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The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha as Background to the New Testament

By JAMES R. DAVILA

This article outlines a new approach to the study of the Old Testament pseudepigrapha which moves methodically from the known to the unknown and which gives us a somewhat reduced, but considerably better-founded corpus of Jewish pseudepigrapha which we may use, cautiously and with due care, for New Testament background.

The Old Testament pseudepigrapha are a motley collection of some scores of quasi-biblical books either written pseudonymously in the names of characters from the Hebrew Bible (Enoch, Ezra, Baruch, etc.), or retelling stories from the Hebrew Bible (e.g. the book of *Jubilees*), or telling stories about Jews in the Second Temple period (e.g. *3 Maccabees*), or even telling the stories of pagan sages and prophets of the biblical period (*Abiqar* and the *Sibylline Oracles*). They were composed in Hebrew, Aramaic, and Greek over a long span of time, perhaps from the late Persian period to the early Middle Ages, with the texts of some of them evolving considerably over the centuries. There is compelling evidence that some of these works were written by Jews during the Second Temple and Hellenistic periods. For example, fragments of the original Hebrew of *Jubilees* and the original Aramaic of much of *1 Enoch* were found among the Dead Sea Scrolls. The pseudepigrapha are works that failed to be adopted into the major biblical canons; those of Judaism and of the Catholic, Orthodox, and Protestant Churches. They are thus for the most part to be distinguished from the Old Testament Apocrypha, which are accepted as scripture by the Catholic and Orthodox Churches, but not by Jews or Protestants. James Charlesworth collected fifty-two works and numerous fragments in the two massive *Old Testament Pseudepigrapha* volumes he edited,¹ and my colleague Richard Bauckham and I are co-ordinating an international project to publish

translations of another fifty or so (plus additional fragments) beyond these.

Old Testament pseudepigrapha stemming from the first century CE and earlier (and perhaps even a bit later) preserve precious information about Judaism in the time of Jesus and the earliest church and thus are useful as cultural, literary, and philological background to the New Testament and Christian origins. Their importance has not been lost on New Testament scholars, who have drawn on them freely (along with the Dead Sea Scrolls, the Old Testament Apocrypha, the works of Philo and Josephus, and the rabbinic literature) for a better understanding of the Jewish background of earliest Christianity.

There are, however, certain challenges in the study of the Old Testament pseudepigrapha which need to be taken into account before we can use them for any purpose. Virtually all of them have reached us in a manuscript tradition copied and transmitted entirely by Christians. (The few exceptions, such as Hebrew *3 Enoch*, which really belongs in the corpus of early Jewish mystical literature rather than pseudepigrapha, can be ignored for my purposes here.) Some were clearly written by Jews but, for reasons often unknown to us, Jews lost interest in them early on and ceased to copy them. We are very fortunate to have the Jewish fragments of *Jubilees* and *1 Enoch* from the chance finds at Qumran, and otherwise the Jewish pseudepigrapha manuscripts that must have existed at one time are almost entirely lost to us. In addition, the pseudepigrapha are frequently not preserved in their original language. *Jubilees* was composed in Hebrew and translated into Greek. Apart from the few Qumran

¹ Charlesworth, *The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha* (2 vols; Garden City, New York: Doubleday, 1983–85).

fragments, the Hebrew is entirely lost and most of the Greek is as well. The Greek was translated into other languages and the work survives complete only in the Ethiopic translation of the Greek. Much of Aramaic 1 *Enoch* has a similar transmission history and, again, the whole book survives only in Ethiopic. Internal evidence shows decisively that the *Biblical Antiquities* of Pseudo-Philo was composed in Hebrew, then it was probably translated into Greek, with the Greek subsequently being translated into Latin, but only the Latin translation survives today. So some pseudepigrapha survive only in translations from a lost Greek version (which sometimes is a translation of a lost Hebrew or Aramaic original) into Arabic, Armenian, Coptic, Ethiopic, Latin, Syriac, and the like.

Moreover, the Christian copyists of the Jewish pseudepigrapha did not necessarily copy the works unchanged. We have enough of the original Aramaic of *Aramaic Levi* (again from Qumran and also medieval fragments) to see that the Christian writer/editor of the Greek *Testaments of the Twelve Patriarchs* freely adapted this work in translation in the Greek *Testament of Levi* and even added explicitly Christian statements to it. And Christians not only edited and adapted such works, they also composed Old Testament pseudepigrapha themselves (e.g. the *Ascension of Isaiah*, the *Odes of Solomon*, the *Coptic Apocalypse of Elijah*, the *Testament of Solomon*, and some *Sibylline Oracles*).

Given the complicated origins of the Old Testament pseudepigrapha, how should scholars approach them and, particularly, how can they sift through the corpus to isolate the Jewish works from the Christian ones?

The most common approach among New Testament scholars has been to assume that any work that does not have obviously Christian elements (e.g. quotations from the New Testament or references to Jesus, the virgin birth, the crucifixion, the apostles, etc.) is a Jewish composition. Indeed, it is usually even assumed that if a work does have such Christian elements but they are few and are not central to the contents, these elements can be removed by redaction criticism and the resulting expurgated document can assumed to be a Jewish work in more or less pristine form. In a word, if it cannot be proved beyond reasonable doubt to be Christian, it must be Jewish.

A little reflection shows that there are serious problems with this approach. If the Old Testament

pseudepigrapha retell or expand upon Old Testament stories, it stands to reason that they would tend to look Jewish, whether they were written by Jews or Christians. No doubt Christian pseudepigraphers would frequently tip their hand by introducing references to Jesus, etc. as prophecies after the fact, or by carelessly quoting or alluding to the New Testament, but there is no particular reason to assume that they must always have done so. Indeed, a Christian author might have had every incentive to maintain an air of Old Testament verisimilitude, if he (or she) really hoped to pass the work off as an ancient composition from the Old Testament period or even simply wished to maintain an esthetically convincing Old Testament atmosphere.

Moreover, there is indirect positive evidence that shows that such a possibility must not be dismissed. For example, in his Syriac commentaries on Genesis and Exodus, the fourth-century Christian writer Ephrem Syrus retold a number of Old Testament episodes at length (such as the story of the Flood and the life of Joseph) without a single explicit reference to Christian matters. Likewise, in the early fifth century, Augustine of Hippo preached a sermon in Carthage on Micah 6:6–8 and Psalm 72 (his Old Testament sermon #48) scarcely anything in which need be taken as referring to Christian matters. And John Chrysostom, the fourth-century Greek-speaking priest of Antioch and Bishop of Constantinople, preached a number of homilies on Genesis which can be turned into apparently Jewish documents with a light application of redaction criticism to eliminate a few Christian elements.² If Christian biblical commentaries and sermons could retell Old Testament stories with no or minimal reference to Christian matters, it is entirely possible that Christians wrote Old Testament pseudepigrapha that cannot be identified as Christian compositions by their content.

To make matters more complicated, Jews could also have written Old Testament pseudepigrapha that contained no explicitly Jewish features and even some features that appear Christian. As a thought experiment, imagine that 1QH^a (the Qumran *Hodayot* or Thanksgiving Hymns scroll) had come down to us not in damaged form in its

² I have discussed these matters in greater detail in chapter 2 of my forthcoming book, *The Provenance of the Pseudepigrapha: Jewish, Christian, or Other?* (JSJSup 105; Leiden: Brill).

original Hebrew, but intact in a medieval manuscript containing a Syriac translation of a lost Greek translation of the lost Hebrew original (a transmission history that would not be at all unusual for an Old Testament pseudepigraphon). There is absolutely nothing in this work that a Syriac-speaking Christian of the second to fourth centuries could not have written. Moreover, we now know that the so-called Self-Glorification Hymn originally appeared in column 26 of the *Hodayot*. In this remarkable hymn the human speaker boasts of ascending to heaven, consorting with divine beings, and perhaps being enthroned there. He has a special relationship with God, yet also is despised and bears incomparable evil.³ If all we had was the Syriac translation, we might well conclude that the *Hodayot* was a Christian composition by the early Syriac-speaking church and that the Self-Glorification Hymn was a hymn about Christ.

Christians may have written pseudepigrapha without any obvious Christian features. Jews may have written pseudepigrapha that are not obviously Jewish and that even appear to have Christian elements. One lesson we can learn from all this is that the assumption that a work is Jewish unless it has undeniably Christian elements is flawed and cannot be relied upon to give us accurate results. Another is that in some, perhaps many, cases, we will not be able to tell whether a given pseudepigraphon is a Jewish or Christian composition (or, indeed, something else; see below). But we need not despair. When approached from the proper angle and with careful critical sifting, the Old Testament pseudepigrapha remain a treasure-trove of information about early Christianity and, in certain cases, ancient Judaism.

We must begin by adjusting our perspective. Here valuable work has been done by Robert A. Kraft, who has pointed out that the most reasonable approach is not to assume that a work is Jewish until proven otherwise, but to reverse the burden of proof.⁴ We should start by trying to understand the work in the social context of its earliest manuscripts

and then work backwards from there only as the evidence requires. Sometimes this will lead us to argue for a Jewish origin, and if so, well and good, but often there is not persuasive evidence for this and in those cases the default working hypothesis is that the document is a Christian work, sometime a fairly late one.

This perspective is initially counter-intuitive and merits some discussion. Frequently when I suggest that this is the proper approach to the pseud-epigrapha, I am told that, on the contrary, we should come to the material with no presuppositions about its origins and go where the evidence leads us. On one level, of course, this is true, and if scholars had consistently done this instead of proceeding from the assumption that pseudepigrapha are Jewish until proven otherwise, the field would be in better shape. But this understanding is nevertheless incomplete and misleading. If a given pseudepigraphon was transmitted only by Christians and therefore survives only in Christian manuscripts, it meant something to the copyists and subsequent readers of those manuscripts, who went to considerable effort to preserve it, and in that sense it is a Christian work. Its existence in the social context that produced the earliest manuscript of the document is a fact, not a presupposition, and our first task is to place the document in that social context and try to understand it there. If it fits comfortably, we may take note of other possible origins, but our working hypothesis should be that it is a Christian composition of roughly that milieu.

It may well be that it does not fit comfortably. The document may show evidence of being composed much earlier, of being composed in a language not spoken in that time and place, or of expressing ideas and views that would have been very problematical in that social context. In other words, it may have been preserved because the copyists and readers misunderstood it or wilfully misconstrued it, because they found parts of it congenial. At this point, we will have positive evidence that we need to work backwards from the context of the earliest manuscript, and presumably we will also have at least some idea of what kind of original context to look for.

³ You can read the *Hodayot* in English in Florention García Martínez's *The Dead Sea Scrolls Translated: The Qumran Texts in English* (2nd edn; Leiden: Brill; Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1996), 317–61. For a better-preserved recension of the Self-Glorification Hymn, see *ibid.*, pp. 117–18 (4Q491 frag. 11, col. i).

⁴ Kraft, 'The Pseudepigrapha in Christianity,' in *Tracing the Thread: Studies in the Vitality of Jewish Pseudepigrapha* (ed. John C. Reeves; SBLEJL 6. Atlanta, GA: Scholars Press, 1994),

55–86; *idem*, 'The Pseudepigrapha and Christianity Revisited: Setting the Stage and Framing Some Central Questions,' *JSJ* 32 (2001) 371–95.

When we find we need to do this, we must keep in mind that there is a rather wide range of possible authors of Old Testament pseudepigrapha. As Ross Kraemer once said to me, many people in antiquity had the means, motive, and opportunity to compose such texts. They could be Jews or Christians (of varying levels of commitment to what I call ‘boundary maintenance’ – distinguishing themselves from other groups), but there were also ‘God-fearers’ (i.e. gentiles who had a strong interest in Judaism and some commitment to Jewish praxis, but did not convert); ‘sympathizers’ (gentiles who were interested in Judaism but who may not have been involved at all with a Jewish community); Jewish-Christians of various kinds; Samaritans; and quite likely other groups we know nothing about. Often it is reasonable to keep some or all of these possible authorships in mind for a text without preferring any one of them, and sometimes there are hints within a text that point to one or another of these – hints that have been ignored because scholars have been so keen to claim pseudepigrapha as first-century-or-earlier Jewish texts in order to use them as New Testament background.

Since the main interest of this article is Jewish pseudepigrapha and the light they may shed on the New Testament, it is worthwhile to reflect briefly on the sort of information that might lead us to conclude that a given pseudepigraphon is a Jewish rather than a Christian work. Ideally, we might have external evidence, such as the Qumran fragments of *Jubilees* and *1 Enoch* in Hebrew and Aramaic. But more often we must rely on internal evidence. This might include indications that the work was composed before the rise of Christianity (which would eliminate Christian authorship but leave a wide range of other options open); compelling philological evidence that the work was translated from Hebrew; or a significant pattern (not just isolated cases) of content or ideas (I use the term ‘signature features’) congenial to boundary-maintaining Judaism but not to Christianity or other possible authorships. Jewish signature features include sympathetic concern with the Jewish ritual cult, Jewish legal traditions, and Jewish national and ethnic interests.⁵

A detailed analysis of each pseudepigraphon is outside the scope of this brief article, but I will sum-

marize the results of my research. I have concluded that the following pseudepigrapha are Jewish beyond reasonable doubt and were written either within a century of the crucifixion of Jesus or earlier and may be confidently used for background to the New Testament writings. The pseudepigrapha that can be shown to be Jewish on external grounds (fragmentary preservation among the Dead Sea Scrolls) are the Book of the Watchers, the Astronomical Book, the Book of Dreams, the Epistle of Enoch (all in *1 Enoch*), and the book of *Jubilees*. The texts that can be shown to be Jewish on internal grounds are *2 Baruch*, *4 Ezra*, the *Assumption or Testament of Moses*, the *Psalms of Solomon*, and Pseudo-Philo’s *Biblical Antiquities*. In addition, although *Aristeas to Philocrates* claims to be written by a gentile and may have been written either by a Jew or by a gentile God-fearer, the first-century Jewish historian Flavius Josephus makes extensive use of this work (perhaps in an earlier recension than the one we have), indicating that, whatever its origins, it seemed convincingly Jewish to at least some first-century Jews. For this reason I consider it fair game as Jewish background to the New Testament. So all of these documents are certainly very important for understanding both first-century Judaism and earliest Christianity.

Texts that are Jewish beyond reasonable doubt (mainly on internal criteria) and that were composed in the early centuries CE, but not necessarily within a century of the crucifixion, include the *Similitudes of Enoch* (*1 Enoch* 37–71) and *3–4 Maccabees*. One should perhaps be somewhat more cautious about using these for New Testament background, since they may be considerably later than the New Testament writings. But they certainly give us valuable firsthand information about Judaism in the Hellenistic period or the first few centuries CE.

Some other pseudepigrapha are likely to be Jewish but cannot be shown to be so beyond reasonable doubt. *Sibylline Oracles* books 3 and 5 may very well be of Jewish origin, but in both cases other possibilities cannot be excluded. One can make a case that *Sibylline Oracles* 3 was written by a gentile God-fearer and that *Sibylline Oracles* 5 was written by a Jewish Christian or a God-fearer, and these possibilities should not be ignored. *Sibylline Oracles* 4 could be by a radically Hellenizing, baptizing Jew, but it could equally well come from a God-fearer or a Jewish or gentile Christian. Other texts such as the *Testament of Job* and *Joseph and Aseneth*, may be

⁵ I discuss the issues in the preceding two paragraphs at length in chapter 1 of *The Provenance of the Pseudepigrapha*.

Jewish, but then again may not be. Such doubtfully Jewish works may be used as ancillary evidence for ancient Judaism alongside texts that we can take to be Jewish beyond reasonable doubt, but theories about ancient Judaism should not be formulated on the basis of the doubtful texts alone.

Still other Old Testament pseudepigrapha are often used as Jewish texts but in my opinion are probably Christian compositions. These include the *Testament of Abraham* and the *Story of Zosimus* (the latter is also known as the *History of the Rechabites*). I would not use texts in this category at all for New Testament background or the reconstruction of ancient Judaism.⁶

Even when we focus for such purposes on pseudepigrapha established as Jewish beyond reasonable doubt, there are inherent limitations in their use, which we would do well to take into account. These pseudepigrapha were transmitted in complete form only by Christians and most come down to us in relatively few manuscripts that often differ widely among themselves. Many survive only in translation, and sometimes only in secondary translations. We can regard the texts of these works as reasonably well established, certainly well enough for us to understand their basic flow and overall content. But often we cannot be sure of the original text at any given point, so prudence dictates that we concentrate on general themes and repeated ideas in them rather than on individual verses as proof-texts. Those seeking to mine them for background material to the New Testament (and those reading such efforts critically) should keep this point in mind.

⁶ The documents listed in the preceding four paragraphs are analysed in chapters 3 and 4 of *The Provenance of the Pseudepigrapha*. For *Joseph and Aseneth* see also Ross Shepard Kraemer, *When Aseneth Met Joseph: A Late Antique Tale of the Biblical Patriarch and His Egyptian Wife, Reconsidered* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998). I would include a number of other texts in the third category (those often used as Jewish works but which in reality are probably of Christian authorship), most notably the *Testaments of the Twelve Patriarchs* (which uses Jewish sources but is itself a Christian composition) the *Life of Adam and Eve*, and the *Lives of the Prophets*. For the first two, see Marinus de Jonge, *Pseudepigrapha of the Old Testament as Part of Christian Literature: The Case of the Testaments of the Twelve Patriarchs and the Greek Life of Adam and Eve* (SVTP 18; Leiden: Brill, 2003). For the third, see David Satran, *Biblical Prophets in Byzantine Palestine: Reassessing the 'Lives of the Prophets'* (SVTP 11; Leiden: Brill, 1995).

Some may argue that I am imposing an unrealistic standard when I limit the corpus of Jewish pseudepigrapha to those works that can be shown beyond reasonable doubt to be Jewish. I do not think this is the case. The methodology I have employed is far from nihilistic; it provides us with a substantial corpus of pseudepigrapha that we can use for New Testament background. And I believe my approach serves our understanding of ancient Judaism better than any other in the long run. In other words, granting that in many cases we simply cannot tell if a pseudepigraphon is of Jewish origin, it is better to exclude doubtful cases and base our reconstruction on what we know that we know. A false positive does more harm than a false negative: if we think we are studying ancient Judaism (or New Testament background) with a first-century-CE Jewish text and in reality it is a third-century-CE Christian composition, we pollute our corpus with erroneous information that distorts our understanding. Better to leave it out until such a time as we can be sure what its origin actually is, even if the price is potentially leaving out genuine Jewish works if we cannot be sure beyond reasonable doubt that that is what they are. Meanwhile, of course, such documents remain important historical resources for our understanding of Christianity in late antiquity.

In sum, I have outlined a new approach to the study of the Old Testament pseudepigrapha which moves methodically from the known to the unknown and which gives us a somewhat reduced, but considerably better-founded corpus of Jewish pseudepigrapha which we may use, cautiously and with due care, as background to the New Testament. Some other pseudepigrapha may well be Jewish, but other possible origins for them remain plausible, and their evidence should be used only to confirm what we find in pseudepigrapha we can regard as Jewish beyond reasonable doubt, as well as in other clearly Jewish ancient texts such as the Dead Sea Scrolls, most of the Old Testament Apocrypha, the works of Philo and Josephus, and the Tannaitic rabbinic literature. These other corpora can also be used for New Testament background, although each corpus has its own pitfalls and must be approached with a methodology appropriate to it. But that is another article.