Ehrman's book consists of two parts. In part I he deals on nearly 150 pages with the phenomenon of forgery in Greco-Roman antiquity (11-145). In the much longer second part he identifies and analyses early Christian forgeries and counterforgeries from the first four centuries (149-548).

Since "the majority of our early Christian forgeries do in fact appear to have been generated out of a polemical context" (531), most early Christian pseudepigrapha are covered in part II, some of them at several places, among them the New Testament pseudepigrapha. One of the main impressions Ehrman's arrangement of the source material makes is that in terms of their deceptive intention and strategies the New Testament pseudepigrapha were not fundamentally different from the extra-canonical pseudepigrapha of the same period.

As someone who has himself written on the same subject, I am particularly interested in what Ehrman has to say (mainly in part II) about the complex and debated literary phenomenon of early Christian pseudepigraphy. In Ehrman's treatment of this topic, at least three central questions can be distinguished.

First, were pseudepigraphical texts written to deceive and regarded as deceptive by their readers? Ehrman gives a positive answer. One of his main theses is that “forgery was widely considered a form of literary deceit” (529). To my ears, admittedly the ears of a second language reader, this statement sounds somewhat tautological since forgery is per definition the act of producing something for a deceitful or fraudulent purpose. Therefore, I would prefer to say that, as a rule, ancient pseudepigraphy was considered a form of literary deceit. But apart from this terminological caveat, I agree with the conclusions Ehrman has drawn from the available source texts.

Ehrman's second question is: “Did forgers think that lying is something not only right, but divinely sanctioned?” (548). Ehrman's answer is again positive, and there can be little doubt, I believe, that this is exactly what some of the ancient sources indicate.

Thirdly, Ehrman asks, what kinds of texts were regarded as pseudepigraphical? His answer to this third question is problematic. Whereas both of us have covered pretty much the same ground and so far have come to very similar conclusions, Ehrman explicitly explains to his readers where our books differ. Apart from Ehrman's leading interest in forgery and counterforgery and my overarching focus on forgery and canonicity he disagrees with my thesis that “a book that was not authored by the person named is not a forgery if its
contents can be traced back directly to that person” (31 n. 6). Ehrman does not concur with my observation that the ancients distinguished between the wording and the contents of a text and formed their opinion about its authenticity or inauthenticity on the basis of the origin of its contents (87-88, 90, 110, 116 etc.; cf. my Pseudepigraphie und literarische Fälschung [Tübingen 2001] 195). Ehrman’s counter thesis is that the decision about a book’s authenticity “was not based purely on the question of the contents of a work” (88); “it was not simply the contents of a work that mattered” (90); “the contents of a work mattered insofar as they were genuinely penned by an authoritative figure” (92). A book was only regarded as authentic if it contained the alleged author’s “own words” (111).

One of Ehrman’s main targets is my interpretation of ancient school pseudepigraphy. In 2001 I had disputed the prevalent thesis that in ancient philosophical and medical (and Christian) schools it was acceptable for pupils to publish their own ideas under the names of their famous teachers, for instance Pythagoras or Hippocrates. After having reviewed the relevant source texts I concluded that the understanding of authorship in Greco-Roman schools was compatible with the notion of authenticity in the rest of ancient literature: Pupils were allowed to publish their teachers’ words and thoughts under the names of their teachers, but they had to publish their own philosophical, medical, or theological ideas under their own names. Otherwise they were regarded as literary forgers.

One of the alleged proof texts for non-deceptive pseudepigraphy in ancient schools I had to deal with came from Porphyry. According to B. L. van der Waerden, in a fragment that has only been preserved in an Arabic translation, Porphyry distinguished 280 authentic books of Pythagoras from other books which had been forged under his name; while Pythagoras himself published 80 authentic books, the inheritors of his knowledge published 200 authentic books—apparently under the philosopher’s name (Pauly-Wissowa Suppl. 10 [1965] 862-864). I suggested that Porphyry distinguished the 200 books from the literary forgeries because he regarded them as adequate documentations of Pythagoras’ teaching and therefore as non-deceptive.

In his book, Ehrman quotes a new translation of the Arabic fragment in which Porphyry does not say or imply that the 200 books were published under Pythagoras’ name (109-110). But the translation of Porphyry’s remarks which Ehrman offers is not complete; it omits its final and most decisive section in which Porphyry accepted 280 books of the sage as authentic.

If Ehrman’s interpretation of Porphyry’s explanation was correct (which I doubt, because it rests on an incomplete textual basis), he had at least demonstrated that one of the central proof texts for non-deceptive school