Davila, James R.

The Provenance of the Pseudepigrapha: Jewish, Christian, or Other?

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This innovative work by Professor James Davila focuses on the tricky problem of the religious origins of “Old Testament pseudepigrapha.” It provides scholars and students of pseudepigraphic literature not only with a new, well-thought-out methodology in order to approach these texts but also important case studies. However, the interest of this book exceeds the scope of the pseudepigraphic corpus. Indeed, it offers important insight into the difficult (and occasionally painful) question of how to categorize late antique religious forms of identity and community.

The issue of the provenance has been addressed in the past, for example by Marinus De Jonge and Robert Kraft. Elaborating on his predecessors’ works, Davila questions two widespread assumptions: (1) that a lack of explicitly Christian features (e.g., references to Christ) in an Old Testament pseudepigraphon indicates that it is Jewish; and (2) that Christian features that can be removed from an Old Testament pseudepigraphon without damage to the sense should lead us to consider them as Christian interpolations on a Jewish work. According to Davila, who follows Kraft’s line of argument, the study of the origin of these pseudepigraphic works should begin with the earliest physical evidence for these works, namely, the earliest manuscripts and quotations (as Davila rightfully adds).
Elaborating on these insights, in the first part of the book Davila offers a carefully thought out methodology aiming to identify the possible religious origins of Old Testament pseudepigrapha. This methodology is largely based on the recognition of the presence of what he labels “signature features” as well as a rejection of the lack of such signature features as a relevant criterion of identification. In the second part, he implements this methodology to examine a number of these pseudepigrapha.

Some readers will perhaps be tempted to understand Davila’s book as an attempt to identify as Christian a certain amount of pseudepigrapha that are usually considered Jewish. Indeed, according to Davila, a pseudepigraphon should be studied primarily in the light of the earliest context in which it is found, and since the earliest evidence in most cases is found in Christian manuscripts, several of these pseudepigrapha, according to Davila, prove to be Christian. As he points out in a footnote, his working hypothesis may appear to conceal “a form of Christian hegemony and [a] Christian expropriation of Jewish traditions” (6 n. 10, quoting Ross Kraemer’s *When Aseneth Met Joseph*). Yet Davila’s intellectual rigor should allay anyone’s suspicions of a hidden agenda. First of all, he does not suggest taking the earliest Christian evidence for these pseudepigrapha as a proof of their Christian origins but rather as the starting point from which to work backwards. Second, by laying out a new methodology in order to identify the religious origins of a pseudepigraphon, he in fact contributes to a healthy reassessment of our textual evidence for early Judaism—a central assumption behind his work is that “for the purpose of reconstructing ancient Judaism a false negative is less harmful than a false positive” (7).

Needless to say, the use of categories such as “Jewish” and “Christian” in a late antique context poses many problems that are addressed in chapter 1. This chapter is probably the most important one from a methodological point of view. It consists of a discussion of the different religious categories of late antiquity that should be of interest not only to the students of pseudepigraphic literature but also to historians of religion. The questions raised in this chapter focus on a number of issues: What kind of reality do “Judaism” and “Christianity” cover during this period, given the multiplicity in their forms? How can we tell them apart? What are we to do with groups that are close to but not part and parcel of Judaism or Christianity (e.g., sympathizers and God-fearers)? In all cases, Davila is careful to insist on the existence of a continuum between “Judaism,” “Christianity,” and “polytheism.”

As far as Judaism is concerned, Davila adopts Jonathan Smith’s “polythetic” classification: instead of using an essentialist definition of Judaism, he provides a certain number of criteria from which no single one need be present in every form of Judaism (20). Another section (23) is devoted to “Jews and non-Christian Gentiles.” Admitting that his choice of
categories is “to some degree arbitrary,” Davila works with four groups: “proselytes,” “God-fearers,” “sympathizers,” and “syncretistic Jews.” Proselytes as potential authors of Old Testament pseudepigrapha are rightfully regarded by him as Jewish, since the difference is undetectable; God-fearers are taken as potential authors of Old Testament pseudepigrapha; sympathizers can include Hyspistarians, the author of the Poimandres, and authors of Greek magical papyri; and, finally, syncretistic Jews may be represented, albeit with some caution, by Artapanos. This last category seems to me to be incorrect and irrelevant to Davila’s purpose. The idea of a continuum between Jews and polytheists also makes it useless. In my view, just as a Jewish proselyte should be viewed as a Jewish author, a syncretistic Jew should be seen as a Jewish author.

As for Jewish-Christians, Davila adopts E. Brown’s suggestion that we must think in terms of a continuum between (Mosaic law) observant and nonobservant Christians rather than between Jewish and Gentile Christianity. Indeed, in this case, too, the various forms of Jewish Christianity and Judaizing Gentile Christianity make it epistemologically impossible to identify a work as “Jewish-Christian.” In addition, Davila discusses possible Samaritan and Galilean authorship (based on R. Horsley’s views of the survival of Israelite culture in Galilean culture of the Hasmonean period, which he rejects).

Choosing the “continuum” as a model in order to understand the various religious groups that could have authored Old Testament pseudepigrapha, Davila emphasizes the complexity of the religious phenomenon of this period. This complexity makes it highly difficult (impossible?) to identify the origin of a pseudepigraphon. We are thus left with the question of whether it is epistemologically and methodologically relevant to even try to determine the religious provenance of this literature.

It seems that Davila’s main problem is that the “real,” “historical” religious identity of the author is, in many cases, not adequately reflected in the text she or he has written. Only works by “boundary-maintaining” authors (as Davila puts it) may be identified. Yet even in this case this endeavor may prove to be difficult. For example, Davila shows in chapter 2 how a “boundary-maintaining” Christian author such as Augustine could produce a text that may look authentically Jewish. He shows that undeniably Christian authors, such as Ephrem, dealing with Old Testament topics and characters felt no need to insert Christian signature features into their productions. Although Davila uses this demonstration as an argument to question the identification of a number of pseudepigrapha as Jewish, I think it points even more to the difficulty of attempting to solve the question of the provenance.

Regarding this question, it seems to me that Davila’s book faces two main difficulties, and I am not sure they can be solved. First of all, there is a discrepancy between the “historical” religious continuum analyzed by Davila and the manner in which the beliefs
and practice of the different communities and individuals included in this continuum are reflected in their literary production. In addition, a literary production reflects not only the supposed religious identity of its author but also the sources used, which may not belong precisely to the same religious sphere (cf., e.g., the case of the Christian authors who used Jewish sources).

Second, there is a contradiction between Davila’s use of the model of the continuum in order to describe the religious world of late antiquity and the use of fixed religious categories (e.g., Jewish, Christian, sympathizer, Gentile judaizing Christian, etc.) required by his endeavor to identify the religious origin of the Old Testament pseudepigrapha. Indeed, the concept of a continuum implies that there are many nuances in the late antique religious experience and that they hardly let themselves be pigeonholed. In contrast, the process of provenance identification necessitates clear categories. These problems occasionally appear in the practical cases exposed in the second part of the book (see below).

In the second part of the book Davila turns to a number of examples of pseudepigrapha in which he applies his methodology. First he confirms the Jewishness of several writings that are usually accepted as Jewish, such as the Letter of Aristeas, and the Philonic and Josephan corpus. This theoretical exercise serves to legitimize the methodological principles laid out in the previous chapters. In addition to these texts, the Jewish provenance of other writings is on some occasions asserted and on others denied. For instance, Davila raises doubts about the Jewish origin of sections from the Sibylline Oracles 3 and 5 and from the Story of Sozimus and of the full text of Pseudo-Phocylides, Testament of Job, Testament of Abraham, and Wisdom of Solomon.

I do find some discrepancies between theory and practice when it comes to Davila’s analysis of various texts. Let us take the example of 2 Baruch. Davila argues, against Rivka Nir’s new study, that 2 Baruch should be considered Jewish because of the central importance it gives to the law and its “robust nationalist identity.” Davila also uses the argument of the lack of Christian signature features (128–30) to claim the Jewish origin of 2 Baruch. I find these arguments problematic because Davila’s reasoning contradicts his methodology. For instance, he argues that a lack of Christian signature features is not a valid argument to identify a text as Jewish. Moreover, it seems to me that by discussing this work in the framework of the clear-cut categories of Judaism versus Christianity, he contradicts his discussion on the religious continuum connecting Judaism, Christianity, and polytheism. This indicates, in my opinion, the difficulty of (1) avoiding the use of the argument e silentio, and (2) escaping arbitrary categories constructed in light of our contemporary knowledge of religious experience. Despite his discussion of the ancient
religious continuum mentioned above, Davila seems, as it were, stuck in the everlasting debate of “Jewish” versus “Christian” origin.

Nevertheless, it should be pointed out that Davila significantly enriches the discussion on the religious origins of the pseudepigrapha by attempting to think “outside” of these categories. Indeed, he offers one of the only serious methodological discussions on the possibility that some pseudepigrapha were authored by God-fearers or Gentiles, proselytes and sympathizers to Judaism. Although a lack of evidence makes it impossible to reach any definite conclusions in most cases, it is certainly worth taking his hypotheses into consideration.

There are many other reasons Davila’s book deserves the attention of the scholarly community. Indeed, the methodology proposed in his book lays the groundwork for new research on the pseudepigrapha. Moreover, as Davila rightly puts it, “the approach in this book allows us to articulate more clearly what we know and do not know, and how we know what we know and why we do not know what we do not know” (233). However, the subject he tackles is a very complicated one because it is closely related to our (re)construction of religious categories. As I pointed out earlier, the discrepancy between the “historical” religious identity of an author (or community) and the manner in which this identity is reflected in pseudepigraphic texts should lead us to change the way we study this literature. It is very difficult to determine the origin of this literature, even if we start from the earliest material evidence, that is, in most cases, Christian manuscripts. A more secure approach may be to focus on the reception of pseudepigraphic literature in Christianity. Indeed, this is a fascinating story that stands on firmer ground.