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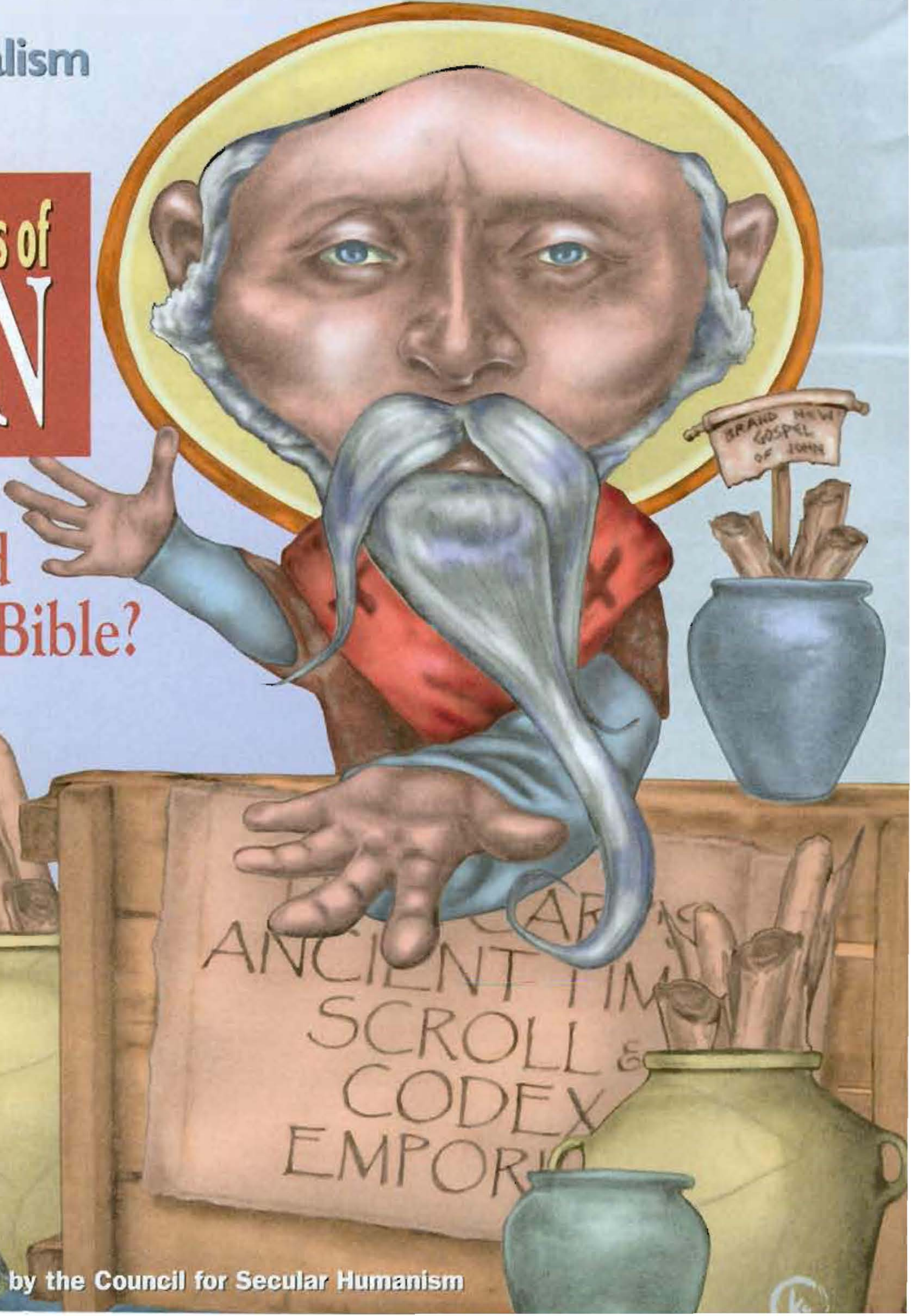

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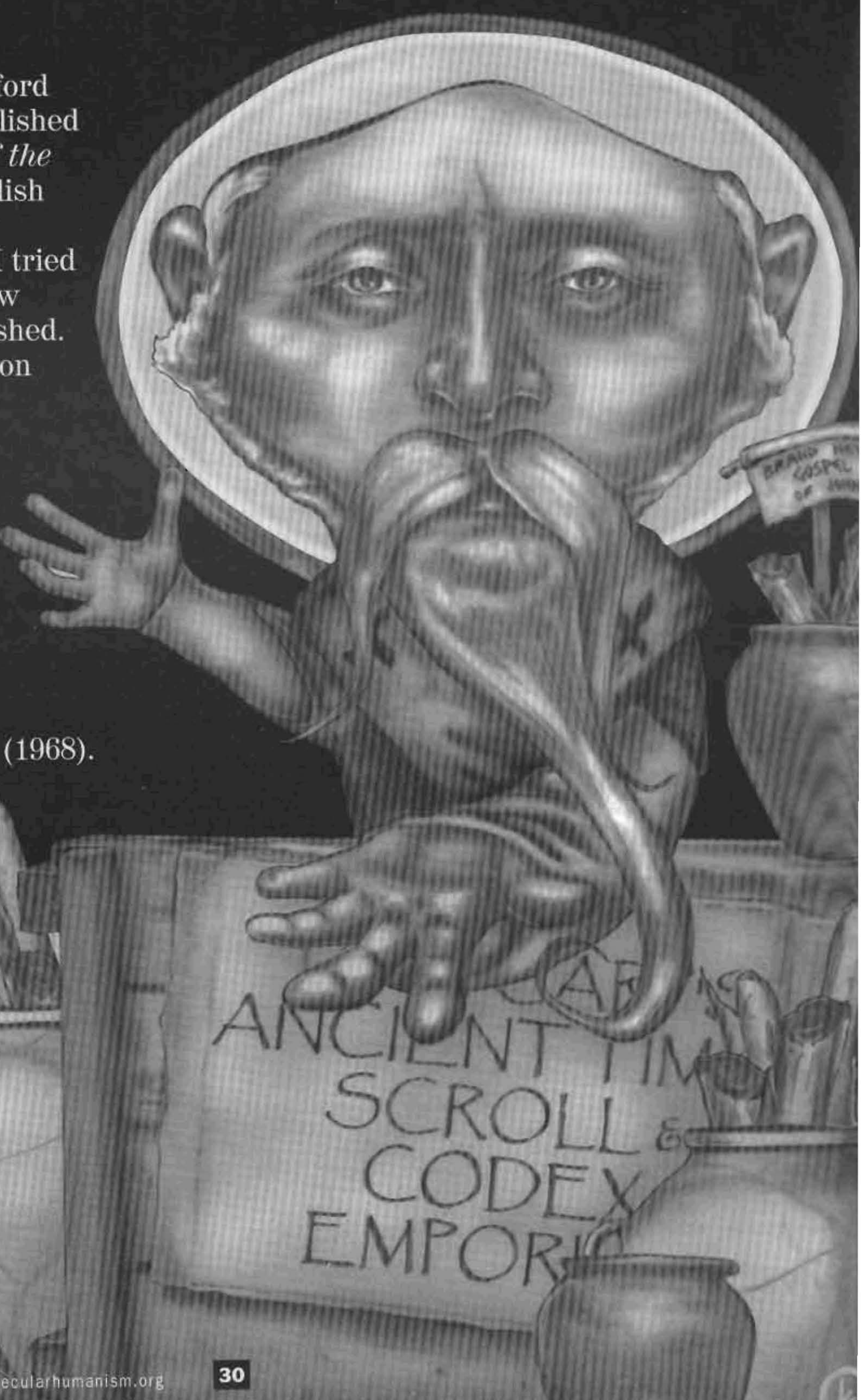
Who Published the New Testament?

David Trobisch

In the fall of 2000, Oxford University Press published *The First Edition of the New Testament,* the English version of my German postdoctoral thesis. In it, I tried to determine when the New Testament was first published. I concentrated my efforts on studying the manuscript tradition. The result was surprising and differed considerably from the conclusions drawn in the classic studies by Alfred Loisy (1891), Theodor Zahn (1888–1892), Adolf von Harnack (1914), and Hans von Campenhausen (1968).



The existing early specimens of the New Testament feature a closed selection of twenty-seven writings arranged in the same sequence and displaying uniform titles with very few variants. They were produced in the form of bound manuscripts and employ a unique system to mark sacred terms, the so-called *nomina sacra*. These features indicate that the New Testament is a carefully edited publication, rather than the product of a gradual process that lasted for centuries. Instead, it was edited and published by specific people at a very specific time and place. Because its first documented readers are the church fathers Irenaeus, Tertullian, Clement of Alexandria, Origen, and Tatian—all of whom wrote at the end of the second and the beginning of the third centuries—the New Testament must have been published before 180 C.E.

In the ten years since the first publication of my book in German, numerous reviews have been written, and many colleagues have tested my theory. They either liked it or they hated it, but to my knowledge no one has been able to point out a serious flaw in either the evidence evaluated or the conclusions drawn. So, I will assume that the theory has withstood the test of time and take the next step of interpreting the New Testament as a publication of the second century.

I will also assume that the New Testament contains forgeries, an assumption shared by the majority of historical scholars. A forgery is an authoritative document that lies about its true authorship. Books of the New Testament widely regarded as forgeries include 1 Timothy, 2 Timothy, Titus, and 2 Peter. These letters appear to have been written by the apostles Paul and Peter, although they were actually authored by someone else. Whoever designed them intended to deceive readers about their true authorship.

If you cannot find it in your heart to look at the New Testament as a publication of the second century that contains forgeries, then the following deliberations are not for you. But, if you are willing to entertain the idea that the New Testament, like any other book, was published by a person or a group of people, then you might be interested in asking the question: *Who* published the first edition of the New Testament?

The Case for Forgery

To demonstrate the typical characteristics of published forgeries, consider two examples: the letters of Ignatius of Antioch (ca. 35–107) and the ninth-century *Pseudo-Isidorian Decretals*, a once-influential collection of authoritative documents.

The letters of Ignatius have come to us in several editions. The most successful edition, as measured by the number of extant manuscripts, contains thirteen letters. Contemporary scholarship, however, has reached a consensus that six letters are forgeries, while the other seven letters represent expanded versions of the original letters. The six spurious letters were written by the same person who added to the original ones.

In recent years, this inventive person has been identified through the work of Dieter Hagedorn as a certain Julian, a fourth-century Arian Christian and the author of a commentary on the book of Job. He is also the compiler of a much larger forgery, the *Apostolic Constitutions*. In this work, Clement, the legendary third successor to Peter as bishop of Rome, records what the apostles said. They speak in first person. Julian most likely worked in Syria and published between 350 and 380 C.E.

The *Pseudo-Isidorian Decretals* contain more than ten thousand excerpts, combining authentic documents with spurious material. They were first introduced in the trials against Catholic clerics in northeastern France during the ninth century. The function of this collection is to prove that bishops are under the jurisdiction of the pope and do not have to answer to provincial synods or secular authorities. In addition to canons issued by synods and councils since Nicea, the *Pseudo-Isidorian Decretals* contain papal letters, so-called decretals. They begin with letters attributed to Clement of Rome and continue on up through Gregory II, an account of whose council of 721 forms the last piece of the collection. The compiler introduces himself as Isidor Mercator, suggesting to naïve readers that the author is Isidor of Sevilla, the famous medieval bishop and influential scholar. The true author has yet to be identified.

I chose these two examples to show that it is sometimes possible to describe the place, time, and historical circumstances of published collections that contain forgeries. Now, to determine the provenance and authorship of the *Four-Gospel-Book* (the New Testament), careful study shows the following three areas to be especially promising in their potential to yield relevant information: (1) editorial notes to the readers, (2) the first documented users of the collection, and (3) geographical information contained in the forgeries.

Editorial notes to readers. Once scholarly investigators made the connection between Julian's commentary on Job and the *Apostolic Constitutions* and interpolated letters of Ignatius, it was possible to describe the theological position of the author and the interest of the editor.

A similar structure is found in the New Testament. The Gospel of John ends with the following note to readers: "The disciple whom Jesus loved . . . was the one who had reclined next to Jesus at the supper and had said, 'Lord, who is it that is going to betray you?' . . . This is the disciple who is testifying to these things and has written them, and we know that his testimony is true" (John 21:20–24 NRSV).

In this sentence, the editors disclose their source to the reader. This is not unusual in the New Testament. Comparable editorial notes can be found in the introductions to Luke, Acts, and Revelation. A modern rendition might sound like: "We used a manuscript written by the favorite disciple of Jesus, the one who was next to him at the Last Supper. We trust that his account of the events is authentic." A note to the reader always has an unwritten subtext: "There are other books around that tell the story differently, but we think *we* got it right." Readers of the canonical collection will have read or at

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least noticed three Gospels before they encounter John's Gospel. And they may have questions about why some of the stories are told quite differently in John. The editorial note at the end of John invites them to read the fourth Gospel as an authoritative commentary on the first three, a commentary written from the perspective of an eyewitness who tells the readers what really happened.

The last sentence of John, however, goes one step further: "But there are also many other things that Jesus did; if every one of them were written down, I suppose that the world itself could not contain the books that would be written" (John 21:25 NRSV). The authorial voice shifts from the first-person plural "we know" to first-person singular "I suppose." And this sentence does not refer to only one author and one manuscript; instead, it talks about "books" in the plural. The reader of John will have just finished reading the fourth account of "things that Jesus did." A modern rendition of this sentence may sound like: "If everything Jesus did was written down, I suppose that the world could not contain all the books that would have to be published. Four books are plenty!" The last sentence of John does not refer only to the Gospel according to John; it refers to the Gospel collection as a whole. It may have been written by the publisher of the *Four-Gospel-Book*.

If this reading is correct, we can draw several conclusions about the publisher:

1. He is well known. Using the first person singular indicates that the *Four-Gospel-Book* was not published anonymously and that the first readers were aware of the name of the publisher. If this was a famous person of the time, we have hope that we would recognize his name even today.
2. Whoever wrote this sentence used his authority to add John to the canon as a witness to the synoptic gospels.
3. One of the major disagreements between the fourth Gospel and the first three is the date of Jesus's death. Whereas the synoptic gospels have Jesus celebrate the Passover meal with his disciples the evening before he dies, John has Jesus die on the afternoon before Passover. In the second century, Asia Minor followed the Johannine tradition, commemorating Jesus's death on the day before Passover no matter what day of the week this happened to be. Rome, on the other hand, always commemorated Jesus's death on a Friday. This led to differences in the fasting observances and gave rise to a well-documented conflict of the second century, the so-called Easter Controversy. By publishing John together with the synoptics, the publisher indicates that he is aware of the discrepancy but tolerates both positions.

The first documented users. The *Pseudo-Isidorian Decretals* surfaced first in northeastern France during the second half of the ninth century. They provided critical evidence in trials concerning clerics by insisting that bishops had to answer only to the pope. Most forgeries originate close to the location where they are first used; therefore, the first documented users provide important clues concerning the date, location, and intent of a forgery.

Like no other book of the New Testament, the book of Acts offers a view into the whole collection. Being the second volume of Luke's work, it provides a link to the *Four-Gospel-Book*. In its first half, Acts introduces the authors of the General Letters: Peter, John, James, and Jude; in the second half, it introduces Paul, the author of the other New Testament letter collection. In addition, Acts provides information that makes it possible to identify Luke, the author of the Gospel, as the doctor who travels with Paul and to identify Mark as someone close to Peter *and* Paul. This "canon consciousness" suggests that the book of Acts was composed at a later date than is typically thought; this theory is supported by the first attestation of the book around 180 C.E. The first writer to quote from and make references to Acts is Irenaeus, who uses Acts extensively to refute the heretical theologian Marcion (ca. 110–160) in the third book of his *Against Heresies*.

Marcionite Christianity followed the lead of Paul and opposed the Jerusalem-based leadership of James and his associates. The Marcionite Bible contained only one Gospel, which was close to (but not identical with) the canonical Gospel according to Luke; in addition to the Gospel, it contained ten letters of Paul, but Hebrews and the Pastorals were not included. Irenaeus uses Acts to argue that anyone who accepts the authority of the Gospel according to Luke would also have to accept the authority of the second volume, the book of Acts.

Forgeries usually originate in close proximity to their first users. Therefore, it is very likely that the book of Acts, in the form we read it today, was produced to assist the emerging Catholic Church in its struggle against Marcionite Christianity. This is also true for the New Testament as a whole. Whoever selected the eight authors whose writings are collected in the New Testament tried to give as much representation to Paul as he did to the Jerusalem leadership. The letters of Paul are balanced by a collection of letters from Peter, John, and Jesus's brothers James and Jude. The gospel of Paul (Luke) is offset by the Gospels of Matthew and John. Mark, who is portrayed as being close to both Peter (1 Peter 5:13) and Paul (Col. 4:10), serves as a role model to the readers, encouraging them not to make a choice between Peter and Paul.

Geographical information in the forgeries. The vast majority of New Testament interpreters assume that 1 Timothy, 2 Timothy, Titus, and 2 Peter are forgeries. 1 Timothy and 2 Timothy are both written to Ephesus; 2 Peter presents itself as the second letter written to the same addressees of 1 Peter ("This is now, beloved, the second letter I am writing to you" [2 Peter 3:1]). These addressees live all over Asia Minor ("To the exiles of the Dispersion in Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia, and Bithynia" [1 Peter 1:1]). 1 Timothy is written from an undisclosed location, but 2 Timothy (cf. 2 Tim 1:17) and 2 Peter (implied from 1 Peter 5:13: "Your sister church in Babylon") are both written from Rome. And the mention of Crete in Titus (1:5) suggests to the reader of the New Testament a link to the book of Acts, in which Paul travels to Rome by way of Crete (Acts 27).

These four forgeries display an interest in Rome and Asia Minor. Letter collections published in antiquity usually drew from the archive of the addressee. Considering that 2 Timothy is presented as the testament of Paul and 2 Peter as the testament of Peter—both having been written in Rome and sent to Asia Minor—one should conclude that the authority of these writings would depend heavily on what the church leadership in Asia had to say about their authenticity. It seems more likely that the forgeries originated in Asia Minor than in Rome.

The Publisher of the New Testament

If one considers the note to the readers of the Gospel collection (John 21:25), the canonical awareness of Acts, and the prominence of Asia Minor and Rome in the New Testament's forged letters, some characteristics of the ideal publisher of the New Testament in the middle of the second century become clear:

1. He was a well-known person of the time.
2. He held authority among Catholic Christians in Rome and Asia Minor.
3. He was a person who would add credibility to the Gospel of John and to the other Johannine writings of the New Testament (1, 2, 3 John and Revelation).
4. He displayed a tolerant attitude toward the Easter Controversy.
5. He opposed Marcionite Christianity.
6. He was a person with experience in publishing.

Polycarp of Smyrna fulfills all these criteria. He was a bishop earlier than 110 C.E., when Ignatius addressed a letter to him, and he died sometime between 155 and 167 C.E. He certainly was a prominent person of the time (1) and carried authority with Catholic Christians in Asia Minor (2). He is described as a disciple of John by Irenaeus, and his esteemed position would have added credibility to the publication of Johannine material (3). Polycarp of Smyrna was chosen by the congregations in Asia Minor to represent them in the Easter Controversy. He was sent to Rome to negotiate with his counterpart, Bishop Anicetus. They agreed to disagree. This sequence of events matches the position described in the covering note to the *Four-Gospel-Book* (John 21:25) (4). Furthermore, Polycarp is reported by Irenaeus to have opposed Marcion to his face, calling him the firstborn of Satan (5). Last but not least, Polycarp had experience in publishing. He assembled and distributed the first edition of the Letters of Ignatius.

The time frame is set by Anicetus, who became bishop in 156–157 C.E., and by the latest possible date for Polycarp's martyrdom, 168 C.E.

I will conclude these considerations with a bold statement: *The New Testament was published by Polycarp of Smyrna between 156 and 168 C.E.*

The Corroborating Evidence

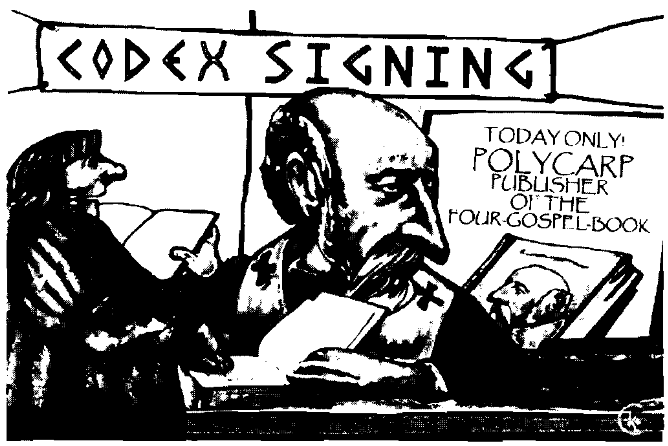
Goethe. In 1774, a pamphlet was published in Germany under the title *Goetter, Helden und Wieland: Eine Farce* (*Gods, Heroes and Wieland: A Farce*). In this booklet, the author poked fun at a highly recognized poet of the time, Christoph Martin Wieland. Although the book was published anonymously, the author left a clue on the title page that made it possible to identify him. The title page was typeset so the name of the true author, W. Goethe, was contained in the first letter or letters of every line.

GOETter

HElden und

Wieland

The extra in 2 Timothy 4:9-20. Like Goethe's title page, 2 Timothy 4:9–20 may contain the names of the publisher and forger of this letter. The passage contains thirteen names: Demas, Crescens, Titus, Luke, Mark, Tychicus, Carpus, Alexander, Prisca, Aquila, Onesiphorus, Erastus, and Trophimus. Of these, all but two are mentioned elsewhere in the New Testament. Forgeries often repeat information from genuine material to create credibility; interpreters are well advised to concentrate on the additional material, the "extra." In this case, the two names, Carpus and Crescens, should command our interest. Carpus could easily be interpreted as referring to Bishop Polycarp. But who is Crescens?



A letter of Polycarp to the Philippians has survived. It served as the introduction to Polycarp's edition of the Letters of Ignatius. In this letter, he thanks his secretary and gives his name: "These things I have written to you with the help of Crescens. I have recommended him to you and I recommend him to you again. For he has acted blamelessly among us, and I believe also among you." Although this argument cannot carry the burden of proof, it is a nice example of corroborating evidence. FI

Further Reading

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