

# Did Moses and Enoch Write Their Eponymous Books?

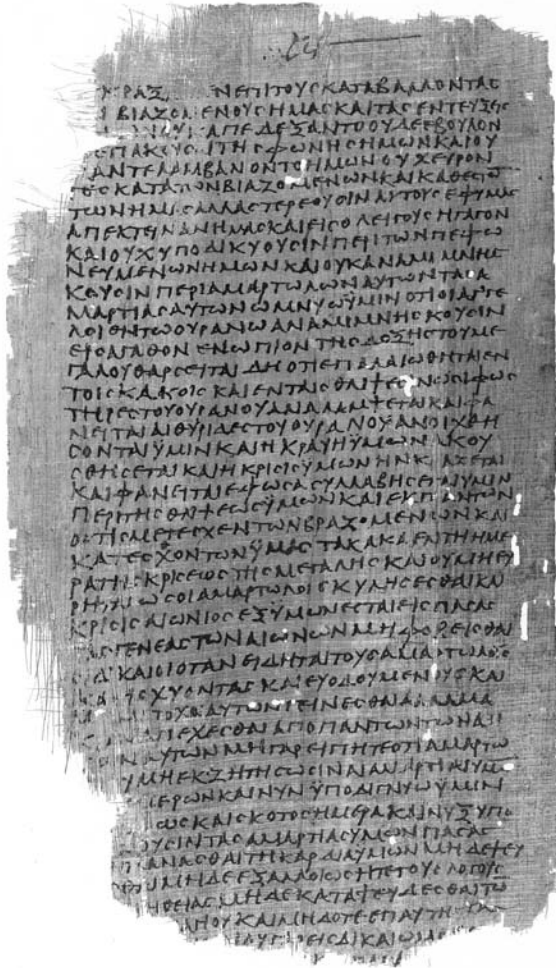
## *The Perspective of Ancient Judaism*

**T**he Bible has a long and complex history. The books that make up this library were composed over a long period of time by numerous authors from different places. Some of these books have self-identified or traditional authors, such as Moses for the Pentateuch, or Isaiah for the eponymous prophetic book. In the Second Temple period, they were copied on individual scrolls and circulated independently. They had not yet been compiled into what we now call the Bible. There was no universal agreement between various Jewish communities as to which books should be considered authoritative. The Book of Enoch, for instance, was highly regarded by some but rejected by others. As a result, it was later included in the Ethiopic Bible but excluded by rabbinical Judaism—hence its absence from the Tanakh and most Christian Bibles.

On what grounds was this decision made? Why was the Book of Isaiah included and not the Book of Enoch? According to Bishop Athanasius of Alexandria, who

discussed the issue in a festal letter written in 367 CE, the Book of Enoch should be rejected because it was not written by the real Enoch. It was written much later by people pretending to be Enoch. This practice is called “pseudepigraphy”—that is, writing under a false name. But, supposing that the Book of Enoch is a pseudepigraph, is this reason enough to exclude it from the Bible? Was pseudepigraphy universally rejected in the Second Temple period? Or were there ancient Jewish communities that ascribed authority to scriptures they knew were written under a false name?

I can think of various reasons why biblical pseudepigraphy may have been accepted and even valued. For instance, ancient Jewish authors may have believed that, in the process of a spiritual encounter with a famous biblical character such as Enoch or Moses, they received teachings or revelations, which they put in writing. A comparative study of similar practices in ancient and modern religious circles may indeed shed light on this phenomenon.



Greek version of the Epistle of Enoch (University of Michigan, P.Mich.inv. 5552, ca. 4th c. CE). The Book of Enoch is one of the most famous and controversial pseudepigrapha known to Ancient Judaism.

Alternatively, ancient writers may have considered themselves to be repositories of their pseudonyms's teachings. Parallels have been sought in the Greco-Roman world, where a philosopher's disciples would keep writing under his name long after his death. Eventually, a famous character might become the emblem of a school of thought, to the extent that its members develop a corporate personality. Moses, Enoch, and other biblical characters would thus be trademarks of a collective identity whose actual authors and redactors remained anonymous. One may even wonder whether these figures actually existed or ever wrote anything. If they are fictitious, can the authors of their pseudepigraphs be accused of forgery?

In arts and literature, "forgery" is often used pejoratively to denounce replicas or imitations made to deceive and pass for authentic. Greedy writers may produce pseudepigraphs of famous authors whose works are worth large sums of money. Pseudepigraphy is also an efficient way to propagate new ideas by benefiting from the authority of a famous character. Well-intended Jewish authors may thus have deliberately turned to pseudepigraphy. They consciously wanted new or modified writings to be accepted by their intended audience as originating from an authoritative figure. If so, their work may be classified as forgery, without necessarily ascribing a pejorative meaning to the term. This does not mean that all pseudepigraphs are forgeries; it is possible that a writer really

believed he received a revelation from a patriarch. All literary genres are concerned: prophetic books, narratives, wisdom literature, epistles, etc. Enoch is once again an excellent candidate, as the literature attributed to him uses several literary genres while remaining apocalyptic—that is, revelatory—in nature.

The University of Michigan Library thus conserves fragments of the Epistle of Enoch in Greek, copied around the fourth century CE (P.Mich.inv. 5552). In this epistle, the eponymous patriarch seems to warn against pseudepigraphers—or rather against those who would take advantage of this practice and pervert the traditions connected to him. If the author of the epistle is a pseudepigrapher himself, how ironic that he would condemn such practice! But this passage does not necessarily condemn all forms of pseudepigraphy; in fact, it could also be viewed as an invitation to pseudepigraphy, in which the author encourages pseudepigraphers to be faithful and accurate. If that is the case, he might actually be justifying his own work while providing some kind of ethical guidelines for fellow pseudepigraphers. But does faithfulness to tradition justify the production of a textual artifact that will pass for authentic? Would all Jews in the Second Temple period agree with this principle?

Philo of Alexandria, a Jewish philosopher writing in the first century CE, discusses Moses's authorship of the Pentateuch. If Moses indeed wrote the five books of the Torah, how could he recount his own

death and the events that followed in Deuteronomy 34:5–12? Instead of admitting that someone else may have written this passage, let alone the whole book, Philo insists that Moses was “inspired” and “under divine influence” to the point that, while still alive, he “prophesied” about his own death and the way he would be buried. Was Philo reacting against other Jewish communities that questioned Moses's sole authorship? If so, he was not alone. In the late first century CE, Jewish historian Josephus Flavius deals with the same issue and insists that Moses “himself wrote in the holy books that he died.” In other words, there is no room for shared authorship of the Pentateuch—not even a few verses, let alone pseudepigraphy.

Today, literary forgery raises a number of ethical issues, especially in a religious environment in which we deal with authoritative scriptures such as the Bible. Religious leaders claim to uphold truth and other moral values guided by biblical traditions. Is pseudepigraphy an exception to the rule? Can scriptures be faithful to the truth even if their authors wrote under a false name? Or should these books be discarded and removed from the Bible? Looking at Second Temple Judaism in its diversity sheds light on this issue and helps us find a way forward. ●