



Finding Value in the “False” Writings of the Pseudepigrapha

By Christine E. Shander

Students often ask how the books of the Bible became “one” book, and they are also interested in knowing why some books were left out. These questions are difficult because the canonical list defining what was sacred did not emerge until far after biblical literature was composed. It was not like writing with the hope of being on a best-seller list. Instead, religious groups wrote to preserve and transmit age-old stories, beliefs and understandings of God, self and others. The literature was written to reinforce a common social identity, as well as to explain why certain practices were important to maintain. Eventually some of these texts became canonical and made it into the Bible lists, but others were rejected and were later collected as Pseudepigrapha.

The term “pseudepigrapha” may be translated from the Greek as *false writing*. ‘Pseudepigrapha’ represents the plural collection, whereas ‘pseudepigraphon’ reflects an individual composition. The label reflects that these books were written under a pen name or from the perspective of a figure who is meaningful in other biblical books, but is no longer alive. In other words, the author may have borrowed a respected name, in order that his words may be heard. There are two collections of pseudepigrapha; in general, the texts are categorized by their relation to either the Old Testament or the New Testament. The New Testament collection of pseudepigrapha is known as the New Testament Apocryphon. For the sake of brevity, this article will focus on the Old Testament Pseudepigrapha, briefly introducing two compositions from this collection.

The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha is generally understood as a collection of literature written by various Jewish and Jewish-Christian groups anytime between 250 BCE and 200 CE. Though some of the books that came to be collected together have overlapping topics, some of them have very little relation. Like a biblical canon, the collections of pseudepigrapha contain various genres and were written in different time periods.

Pseudepigrapha can be a misleading title though. For example, if the title implies that a text is “false,” or pure fiction, the value of the text comes into question, especially when the “false” text utilizes a character from other books that religious circles celebrate as part of their faith story. To say that a text is fictional, however, does not mean that it cannot share valid truths or life lessons. Take for example the contemporary category of historical fiction. We admit that it is fictional, but we acknowledge it may have value in depicting historical events for younger generations. Furthermore, some of the books that are considered

pseudepigraphic are included in some Bible canons (e.g. some deuterocanonical or Apocryphal books in the Catholic canon, Enoch in the Ethiopian Orthodox canon, etc.).

The concept of pseudepigrapha might also trigger someone to question the authority and sacredness of the books included in their Bible or canon. Despite these fears, pseudepigrapha are valuable for students of biblical literature. While pseudepigrapha are a treasure trove that could take years to explore, the following samples briefly engage two books whose connections to the Bible are more apparent than other pseudepigraphic texts.

Many pseudepigrapha were written as if elaborating what was left out of biblical stories. Take for example, the famous story of Joseph in Genesis 37-50. The biblical account reports that this brother had many dreams and was the envy of his brothers for the favor he received from his father. One day, they played a nasty trick on him and sold him into slavery; they told their father that he had passed away. The story in Genesis continues to share the misfortunes and jail time Joseph faced in Egypt. Then, one day, the tables turned and Joseph was consulted for his dream-reading abilities. Suddenly, Joseph becomes a representative of Pharaoh! In Genesis 41:45 & 50, readers hear that Joseph had two sons from his marriage to Asenath, daughter of Potiphera, priest of On. After the mere mention of Joseph's wife and family, the story of Joseph carries on with his brothers coming in search of food during the famine and the new family falls out of the picture.

Inspired by the Genesis story, the pseudepigraphon *Joseph and Aseneth* (the Greek spelling of Aseneth varies from the Hebrew), is the story of Joseph marrying the beautiful daughter of a wealthy Egyptian priest. It is as if the new story serves to share missing scenes that stand behind the mere two verses reporting Joseph's marriage. More than elaborating details, however, this composition engages a difficult issue for later generations: Can a person of Hebrew faith and loyalty to God marry someone of foreign, idolatrous practice? The romantic story reinforces the importance of religious identity for those living as a foreigner in a country with different religious practices. The story begins with Aseneth being repulsed by the thought of her father marrying her off to Joseph the Hebrew (*J&A* 4:9-12). Moments later, when Joseph visits her home, Aseneth has a change of heart and desires, "Joseph, a son of God" (*J&A* 6:3). Joseph will not have her, nor will he even accept a kiss as a greeting, for, "It is not fitting for a man who worships God, who will bless with his mouth the living God and eat blessed bread of life and drink a blessed cup of immortality and anoint himself with blessed ointment of incorruptibility to kiss a strange woman who will bless with her mouth dead and dumb idols and eat from the table bread of strangulation and drink from their libation a cup of insidiousness and anoint herself with ointment of destruction" (*J&A* 8:5-6). After such an insult, Joseph

blesses the broken, idolatrous woman, and she retires to her castle tower to cry, pray and fast.

The romantic story continues with a lengthy conversion that concludes with a visit by a heavenly figure who blesses her and gives her a new name. As readers of Genesis might guess, Joseph takes Aseneth to be his wife. Although *Joseph and Aseneth* contains new content for the Joseph story, the additional story is done within the spirit of the text. It does not undercut the story provided in Genesis, but answers later questions about marrying foreign wives (cf. Ezra 10). The pseudepigraphic story appears to provide permission for marriage to foreign women that are willing to convert and claim loyalty to Israel's God. The story compares to Esther's loyalty to the new family's God, even though she was a foreigner.

Aside from elaborating between the lines of biblical texts, some pseudepigrapha sought to smooth out tensions between texts. For example, Genesis provides the account of what some faith traditions interpret as the first sin, where Eve is tempted by the serpent to partake of the forbidden fruit, and, then, Adam follows (Genesis 2:15-3:24). While later pseudepigraphic literature affirms the story of Adam and Eve's disobedience, they contemplate who is to blame for sin or evil entering the world. Should the fault be understood as the first couple on earth or the continuous legacy of people choosing sin? Was humanity predestined to sin? Was humanity too weak to handle the temptation of an evil influence? Should God have made it impossible to sin?

Fourth Ezra (also known as 2 Esdras 3-14 in the Catholic and Orthodox Bibles) is written as a report from Ezra (also named Salathiel), a prophetic and priestly figure from Israel who has gone with the exiled into Babylon. Ezra recounts seven visions, in which he engaged both Uriel the angel and God the Most High in a dialogue on man's predicament. Although it was probably written far later, the story is situated in the context of the Babylonian exile. Trying to understand why Israel is experiencing the Babylonian exile, Ezra begins to question the origin of evil. Ezra debates God's plan for dealing with evil's presence in creation. He affirms the Genesis story, putting Adam at the beginning of sin. He is disturbed, however, that all nations come from Adam and only Israel appears to be punished or held accountable. Ezra does not understand how an idolatrous nation could dominate God's nation. Furthermore, Ezra does not understand why God would create a man who would be susceptible to ruining creation. In one of the book's most famous lines, Ezra laments, "O Adam, what have you done? For though it was you who sinned, the fall was not yours alone, but also ours who are your descendants" (4 Ezra 7:118). Is it fair that everyone be punished for something the first couple initiated?

The writers of pseudepigraphic texts probably did not write with the intention of replacing other sacred stories. Instead, by updating the stories to answer

questions relevant to their current contexts, they probably wrote to encourage continued sharing of the sacred stories and faith. This makes pseudepigraphic texts important to biblical studies because they help provide insight to religious groups that transmitted the biblical material, by exposing the questions and concerns that occupied their minds.

Studying the Pseudepigrapha provides a window into the lives of religious groups that preserved and passed on the biblical texts we have today. They help us to see what religious groups throughout different times held as most important to remember or believe. They also help us to see what questions about the sacred texts were particularly troublesome, as well as how religious groups maintained faith despite facing exile or destruction of the Jerusalem Temple.

In many ways, pseudepigrapha aid us to understand religious identity forged in the midst of transition and uncertainty (i.e. in exile, returning from exile, living under foreign rule, etc.). What did religious groups affirm as most important in belief, practice and identity, while living in the midst of foreigners? How did a religious group define themselves when forced into exile or while living under foreign oppression? How did the religious groups adapt the promises and stories of the past to the current experiences? When Temple practices in Jerusalem were not available, how did the religious community maintain their faith identity and practice? Through some of the more exotic, apocalyptic pieces, Pseudepigrapha can also provide a window into our understanding of the future hopes and expectations for these people of faith. The Pseudepigrapha are a rich collection of biblical literature that has often been ignored for its “false writing” title, but it is our loss to ignore these “false writings.”

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Additional Resources:

George W. E. Nickelsburg, *Jewish Literature Between the Bible and the Mishnah*, Second Edition (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2005).

James H. Charlesworth, *The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha*, Vol. 1-2 (Peabody: Hendrickson, 2010).

<http://www.st-andrews.ac.uk/divinity/rt/otp/relatedsites/> University of St. Andrews School of Divinity has compiled a list of online resources on the pseudepigrapha.

<http://ocp.tyndale.ca> The Online Critical Edition of the Pseudepigrapha is a developing resource produced by biblical scholars. It is missing some compositions, but this site appears to be a work in progress.

