

Sermon for the Fifth Sunday after the Epiphany, February 4, 2018

Solemn Evensong

By the Reverend Stephen Gerth

Year 2: Isaiah 57:14–21; 2 Timothy 2:14–21; Ephesians 2:11–22

This afternoon when I turned my attention to the late Raymond Brown's *An Introduction to the New Testament* to read about the letter we know as "The Second Letter of Paul to Timothy," knowing that I would have to confront the issue of New Testament authorship.¹ So that's what this homily is about. There are two technical words that comes up in this discussion, I will mention them only once: pseudepigraphy (false writing) and pseudonymity ("false name").² Now, I'm going to try to summarize what we know about who wrote what.

The easiest author to name is Paul, whom scholars widely agree was the author of the Letter to the Romans, the First Letter to the Corinthians, what we know as the Second Letter to the Corinthians, which seems to be two different letters of Paul that were at some early point put together, the Letter to the Philippians, the Letter to Philemon, the Letter to the

¹ Raymond E. Brown, *An Introduction to the New Testament* (New York: Doubleday, 1997).

² *Ibid.*, 25.

Galatians,³ and the First Letter to the Thessalonians, which is regarded as the earliest of Paul's letters—written around the year 50 or 51.⁴ That gives Paul seven letters for sure.

The author of the Revelation to John identifies himself as Jesus Christ's "servant John."⁵ Though Justin of Rome, who was martyred circa the year 167, identified him as the apostle John, but that attribution is not reliable.⁶ Others would identify him simply as John the presbyter—priest.⁷

None of the gospels identifies its author, nor do Acts—written by the author of Luke,⁸ Hebrews—not written by Paul,⁹ and First John—written by someone who knew and was a part of the Johannine community.¹⁰

³ Ibid., 428,

⁴ Ibid., 433.

⁵ Revelation 1:1.

⁶ Brown, 802–03.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Ibid., 267–69.

⁹ Ibid., 693–95.

¹⁰ Ibid., 383–84.

The gospels had named authors by the end of the second century.¹¹ The letter we know as the Second Letter of Peter is regarded by most scholarship as the last letter of the New Testament to be written—Father Brown gave the date as “most likely AD 130, give or take a decade.”¹² Jerome in the fourth century realized by comparing the grammar and content in what was known as the First Letter of Peter to the Second Letter of Peter that the two letters had different authors.¹³ Father Brown writes, “Indeed, the [false name] of II Peter is more certain than that of any other [New Testament] work.”¹⁴

These are the New Testament letters ascribed by text and tradition to Paul, but for which there are sound reasons to doubt his authorship, even when the theology may reflect Pauline thought in some ways: The Second Letter to the Thessalonians, the Letter to the Colossians, the Letter to the Ephesians, the Letter to Titus, the First Letter to Timothy, and the Second Letter to Timothy.

¹¹ Ibid., 7.

¹² Ibid., 762.

¹³ Ibid., 766-67.

¹⁴ Ibid., 767,

Then, there's the First Letter of John—which because of its style and content seems to be from someone who was a part of the community of John's gospel.¹⁵ This author also seems to have been the author of the Second and Third Letters of John.¹⁶

Next, we are down to First Peter, James, and Jude. Father Raymond Brown goes out of his way to suggest that the apostle Peter either dictated the letter or that what we know as the First Letter of Peter was written “more likely by a disciple carrying on the heritage of Peter at Rome.”¹⁷ He writes as if there can be no question that Peter lived and died in Rome—though he does acknowledge, “The question of whether Peter's bones have been found is much more disputable.”¹⁸ With respect, I think it remains true that there is no reliable historical evidence that Peter was ever in Rome.

Now, the authorship of the Letter of Jude is a matter debated with few available facts, in my humble opinion. About this very short letter, Father Brown

¹⁵ Ibid., 384.

¹⁶ Ibid., 395.

¹⁷ Ibid., 706.

¹⁸ Ibid., 719 n.

wrote, “Today most would not appreciate or find germane its argumentation from Israelite tradition about the angels who sinned with women, [the archangel] Michael’s battle over the body of Moses, Sodom, Balaam, and Korah.” I do appreciate very much Father Brown’s conclusion that “We owe Jude reverence as a book of Sacred Scripture, but its applicability to ordinary life remains a formidable difficulty.”¹⁹ I wonder if he might agree that his perspective on the Letter of Jude might help us be more open to being less fearful of trusting that the Spirit is still leading us away from the many forms of fundamentalism that still afflict those who call themselves Christian.

✠ In the Name of the Father, and of the Son,
and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

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¹⁹ Ibid., 759–60.