

Enoch, the Angels, and Heavenly Books  
Leslie Baynes

One of the easiest ways to make a roomful of biblical scholars break into snickers is to mention “the assured results of modern scholarship.” That said, however, a cautious consensus has arisen in the guild concerning the ancient social context of *1 Enoch*; that is, that it issues from scribes. Although Gen 5:18-24 gives no indication that the character of Enoch has anything to do with scribes or scribalism, later texts certainly do. In *1 Enoch* 12:3 and 92:1, he is called a “scribe;” in 12:4, “scribe of righteousness,” and in 15:1, “scribe of truth.” He writes a petition at the request of the Watchers in 13:6, and he claims that his own writings are authoritative in chapters 81-82 and 100:6.<sup>1</sup> As George Nickelsburg writes, “the fictional Enoch presents his books as the embodiment of life-giving heavenly wisdom.”<sup>2</sup> Neither is *1 Enoch* the only text that makes these claims. *Jubilees* reports that he was “the first who learned writing and knowledge and wisdom,” that he “wrote a testimony and testified to the children of men throughout the generations of the earth,” and that he is in the garden of Eden “writing condemnation and judgment of the world” (*Jub.* 4:17-24). In the *Testament of Abraham* a huge angelic Enoch is the scribe of judgment (*Tab. Rec. B.* 10-11). In *2 Enoch* the title character transforms into a figure indistinguishable from one of the Lord’s “glorious ones,” and when the angel Vrevoil gives him a speed-writing pen, he becomes almost literally a super-star scribe (*2 Enoch* 22). In light of this material, it is not surprising that a consensus has arisen that the Enochic corpus comes from scribes.

With the preponderance of evidence suggesting that this literature emerged from a scribal context, what is to be done with this passage from the Similitudes of Enoch? In a list of fallen angels, we read

And the name of the fourth is Penemue. This one showed the sons of men the bitter and the sweet and showed them all the secrets of their wisdom. He gave humans knowledge about writing with ink and papyrus, and therefore many went astray from of old and forever and until this day. For humans were not born for this purpose, to confirm their trustworthiness through pen and ink. For humans were not created to be different from the angels, so that they should remain pure and righteous. And Death, which ruins everything, would not have laid its hand on them. But through this, their knowledge, they are perishing, and through this power it devours us (*I Enoch* 69:8-11).<sup>3</sup>

This critique of writing is unprecedented in pre-rabbinic Jewish texts,<sup>4</sup> and it is all the more striking in a text rooted in scribalism. Knowledge of writing causes many to go astray, and through this knowledge, people are subject to death? This is a rather shocking anomaly in the Enochic corpus and, in a more general sense, paradoxical in a written work that otherwise endorses writing. How then should one approach this passage? I believe that there are at least three promising avenues. The first is through a survey of early Jewish attitudes about the relationship between heavenly beings and heavenly books. The second is through comparisons of the passage with two Greek texts: Aeschylus' telling of the Prometheus story and Plato's myth of Theuth in the *Phaedrus*. The third is through a comparison of this passage with remarks about books and writing in the Epistle of Enoch. By these routes we can begin to make some sense of the condemnation of Penemue's teaching.

In the passage above, writing is the privilege of angels, and humans were not born for it. Without it, "Death would not have laid its hand on them." In the Hebrew scriptures and the literature of the Second Temple period, writing is almost always a matter of life and death, particularly when it is in the hands of a heavenly being of whatever sort. The Hebrew scriptures express this idea through neither philosophy nor myth, but it is present there nonetheless in the heavenly book motif.<sup>5</sup> Almost every time this motif appears, it in

some way mediates life and death. This is the case in Exod 32:32-33, the only occurrence of the motif in the Pentateuch. After the golden calf incident, “Moses returned to the Lord and said, ‘Alas, this people has sinned a great sin; they have made for themselves gods of gold. But now, if you will only forgive their sin—but if not, blot me out of the book that you have written.’ But the Lord said to Moses, ‘Whoever has sinned against me I will blot out of my book.’ ” Being written in this book, a book of life, signifies continued physical existence; being blotted from it indicates physical death. Psalm 69:28 echoes this idea: “Let them be blotted out of the book of the living; let them not be enrolled among the righteous.”

These are by no means the only early examples of the correlation between heavenly writing and life and death. The Psalmist notes, “Your eyes beheld my unformed substance. In your book were written all the days that were formed for me, when none of them as yet existed” (Psalm 139:16).<sup>6</sup> Here “your book” is a book of fate for the person whose length of days it predetermines. In Zechariah 5:1-5 the prophet sees a large flying scroll which

is the curse that goes out over the face of the whole land; for everyone who steals shall be cut off according to the writing on one side, and everyone who swears falsely shall be cut off according to the writing on the other side. I have sent it out, says the Lord of hosts, and it shall enter the house of the thief, and the house of anyone who swears falsely by my name; and it shall abide in that house and consume it, both timber and stones.

Neither a book of fate nor a book of life, this book might be called a book of action, a dynamic book with a mission, and within Zechariah’s apocalyptic vision, the letters of its law kill.

It is obvious that all of these books mediate life and death, but another commonality among them needs pointing out: all of them are in the possession of God.

As we progress from a survey of the earliest to later examples of heavenly writing, however, we observe that it moves into the hands of angels or other heavenly beings, particularly but not exclusively in apocalypses. This is not a surprising development since, as a rule, the figure of God recedes in this genre, and angels emerge as God's primary agents. From this point forward, if an apocalypse mentions who inscribes or maintains heavenly books, it is almost invariably a supernatural figure other than God. This is very much the case in *I Enoch*, where the only legitimate writers are angels and Enoch himself, who by virtue of his translation has become a supra-human figure. As we shall see, other writers are mentioned in *I Enoch* only to be most emphatically dismissed.

In the earliest sections of *I Enoch*, the Astronomical Book (AB) and the Book of the Watchers (BW), the only ones who deal with books and writing are Enoch (72:1, 81:1-2, 82:1-3; 12:6, 13:4-6, 14:4-7) and the angels Uriel (72:1, 81:1-2; 33:4) and Raphael (10:8). References to books and writing in chapters 71 and 82 of the Astronomical Book act as a frame, the purpose of which is to present the Astronomical Book itself as Enoch's own heavenly writing backed by the authority Uriel. It appears, however, that in the Book of the Watchers, writing is a privilege only of those angels who are in good standing. The fallen Watchers must throw themselves upon the mercy of Enoch the righteous scribe to plead their case: "They asked that I write a memorandum of petition for them, that they might have forgiveness, and that I recite the memorandum of petition for them in the presence of the Lord of heaven. For they were no longer able to speak or to lift their eyes to heaven out of shame for the deeds through which they had sinned and for which they had been condemned" (13:4-5). This written petition is a

matter of life and death for them, but even with Enoch as their advocate, their case is doomed. They receive eternal punishment for their deeds (14:4-7).

As is well known, there are two accounts of the sins of the fallen angels in the Book of the Watchers and two lists of their names: led by Shemihazah, a group descends to earth to breed with human women (6:1-7); led by Asael, a group descends to earth to teach people metallurgy, which they use to form weapons for war and jewelry for ornamentation, cosmetics, spells, herbology, and the interpretation of astronomical phenomena (8:1-3). This knowledge causes them to perish (8:4).

In light of this background we can return to *I Enoch* 69, that is, to Penemue and his introduction of writing, which also causes people to perish. Chapter 69 of the Similitudes, like the Book of the Watchers, contains two lists of angels: the first, 69:2-3, corresponds rather closely but not exactly to 6:7,<sup>7</sup> the group led by Shemihazah. The second, 69:4-12, is in some respects similar to and in others completely different from the list in 8:1-3 headed by Asael. While both of these lists first name the angels and then the teachings that they promoted, there is no overlap among the names and very little overlap regarding the teachings.<sup>8</sup> The teaching of Penemue on writing has no correspondence whatsoever with the list in the Book of the Watchers chapter 8. Thus we are still left with the question of why it is there and what its purpose is.<sup>9</sup>

However, there is one item, the use of metal to fashion weapons of war, that is common to 8:1-3 and 69:4-12, and this is in fact a good place to begin answering that question.<sup>10</sup> Several scholars, including George W. E. Nickelsburg<sup>11</sup> and Rüdiger Bartelmus,<sup>12</sup> have argued that the material having to do with metallurgy in the Book of the Watchers “has significant points of contact with the Prometheus myth, especially to

Aeschylus's version of it. Asael, a heavenly being, rebels against God by teaching humankind about metallurgy, mining, and the making of dyes—for all of which fire is essential. For his act of rebellion, Asael is bound ... [and] entombed". Prometheus "taught the mining of copper, iron, silver, and gold ... an expansion on the idea of his theft of fire". As punishment, he is first tortured and later entombed.<sup>13</sup>

Fire and mining are not the only things that Prometheus gave humanity in *Prometheus Bound*. Among many other gifts, Aeschylus also attributes to him the introduction of "writing (*grammata*), mother of the muses, memory of all" (*Prometheus Bound* 461, my translation). If, as seems likely, the story of Prometheus influenced the rendition of the fallen angels' teaching in the Book of the Watchers and subsequently in the Similitudes, it is conceivable that the later author of the Similitudes might have included yet another element from it, the introduction of writing.

There are, of course, several possible problems with this theory. George Nickelsburg addresses one and David Winston Suter another. Nickelsburg asks, "Is it likely that the Jewish author of the Asael myth read and used mythic material from pagan Greek writings or popular oral versions of this material?" He answers his question affirmatively: "If one dates the creation of the Asael myth to the fourth century B.C.E., before the reforms that led to the revolt and persecution by Antiochus, there are no clear reasons why Jews would be reticent to use pagan sources from their Greek environment."<sup>14</sup> The much later date of composition of the Similitudes does not at all preclude the continued and expanded use of this material. In fact, the complex interweaving of Hellenism and Judaism by the first century C.E. might make it even more probable.<sup>15</sup>

Another oddity regarding the use of the Aeschylus drama is that writing, like metal working, is a boon for humanity in *Prometheus Bound*, whereas in *1 Enoch* both technologies lead to the destruction not only of the giver but also of the recipients. Addressing this general concept, David Winston Suter notes that the Similitudes invert the Promethean myth. Suter writes, “as far as man is concerned, Prometheus is a hero, while the host of Asael are considered evil”. Later he notes that “Both versions of the angel-list tradition [8:1-3 and 69:4-12] claim that the angels led mankind astray by teaching them various arts and sciences ... This element of the tradition represents an inversion of the Promethean or culture-hero motif ... If one looks closely at the inversion of this motif, it reveals an ambivalence in the scribal tradition toward secret knowledge”.<sup>16</sup> Annette Yoshiko Reed applies Michael Stone’s work on “lists of revealed things” to this issue. She notes that “Stone has shown that the same formulaic lists were used to catalogue topics of apocalyptic speculation and to stress the limits of human knowledge. Such textual parallels point to the close connections between those who enthusiastically embraced speculative wisdom and those who emphasized the dangers inherent in the unrestrained search for knowledge.”<sup>17</sup>

It is easy to see that scribes (no less than anyone else) might differ regarding the benefits of skills such as metallurgy, which literally and metaphorically can produce two-edged swords, or about the sort of secret knowledge that can be obtained in dreams and heavenly journeys, which comprise such a large part of *1 Enoch*. In fact, we have strong indications that some scribes held quite a different view about dreams and heavenly journeys than those demonstrated in *1 Enoch*. Most famously comes Ben Sira:

The senseless have vain and false hopes, and dreams give wings to fools. As one who catches at a shadow and pursues the wind, so is anyone who believes in

dreams. What is seen in dreams is but a reflection, the likeness of a face looking at itself. From an unclean thing what can be clean? And from something false what can be true? Divinations and omens and dreams are unreal, and like a woman in labor, the mind has fantasies. Unless they are sent by intervention from the Most High, pay no attention to them. For dreams have deceived many, and those who put their hope in them have perished (Ben Sira 34:1-7).

So opposed are these remarks to *I Enoch* on this issue that Benjamin Wright has postulated that Ben Sira is explicitly in conflict with *I Enoch* about them.<sup>18</sup>

All of this is well and good. People of good will can in theory disagree about the multifarious uses and effects of relatively mundane technologies such as metallurgy and even esoteric practices such as heavenly journeys and dreams. It is as impossible, however, to imagine the Enochic scribes and their successors denigrating writing as it is to imagine Ben Sira doing so.<sup>19</sup> On this point, it seems clear that while the adaptation of the Promethean myth may begin to explain *how* the tradition of writing found its way into the list in *I Enoch* 69, it does not explain *why* by any means. Can writing, too, be a two-edged sword? There is no other pre-rabbinic Jewish text that hints at this idea. There is, however, a Greek text that does: the myth of Theuth in Plato's *Phaedrus*. Would the author of the Similitudes have known this text or been familiar with the ideas it propounded? It is probably just as likely or as unlikely as he would have known the Prometheus myth.

In the myth of Theuth, as in *Prometheus Bound*, a divine figure attempts to benefit humanity but is rejected by an authority figure. Theuth, the Egyptian ibis god, like Prometheus, wants to give humanity writing (*grammata*; 274 D). First, however, he pays a visit to the king of the Egyptians, Thamus, to get his opinion on the matter. Vaunting his own invention, Theuth tells Thamus that writing will make people wiser and improve their memories. Thamus will have none of it:

You who are the father of letters have been led by your affection to ascribe to them a power opposite of that which they really possess. For this invention will produce forgetfulness in the minds of those who learn to use it, because they will not practice their memory . . . You have invented an elixir (*pharmakon*) not of memory, but of reminding; and you offer your pupils the appearance of wisdom, not true wisdom” (275 A, trans. of H. N. Fowler, Loeb).

The word that Thamus uses to describe the real nature of writing is *pharmakon*, which is a word with many meanings: a drug or medicine, a remedy or poison, a dye, paint, or color, or a magical charm, spell, or enchantment.<sup>20</sup> It is, in fact, the word that the Greek Ahkmim papyrus of *1 Enoch* 7:1-2 uses for the things the Watchers taught their wives (*pharmakeias*),<sup>21</sup> and it is indeed an inspired choice to encompass the many secret teachings of fallen angels.

When Socrates concludes his myth, he tells Phaedrus that anyone who believes that anything in writing will be clear and certain is a simpleton, for “every word, once it is written, is bandied about, alike among those who understand and those who have no interest in it . . . when ill-treated or unjustly reviled it always needs its father to help it; for it has no power to protect or help itself” (275 C-E). Writing apart from its author is helpless; it needs powerful protection. So this myth, like the Similitudes, is a written work that undermines writing.

At this point we begin to come full circle with our investigation of the Penemue passage. In the first-second centuries C.E., that is, around and shortly after the time the Similitudes were written, we see reflections of Plato’s myth evidenced in the broader literate culture, i.e., in Papias.<sup>22</sup> These authors complain of the same things Socrates did regarding writing: once it leaves its “father,” it is at the mercy of misunderstanding or alteration. It needs protection. This seems to be the case with the works of Enoch as well. At the beginning of this paper I noted that in *1 Enoch*, the supra-human Enoch and the

angels are the only legitimate writers and book handlers. They are not, however, the *only* writers and book handlers in the text. The Epistle of Enoch makes this abundantly clear:

Woe to you who annul the words of the righteous; you will have no hope of salvation. Woe to those who write lying words and words of error; they write and lead many astray with their lies. You yourselves err; you will have no peace but will quickly perish. (98:14-16)

The opponents of the “righteous” annul their words and, even more, these opponents produce their own books, which “lead many astray,” just as Penemue “gave humans knowledge about writing with ink and papyrus, and therefore many went astray from of old and forever until this day.” Because of this, they perish. In Plato’s mythological world of Theuth, misunderstanding a text is a problem. But in early Judaism, writing is a matter of life and death. Used rightly, words lead to life, and wrongly, to death (cf. *1 Enoch* 99:2). But writing lying words is not the only fault of Enoch’s opponents. They also alter his words:

Do not err in your hearts or lie, or alter the words of truth, or falsify the words of the Holy One, or give praise to your errors. For it is not to righteousness that all your lies and all your error lead, but to great sin. And now I know this mystery, that sinners will alter and copy the words of truth, and pervert many and lie and invent great fabrications, and write books in their own names. Would that they would write all my words in truth, and neither remove nor alter these words, but write in truth all that I testify to them. And again I know a second mystery, that to the righteous and pious and wise my books will be given for the joy of righteousness and much wisdom. Indeed, to them the books will be given, and they will believe in them, and in them all the righteous will rejoice and be glad, to learn from them all the paths of truth. In those days, they will summon and testify against the sons of earth in their wisdom. (104:9-105:1)

It is unclear exactly what texts are being annulled in 98:14-16, but in the above passage, the unrighteous tamper with Enoch’s. The authors of the Enochic corpus are convinced that their works (and perhaps theirs alone?), preserved pure and entire in the

name of Enoch, will bring people to joy and righteousness and wisdom. Those of others who “write books in their own names,” will not.

The Epistle of Enoch was probably written in the second century B.C.E. and the Similitudes in the first century C.E. Did the author of the Similitudes read the Epistle and produce the Penemue passage in response to it, influenced as well by the Promethean and Platonic myths? To answer definitively in the affirmative at this point would be to go where angels fear to tread. However, if the author of the Similitudes could incorporate and reinterpret material from the earlier Book of the Watchers (and the Astronomical Book; cf. 60:11-22), surely he could do the same with the Epistle. There is, moreover, another correlation between these two sections of the Enochic corpus that bears mentioning and that makes an affirmative answer to the above question more likely. The “woes” directed at those who annul the words of the righteous and who write lies in 98:14-15 are followed almost immediately by a condemnation of those who sell, abandon, or abort their infants (99:5). In the Similitudes, the teaching of the fourth angel, Penemue, who introduces writing, is followed by that of the fifth angel, Kasdeya, who shows humanity “the blows of the foetus in the womb, so that it aborts” (69:12). These are the only two references to abortion in *I Enoch*, and both are preceded by condemnations of writing.

In conclusion, Enoch and the angels are the only legitimate writers and purveyors of writing in the Enochic corpus, but all writing, legitimate and illegitimate, is a matter of life and death there, just as it is elsewhere in early Jewish literature. Writing is a two-edged sword, a remedy *and* a poison, a *pharmakon*. It is too important to be in the hands of just anyone. To the Enochic scribes, Enoch, in company with the angels, is the writer

par excellence. Human beings were not created to be different from the angels, but the question is, which angels? Enoch stands with the righteous ones. Those who alter, distort, and deny his words are the students of Penemue. In light of this, one may ask: Did the scribes who authored the Enochic corpus consider their books heavenly books, and themselves, like the community at Qumran, in the company of the angels?<sup>23</sup>

<sup>1</sup> George W. E. Nickelsburg, "Wisdom and Apocalypticism," *Conflicted Boundaries in Wisdom and Apocalypticism*, ed. Lawrence M. Wills and Benjamin G. Wright (Symposium Series 35; Atlanta: SBL, 2005), 31.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>3</sup> Unless otherwise noted, all translations of *1 Enoch* are from George W. E. Nickelsburg and James C. VanderKam, *1 Enoch: A New Translation: Based on the Hermeneia Commentary* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2004).

<sup>4</sup> The most striking example of the rabbinic critique of writing is *Pesikta Rabbati* 5.1: "Moses asked that the Mishnah also be in written form, like the Torah. But the Holy One, blessed be He, foresaw that the nations would get to translate the Torah, and reading it, say, in Greek, would declare: 'We are the children of the Lord.' And Israel would declare: 'We are the children of the Lord.' The scales would appear to be balanced between both claims, but then the Holy One, blessed be He, will say to the nations: 'What are you claiming, that you are My children? I have no way of knowing other than that My child is he who possesses My secret lore [*mysterion*].' The nations will ask: 'And what is Thy secret lore?' God will reply: 'It is the Mishnah.'"

<sup>5</sup> Shemaryahu Talmon, "Literary Motifs and Speculative Thought in the Hebrew Bible," *Hebrew University Studies in Literature and the Arts* 16 (1988):150-51: "The conspicuous absence of conceptual systematization [in the Hebrew scriptures] engenders the surmise that the deficiency [*sic*] cannot be due to mere happenstance. It rather seems to be rooted in the biblical authors' intrinsic mode of thinking. On the whole, the ancient writers appear to have consciously abstained from abstractions, preferring to encapsulate their reflections in the matter-of-fact reporting of events ... It is my thesis that this unsatisfactory state of affairs can to some extent be remedied by giving adequate attention to literary conventions which the authors of biblical books repeatedly employ ... A discerning analysis will show that some such patterns, particularly motifs, are in fact condensed signifiers of speculative thought ... [Motifs] are rather deeply implanted in the collective experience and in the synchronous and diachronous memory of the author and of the audience to whom they address themselves."

<sup>6</sup> On the book of fate, see Koep, *Das Himmlische Buch in Antike und Christentum* (Theophaneia 8; Bonn: Peter Hanstein, 1952), 18; F. Nötscher, "Himmlische Bücher und Schicksalsglaube in Qumran," *RQ* 1 (1958-59): 405-11.

<sup>7</sup> Nickelsburg and VanderKam, *1 Enoch: A New Translation*, 88, note p.

<sup>8</sup> A full comparison of the two lists is beyond the scope of this paper. For more details, see Annette Yoshiko Reed, *Fallen Angels and the History of Judaism and Christianity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 113-116.

<sup>9</sup> Neither, for that matter, is it in another list of the teachings of the angels in 65:6.

<sup>10</sup> 8:1, "Asael taught men to make swords of iron and weapons and shields and breastplates and every instrument of war;" 69:6, "[Gadre'el] showed the shield and the coat of mail and the sword for battle and all the implements of death to the sons of men."

<sup>11</sup> "Apocalyptic and Myth in 1 Enoch 6-11," *JBL* 96 (1977): 383-405.

<sup>12</sup> *Heroentum in Israel und seiner Umwelt* (AThANT 65; Zurich: Theologischer Verlag, 1979).

<sup>13</sup> Nickelsburg, *1 Enoch* 1, 193.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>15</sup> John J. Collins and Gregory E. Sterling, eds., *Hellenism in the Land of Israel* (Christianity and Judaism in Antiquity 13; Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2001).

---

<sup>16</sup> David Winston Suter, *Tradition and Composition in the Parables of Enoch* (SBL Dissertation Series 47; Missoula: Scholars Press, 1979), 68-69, 83-84.

<sup>17</sup> Reed, *Fallen Angels and the History of Judaism and Christianity*, 43.

<sup>18</sup> Benjamin G. Wright III, "Putting the Puzzle Together: Some Suggestions Concerning the Social Location of the Wisdom of Ben Sira," *Conflicted Boundaries in Wisdom and Apocalypticism*, 100-103.

<sup>19</sup> Cf. Ben Sira 38:24-39:11.

<sup>20</sup> Jacques Derrida has a marvelous time playing with the multiple meanings of this word in "Plato's Pharmacy," *Dissemination* (trans. Barbara Johnson; Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1971), 65-171. For an application of this word and Derrida's ideas to other Jewish apocalypses, see Leslie Baynes, "At Play in the Fields of the Lord: 'Plato's Pharmacy' and God's Heavenly Book," *The Glass* (2006): 13-26.

<sup>21</sup> Nickelsburg, *1 Enoch 1*, 197.

<sup>22</sup> Loveday Alexander, "The Living Voice: Scepticism Towards the Written Word in Early Christian and in Graeco-Roman Texts," *The Bible in Three Dimensions: Essays in Celebration of Forty Years of Biblical Studies in the University of Sheffield*, ed. David J. A. Clines, Stephen E. Fowl and Stanley E. Porter (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1990), 220-47.

<sup>23</sup> For the purposes of this paper (presented at SBL 2006), I am out of time. The next question to be addressed, however, is how these theories, if they hold up, may correspond with Boccaccini's "Enochic party" and Qumran.