery. A close comparison of the Jacob narrative and (ancient) pseudepigraphy reveals the sobering fact that it cannot carry the weight of Pokorný's theological *sola gratia* vindication of canonical pseudepigraphy.

IV. CONCLUSION

The innovative and promising *sola gratia* defense of NT pseudepigraphy that Pokorný has developed over the past 25 years rests to a very large extent on his exegesis and application of the story about Jacob's deception of his father Isaac in Genesis 27. So far, Pokorný's theological argument in favor of full canonical status for pseudo-Pauline literary forgeries has been dismissed by some and approved by others but has not yet been analyzed and evaluated in detail.

As a closer look at the Genesis narrative concerning Jacob's acquisition of the blessing of the firstborn demonstrates, Pokorný cannot be accused of having diminished the moral offense that was involved in Jacob's dubious procedure. However, the analogy he has drawn between the Jacob narrative in Genesis 27 and the production and canonical reception of a pseudo-Pauline letter is not conclusive. On the one hand, nothing in the distribution of a literary forgery corresponds to God's election and promise which Jacob had received before he was born (Gen 25:23). On the other hand, nothing in Genesis 27 forms a counterpart to the distribution of a pseudepigraphical letter under the name of the apostle Paul.

By equating the deceiver Jacob and deceptive pseudepigrapha, the conclusions which have been drawn from Genesis 27 in favor of canonical forgery are not in keeping with the inner logic of the analogy which is based on a distinction between the actor and his deed. From the exegetically sound observation that God does not withdraw his grace from the deceiver Jacob it can

logically be deduced that the producer of a literary forgery still has access to God's grace. However, the message of Genesis 27 that God does not recall his unconditional election even if the elect person tries to safeguard his election by deceptive means does not imply that the pseudepigraphical texts a forger has produced should be accorded canonical status. Such an application of the Jacob narrative has no sufficient exegetical basis in the biblical text of Genesis 27 and goes far beyond its actual message.

There may be other more convincing theological arguments in favor of canonical pseudepigraphy. The defense of canonical pseudepigraphy developed by Pokorný, however, cannot be regarded as successful.