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Introducing the Pseudepigrapha

The religion of Judaism is renowned for its literary output, and is particularly closely associated with the books of the Hebrew Bible and the later rabbinic literature. In addition, the media has brought to public attention in recent decades the important discovery of a large cache of ancient scrolls in caves at Qumran in the vicinity of the Dead Sea, while the works of the first-century authors Philo and Josephus have long served as important sources of information about Judaism in the New Testament era. A great wealth of other texts were composed by Jews in the centuries ‘between the testaments’, however, which are not so well known or widely appreciated today. It is these books, generally termed the Pseudepigrapha, which are the subject of this volume. They employ a wide range of genres to express theological ideas, promote certain values, explain the Scriptures, educate both Jews and gentiles about Jewish history and practices, and simply provide entertainment. Some of them, like *Jubilees* or *1 Enoch*, may have circulated widely and enjoyed an authority on a par with that of the writings which would eventually attain scriptural status. Some, such as the *Psalms of Solomon*, are liturgical texts, while others take the form of novels or plays, like *Joseph and Aseneth*, or the *Exagoge* by Ezekiel the Tragedian. All, however, are of immense value for an understanding of Second Temple Judaism and of the early Christian movement which arose within that religious and cultural context.

The term ‘pseudepigraphic’ is traditionally applied to these books because many of them are pseudonymous, which means that they are attributed to ancient and honoured figures from Israel’s past, like Moses or Enoch. Others have no named author, and these features of pseudonymity and anonymity are very widespread in early Jewish literature, characterizing, for instance, the rabbinic literature, the Dead Sea Scrolls and the Apocrypha. These practices may be due to the imitation of scriptural models, in which authorship is not always

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specified, or they may reflect the writers' belief that they were not putting forward their own views, but legitimately updating and passing on the traditions of their community. Pseudonymity thus helps to validate a work, providing a sense of authority and antiquity for its theological views or scriptural interpretation, and connecting its audience to Israel's history. For example, 'Ezra', the name of the priestly scribe who, according to Scripture, played a significant role in leading and teaching the exiles who returned from Babylon to Judaea in the fifth century BCE, is a very fitting name with which to associate a book (*4 Ezra*) dealing with an analogous situation, the aftermath of the destruction of the Second Temple in the first century CE. The designation 'Pseudepigrapha' is a very broad and not always an exact description of this literature, but these writings do form a recognizable collection which is distinct from the Apocrypha. The apocryphal books are considered scriptural in some Christian traditions and are more generally accessible and more familiar than the Pseudepigrapha, so they are not treated in this volume.¹

The time span covered by this corpus of literature runs from the end of the Babylonian exile in 539 BCE to approximately 100 CE, soon after the destruction of Jerusalem by the Romans in 70 CE. The Second Temple was in existence for most of this period, standing as the focus of Jewish national identity and religion. It is often difficult to date the Pseudepigrapha precisely, especially if they contain no clear references to recognizable historical events, or draw on pre-existing sources. Some may have attained their current form only after the end of the first century CE, for example, yet possibly were in circulation previously in a more primitive form, or else appear to contain earlier material. The decision has been taken here to err on the side of including such works, like the *Sibylline Oracles*, on the basis that they can provide useful information about the theological views and scriptural interpretation of some Jews in the late Second Temple period, provided that they are approached with due caution, and the later date of their final form is acknowledged.

¹ The one exception is *4 Ezra*; this text is now incorporated into the Christian apocryphal work called 2 Esdras, but given that it is widely regarded as an important example of an early Jewish pseudepigraphic apocalypse and also that 2 Esdras is included in the Apocrypha but not the deuterocanonical Scriptures of the Roman Catholic Church, it seems appropriate to include it in this study (see Chapter 6).

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It is also important to appreciate that these writings were preserved and transmitted mainly by Christian rather than Jewish communities, and that Christian revisions and additions have evidently been made to some of the original texts. This is, of course, part of a wider phenomenon, whereby Christianity absorbed and took over much of the Jewish literary and theological tradition, including the Scriptures, as it grew in both size and cultural and political influence. The question of the provenance of the Pseudepigrapha, then, is one with which contemporary scholarship continues to wrestle. In the past, all of these books were generally accepted as having been composed by Jewish authors, unless they contained obviously Christian material, such as references to Jesus, or to practices like baptism or the celebration of the Eucharist. Even then, these passages were widely regarded as Christian additions to an originally Jewish work. These assumptions are now, however, beginning to change. More recent commentators like James Davila and Robert Kraft have argued persuasively that the burden of proof should be shifted, and the Christian transmission of the Pseudepigrapha taken more seriously, so that all those writings which are not definitely Jewish in their theology should be considered as products of early Christianity, at least in their current form. It will be necessary to return to this debate at appropriate points in other chapters of this volume, but in general the approach taken here will be an inclusive one. Several of these disputed texts, such as the *Testaments of the Twelve Patriarchs*, will be discussed here, then, if they seem to contain older traditions reaching back to the Second Temple period or have close connections with other early Jewish writings, but the Christian influence on their final form will always be fully recognized.

There is a need to define one further term before proceeding. This Introduction has already referred several times to ‘Scripture’, but it is, strictly speaking, anachronistic to use this expression in relation to the Second Temple period, since all decisions about the form and constitution of the Jewish Scriptures were taken later. The authors of the rewritten Bible texts considered in Chapter 2 of this volume, therefore, were not rewriting Scripture as such, but interpreting texts which later came to be accepted as sacred by both Jews and Christians. It would be too cumbersome to repeatedly labour this point, so ‘Scripture’ will be used as a convenient shorthand throughout to

refer to the writings which now comprise the Jewish Bible, but it should always be appreciated that the precise status and authority of the various religious writings in circulation at the time when the Pseudepigrapha were being composed was still undefined. A considerable fluidity and diversity of view persisted until the canon was fixed, but it is clear that the books of the Pentateuch gained a special place in Jewish thought at a relatively early date, and this is reflected in the fact that so much of the Second Temple Jewish literature draws on and interprets them.

The history of the Second Temple period

Jews in the land of Israel

The history of the people of Israel as it is recorded in the Scriptures is that of a tiny nation, often caught between the wars and ambitions of its larger neighbours. This pattern of Israelite subjection to powerful empires, such as the Babylonians, continued throughout the centuries, culminating in the invasion of Palestine by the advancing Roman armies in 63 BCE. The main extant sources of information for the Second Temple period are 1 and 2 Maccabees and the works of Josephus, although none of these writings can be taken as straightforward and historically accurate accounts. This era opens with Persia as the major regional force, and the exiles who wished to return to the small Persian-administered province of Judaea from Babylon being allowed to do so. Around two centuries later, the Persian Empire collapsed, having been defeated decisively by the forces of Alexander the Great in 331 BCE. This marked the start of the Hellenistic period, in which Greek language and education spread abroad throughout the known world. Some Jews apparently rejected Hellenism and all they thought it stood for, others probably embraced it enthusiastically, but for most it simply became the normative culture, inevitably adopted by all people in every region.

Judaea remained subject to Alexander's successors, the Ptolemies and Seleucids, for almost 200 years. The nation then achieved a brief measure of national independence when, prompted to some degree by the desecration of the Temple associated with the notorious Seleucid king Antiochus IV Epiphanes (175–164 BCE), an armed resistance movement led by the family of the Maccabees succeeded

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in overthrowing foreign rule and setting up a semi-autonomous state. From 141 to 63 BCE the priest-kings of the Maccabean or Hasmonaean dynasty ruled Judaea and eventually also its surrounding regions, including Galilee, Samaria and Idumaea. Even these years of greater independence were marred by battles abroad and strife at home, however, as the Jewish kings sought to expand their territory and deal with internal opposition and dynastic struggles. They were not universally popular with the inhabitants of Palestine, as they were not of the Davidic royal line, they assumed the role and title of high priest as well as king which was an innovation in Israelite practice, and they had to raise the money from taxation to fund their expensive wars. It is at this time that the existence is first attested of specific religious parties, the Pharisees, Sadducees and Essenes, who differed about various matters of theology and legal interpretation. The most famous area of disagreement, at least among readers of the New Testament, was the possibility of resurrection, but the members of these factions also held different views about such matters as fate and individual responsibility, the validity of the oral tradition, and the conduct of worship in the Jerusalem Temple.

Eventually, the Hasmonaean dynasty was defeated by the Romans, who ruled Palestine first through client or puppet kings, and then through a series of provincial governors. Herod the Great (37–4 BCE) is the best known of the Roman-installed kings. He enjoys a reputation for great cruelty, and his reign certainly did provoke dissatisfaction among the populace, but he also completed several important rebuilding projects in and around Jerusalem and brought about some positive economic improvements in the region. The Roman officials who succeeded Herod's sons governed with varying degrees of efficiency, but they were distant from their subjects and often inept at dealing with Jewish unrest. Anger at the behaviour of these governors, socio-economic hardships and a desire for religious and national freedom all combined to incite a revolt against Roman rule in Judaea and Galilee in 66 CE. Armed resistance groups emerged to lead the fight against Roman forces, including the Zealots, whose name reflects the zeal with which they fought for their cause. The Jews were ultimately defeated by the Roman army, and Jerusalem was totally destroyed in 70 CE. Much of the city's population was forced into exile, and a new Roman colony was founded there, called Aelia

Capitolina. The Second Temple would never be rebuilt, and it would be 18 centuries before Jews began to return to Palestine in any numbers. This period of crisis is described at great length by Josephus in his book *The Jewish War*, and it forms the backdrop to several of the texts considered in this volume, especially the *Psalms of Solomon*, the *Testament of Moses*, *4 Ezra* and *2 Baruch*, which paint a distressing picture of a nation riven by war, factional strife, poverty and religious uncertainty.

Jews in the Diaspora

The great majority of Jews, however, did not live in Palestine but elsewhere in the Hellenistic world, at some remove from the events in Judaea. They are called the 'Diaspora' communities, a term derived from the Greek verb 'to scatter'. Many of the texts discussed in this volume reflect this context, and so provide significant evidence about Jewish life and thought in the Diaspora. A wide array of reasons, both political and economic, can be put forward to explain the extent of Jewish migration: movement from Palestine to Egypt in times of hardship appears to have been common even in biblical times, for example, and many of those exiled to Babylon in the sixth century BCE chose not to return. Other Jews in search of adventure and prosperity doubtless took advantage of opportunities on offer under various emperors to settle new colonies, or to gain employment as mercenaries. The numerous wars which were fought in these centuries, from Alexander the Great's ousting of the Persians, through the conflicts among his successors the Seleucids and Ptolemies, to the Roman invasions, led to the displacement of large numbers of people, including Jews, as prisoners or refugees. These and other factors contributed to the establishment of substantial Jewish communities in all the major cities of the Graeco-Roman Empire, including in Greece, Asia Minor, Italy, Syria and Egypt.

Many of these Diaspora Jews retained their traditional customs, practising circumcision, maintaining dietary regulations and celebrating Passover, for instance, and they continued to worship the God of their ancestors in their synagogues. That some of them retained an allegiance to the national homeland of Judaea is indicated by the annual collection of a tax from Jewish communities throughout the Mediterranean which was sent to Jerusalem for the upkeep of the

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Temple. Pilgrimages to Jerusalem were also regularly undertaken, especially at festival times (e.g. Acts 2.5). However, the bulk of the evidence, from inscriptions and the extant writings of Jews and gentiles alike, suggests that generally they also felt part of the wider Hellenistic society in which they operated, and at home in its culture. Sources from Alexandria, where there was a particularly large Jewish population, indicate that Jews were accepted there as citizens, were able to play a full part in the life of the city, could own land and property and undertake a range of occupations, and that some benefited from a classical education. Their inculturation is also indicated by the Septuagint translation of the Scriptures into Greek from the middle of the third century BCE, a process which presumably became necessary because they spoke no Hebrew. That Egyptian Jews at least regarded themselves as permanent residents in the Diaspora, not exiles with a constant yearning to return to Palestine, is also demonstrated by the building of a temple in Heliopolis in the late second century BCE, which stood for over two centuries, until it was closed by the Roman authorities in 73/74 CE.

Simple generalizations about Jewish life outside of Israel are best avoided, since the levels of tolerance and positive interaction with gentiles varied considerably in different regions and periods of time. Some Jewish practices certainly did provoke suspicion and prejudice among gentiles, particularly those which made normal social interaction difficult, such as dietary regulations and sabbath observance, and also circumcision, considered barbaric by many educated Greeks. In the case of disputes, however, extant records show the authorities usually upholding Jewish rights and accepting their distinctive religious customs. The presence of some ongoing tension between Jews and other citizens of the Graeco-Roman Empire is indicated by the fact that riots and persecution against Jewish communities broke out sporadically in different locations, including two incidents in Alexandria in the first century CE (37 CE and 66 CE). A significant number of Jews throughout Cyprus, Cyrene, Egypt and possibly Mesopotamia were also involved in an uprising against the authorities in 115/116 CE during the reign of the emperor Trajan. Nevertheless, sufficiently good relationships existed between Jews and gentiles in many Hellenistic cities for people to be attracted to Judaism. Such gentile 'godfearers' were evidently allowed to participate in worship

and in the general life of the synagogue without fully converting or having to leave behind entirely their previous identity and associations. Some of the texts considered in this volume will be concerned with these questions of conversion and the relationships between Jews and gentiles, notably *Joseph and Aseneth* and the *Sibylline Oracles*.

Format and organization

There are various possible ways of organizing an introductory volume on the pseudepigraphic literature of the Second Temple period. One option is to treat the texts chronologically, in order of their composition date. This has the advantage of foregrounding their historical and social contexts, which often impact significantly on their theological emphases or literary forms. However, the problem with this approach is that so many of these writings cannot be dated precisely, or else were clearly composed in stages. It would become necessary, for example, to separate out into different chapters the individual books of the *Sibylline Oracles*, or the various sections of *1 Enoch*, which could prevent the reader from gaining an overall sense of the shape of these works and their contents.

A further possibility is to group the writings together according to the Old Testament character with whose name they are associated, or whom they particularly honour, such as Enoch, Abraham, Moses or Joseph. This can enable valuable comparisons to be drawn between different presentations of the same figure. However, this structuring method is also of limited use, because some characters, such as Job or Ezra, are linked with only one extant writing, while some texts, the *Sibylline Oracles*, for instance, have no connection with a particular person. In addition, it may lead the reader to miss important theological or literary aspects of a work by focusing unduly on the name attached to it. *Jubilees*, for example, styles itself as a divine revelation to Moses, but since it retells the whole of Genesis and the first part of Exodus, it is just as illuminating for its interpretation of Abraham and other patriarchs as of Moses.

The literature might also be divided along geographical lines, with different chapters covering, for example, texts composed in Palestine, in Egypt and elsewhere in the Diaspora. There are two serious issues with such an approach, however. In the first place, it is often impossible

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to locate these writings definitely in a particular city or country, since so little is known about their authors. Second, it can lead to the creation of an artificial division between 'Palestinian Judaism' and 'Diaspora Judaism'. The consensus of modern scholarship is that Jews in every part of the Graeco-Roman Empire, including the land of Israel, were influenced by Greek language, thought and culture, and therefore differences between the attitudes of Jews living in distinct regions should not be pressed too far. So, while texts written in Palestine may be characterized by some particular features, such as concerns about the conduct of Temple worship, or responses to Roman invasion, they are likely to share many theological ideas, ethical values and exegetical traditions in common with those deriving from the Diaspora.

This volume, therefore, is arranged around literary genres, so that each chapter deals with a different type of writing, such as rewritten Bible, testaments or apocalyptic. This format is not entirely without its difficulties, as many of the Pseudepigrapha exhibit features of more than one literary form, so their classification is not straightforward, and some genres are not very well established or easy to define, so that there is considerable debate about which works should be included in them. These points are acknowledged, where relevant, in the introduction to each section, and the understanding of 'genre' adopted here is necessarily broad. Despite the frequent use of mixed literary forms, this method of organizing the material remains the most practical and logical. Its particular advantages are that it is relatively easy for the reader to navigate; it highlights the creative use by the early Jewish writers of a variety of literary forms; it enables attention to be paid to all the noteworthy characteristics of each text; and it allows works which have something in common to be compared. Apocalyptic books do look and feel different from, for instance, biblical expansions, so a better appreciation of the nature and purpose of this type of writing can be achieved by considering the apocalypses together. Similarly, it is interesting to see how examples of the same form, such as rewritten Bible, differ from one another in their selection of material and emphases.

The main chapters in this volume will all follow a similar format, therefore, beginning with a brief overview of the literary genre under consideration, and moving to a more detailed discussion of the two,

three or four main extant examples of it. An introduction to the authorship and historical context of each book will be provided, and then its key features, major theological themes, and interpretation of scriptural passages and themes will be explained. Since the Pseudepigrapha form part of a larger body of early Jewish writings, including the Apocrypha, the Dead Sea Scrolls, and the works of Josephus and Philo, every opportunity will be taken to identify connections, common themes and interesting differences between them and this wider literary corpus.

The significance of the Pseudepigrapha

A distinctive aspect of this introduction to the Pseudepigrapha is its focus on the significance of these texts, which will be highlighted at the end of every chapter. Their ongoing value is sometimes found in the theological and ethical teaching which they put forward, as many touch on issues which are as important now as they were two millennia ago, such as how to respond to social injustice, to the problem of innocent suffering or to the widespread human fear of death. This literature is also extremely important for what it reveals about the history, attitudes to Scripture, and rich and diverse theological tradition which characterized Judaism in the Second Temple era. This historical period is obviously of interest to classical scholars and students of Judaism, but is equally important for an understanding of early Christianity, which arose within the same social, cultural and religious milieu, and whose adherents preserved and valued these writings, a fact which is a telling reminder of the shared roots and close links between these two emerging religions. Their significance as evidence for the beliefs and practices of Christians in the early centuries of the Common Era, a time for which other sources of information are scarce, is, therefore, increasingly being recognized by scholars.

These texts are also relevant to several major current debates within the field of biblical studies, such as the relationship between Palestinian and Diaspora Judaism, and the formation of the Jewish Scriptures. Some of them are, of course, simply worth reading as good stories in their own right, able to entertain or move modern readers as they did ancient audiences. It is hoped, then, that this

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book will be able to offer a variety of persuasive answers to the important question of why anyone should still want to read the pseudepigraphic literature today.

Further reading

- Charlesworth, J. H. (ed.), *The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha*. 2 vols. 1983 and 1985, New York: Doubleday
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