

Theology on the Web.org.uk

Making Biblical Scholarship Accessible

This document was supplied for free educational purposes. Unless it is in the public domain, it may not be sold for profit or hosted on a webserver without the permission of the copyright holder.

If you find it of help to you and would like to support the ministry of Theology on the Web, please consider using the links below:



Buy me a coffee

<https://www.buymeacoffee.com/theology>



PATREON

<https://patreon.com/theologyontheweb>

PayPal

<https://paypal.me/robbradshaw>

A table of contents for *The Expository Times* can be found here:

https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_expository-times_01.php

pdfs are named: [Volume]_[Issue]_[1st page of article].pdf

Popular Books among the Jews in the Time of Our Lord.¹

BY THE REV. PROFESSOR ALLAN MENZIES, D.D., ST. ANDREWS.

It is of great importance to the student of the New Testament, and especially to the student of our Lord's life, to know what the Jews were thinking and expecting in Jesus' time. The latest book of the Old Testament dates more than four centuries B.C. In what direction did Jewish thought travel during these four centuries? The ideas and wishes of the contemporaries of Christ can scarcely be identical with those of the Old Testament, any more than the ideas even of the most conservative among ourselves are identical with those which are expressed in the Westminster Confession of Faith. Thought never stands still, and it did not stand still with the Jews, even when the age of prophecy was past. In the Gospels, accordingly, we find ourselves in a very different world from that of the prophets of the Old Testament. Circumstances have changed, new ways of thinking have appeared, new figures move before the eye of faith, new hopes are felt. The current belief of the Jews in Christ's time differs from the current beliefs of the time of Ezra, about such subjects as angels, the future life, the Messiah, and many others, in a way which every one must at once recognise.

Where can we learn what were the current ideas and beliefs of the Jews at the beginning of the Christian age? The New Testament itself, of course, tells us a great deal about this; but on many points it excites rather than satisfies our curiosity. You cannot, for example, construct from the Gospels the belief the Jews entertained about the Messiah. Various notions of the Messiah cross and recross each other there; at one point the Messianic question seems to be one of intense interest to the fellow-countrymen of Jesus, at another they seem to care very little about it; it is hard to make out whether or not they knew what Jesus meant when He called Himself the Son of Man. If we could gather from sources outside

the New Testament what state of mind these people were in, and what ideas they had, a flood of light would be cast on the Gospel narrative.

Now, one learns what a people think from the books which are written and read among them. And the study of Jewish literature has lately been assuming far more importance than before for the reader of the Gospels. In the Jewish books, it is felt, we may learn what people were thinking when Jesus came, and so Jewish literature is being ransacked by those who deal with the life of Christ; and we are likely to get plenty more of it.

It has been the Rabbinical literature to which most of this attention has been directed. In the Rabbinical literature we have the scholastic learning of the Jews, the learning which the scribes carried on in their schools. Certain methods are used in dealing with Scripture which lead to the development of laws and practices not enjoined in the law; the system of the tradition is built up, and every subject of interest is treated according to fixed rule. Recent lives of Christ are full of Rabbinical quotations; by these, it is supposed, we learn what the Jews thought about the forgiveness of sins, about the world to come, about the Messiah and His forerunners, and so on.

The two works before us deal with a widely different branch of Jewish literature. The labours of the scribes, indeed, were not committed to writing in Jesus' day, they did not form books at all till several generations afterwards; but there were books in His day, written not long before, and expressing popular ideas and hopes in a way the labours of the scribes could never do. The discussions of the scribes originated in the world of learning, and appealed mainly to the learned; but in the other literature we speak of, imagination played a much greater part than learning. The spirit turned from the humiliating present to a

¹ *Books which Influenced Our Lord and His Apostles: Being a Critical Review of Apocalyptic Jewish Literature.* By JOHN E. H. THOMSON, B.D. Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark. 8vo, 1891, 10s. 6d.

Pseudepigrapha: An Account of certain Apocryphal Writings of the Jews and Early Christians. By W. J. DEANE, M.A. Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark. 8vo, 7s. 6d.

future in which Israel should be freed from all humiliation, and set on high above all enemies; it turned also from the dry, formal discussions of law to a region in which thought was free, and could fashion the course of events to its desires. It is one of the strangest contrasts to be seen in any part of history, that at the same time when the scribes were seeking to embrace the whole of life in a great set of regulations, the imagination of the people, free from all restraints, whether of past history or of present likelihood, was painting splendid pictures of the future of Israel in the Apocalypses.

Of the apocryphal books which formed part of the Septuagint, and are printed in many English Bibles, very scanty traces are to be found in the New Testament; it appears that these books, which were written in Greek, and in which the Messianic hope is strikingly absent, were little read in Palestine. Of the various Revelations, however, there are many evidences in the New Testament; in the short Epistle of Jude, two of them are referred to, Enoch and the Assumption of Moses, in the passage about the body of Moses. The sawing asunder of Old Testament martyrs, mentioned in Heb. xi., is taken from the "Ascension of Isaiah." And several other instances might be mentioned.

These books form a very curious literature. The name "Pseudepigrapha," or "Falsely named," by which they are often distinguished, is derived from the fact that each of them assumes the name of some Old Testament worthy. Sometimes it is the account of the ascent of such an one to heaven, of what he saw there, and of the predictions that were there put in his mouth; thus we have the Book of Enoch and the Ascensions of Moses and of Isaiah. Sometimes the seer of old gives his prophecy to his posterity as his last legacy; thus we have the Testaments of the Three Patriarchs, of the Twelve Patriarchs, and of Moses. Sometimes a revelation is made to a character of the Old Testament in his lifetime; thus there is the Apocalypse of Baruch, of Ezra, and of others. There are also many pseudepigraphic works of a legendary character, in which the element of prediction is less pronounced, such as the "Book of Jubilees" or the "Little Genesis," the Book of "Jannes and Jambres," mentioned by Origen, but not now extant, etc. This literature deals largely with the future. Most of the books are apocalyptic in their character—that is to say, they predict the future, not in the grand undefined way of the older pro-

phets, but precisely, dealing with dates, figures, and measurements, and long chains of events to happen in this exact succession.

Here, then, we have a set of books as different as possible in spirit and method from the scholastic Rabbinical literature which has often been regarded as the one sole source, outside the Bible, of our knowledge of Jewish thought in our Lord's time. From these strange works, we learn how the Jew felt and thought who had not offered himself up entirely to the study of the law, and how there was a growth of thought in Palestine which was not the direct outcome of that study nor in bondage to it. No wonder that scholars are turning with eager interest to this branch of Jewish literature, which appears to put before us the thoughts and aspirations of a freer and more living section of the Jewish nation than were the scribes and Pharisees.

Of the books of this nature which may now be read, the majority have come to light but recently. The Book of Enoch, for example, was first edited, in Ethiopic, in 1838; the Book of Jubilees, also in Ethiopic, in 1859; the Ascension of Moses in 1861. Thus we are only beginning to realise the nature of a literature the study of which no one can doubt must have a great influence on our understanding of the gospel narrative. Before any theory can be framed of the relation between the ideas of these books and those of the Gospels, before any history of Jewish thought can be constructed out of them, criticism has to do its work upon them; and it cannot be said that critical discussions of their date, their original language, the meaning of their dark and enigmatical figures and impersonations, are by any means at an end. In Mr. Deane's excellent book, *Pseudepigrapha*, it is these questions that claim our attention. This book consists of a set of essays written at different times, in each of which one of these works is discussed, and which are now collected into a volume. Mr. Deane makes no attempt to construct a history of Jewish thought out of the works he deals with; each book is taken by itself, and, after a careful and thorough statement of the history of its text and editions, as well as of the references to it in the Fathers, the teaching of the book is described, and in the most cautious way it is suggested that the book "helps us to estimate the moral, religious, and political atmosphere in which Christ lived," or that the book illustrates the point that

at the beginning of the first Christian century "the expectation of a Messiah was not universal" among the Jews. Mr. Deane's book is thus a collection of critical studies, from which the inferences are scarcely drawn by him. Nor does he treat by any means all the works included in his title; for a complete list and a discussion of the whole subject, the reader will have to turn to Schürer's *History of the Jewish People*, or to Zöckler's (untranslated) ninth volume of the *Kurzgefasster Commentar* of the Old Testament, in which he treats the Old Testament Apocrypha, and gives an appendix on the Pseudepigraphic literature. Within its limits, Mr. Deane's book is certainly a scholarly and useful work, which every student of the subject will do well to possess.

Mr. Thomson's *Books which Influenced our Lord and His Apostles*, announces by its title that it has a theory on the subject. For this we praise him. The principle of self-denial which leads English scholars to refrain from theory, and labour at facts on which a sound theory may some day be erected, is in some degree a noble one; but it makes the studies to which it is applied very dry and uninteresting, and repels the reader who cannot follow detailed investigation, and yet wants some guidance on the subject. Many cannot wait till such elaborate foundations be completed; they must have a house of some kind to live in, even now. And, besides, it seems to be a law of intellectual advance that progress is made by the imagination putting forth hypotheses to be proved or disproved by the facts, as they are examined more carefully.

Whether Mr. Thomson's theory will stand or no, is a different matter. With regard to his title, which is a sufficiently striking one, we had the impression at first that Mr. Thomson could not mean what his title says. Mr. Deane contends for no more than that the Apocalyptic writings give us information about the state of opinion and sentiment in the early Christian age. One might without any irreverence go further, and argue that our Lord was influenced by the views and feelings of the society into which He was born, and that these writings are evidence of the state of things He thus inherited. But that the Book of Enoch, or the Psalms of Solomon, or the Assumption of Moses were books He knew, and that they helped to lead His thoughts, this we did not suppose the writer could mean. He does mean this, however, though he does very little, so far as we have seen, to specify what elements in our Lord's teaching or attitude may have been derived from such sources. Neither in his Introduction, where he states the theory he holds on the subject, nor in his elaborate discussions of the various apocalyptic writings (where we notice interesting differences between his conclusions and those of Mr. Deane), does he seriously set himself to trace in what way

our Lord was influenced by these books. The books were strongly Messianic, and our Lord uses the Messianic title "Son of Man," which is peculiar to them in the Jewish literature of the day. Other instances of contact it is said might be brought forward (but we have not noticed them). And the apostles use phrases derived from these books, and directly refer to some of them. This is all Mr. Thomson adduces in direct vindication of his title. He gives us an excellent description of the state of the Jews, and of their sects in Jesus' time; and engages in learned critical dissertations on the apocalypses, in which there is much that is of value; but we look in vain for any analysis of the teaching or of the career of the Lord which should prove that or how these works had moved Him.

Instead of this analysis, Mr. Thomson presents us with a theory of the origin of the apocalypses, and of our Lord's external connection with that origin. The apocalyptic writings, it is said, "were the product of that mysterious sect the Essenes." "They were the secret sacred books of the Essenes." But the Essenes, according to our author, were not merely those ascetic communistic bodies dwelling in remote parts of the country, with which we have usually connected the name; they were dispersed all over the country; they almost certainly had a locale at Nazareth; and around the strict observers of the vows of the sect there was a large mass of sympathisers less closely connected with it. Joseph and Mary may have belonged to this outer circle of Essenes, and our Lord may have been present at evening meetings of the Essenes of Nazareth, and there heard the sacred books, such as that of Enoch, which speaks of the Messiah as the "Son of Man," solemnly recited.

It is a great pleasure to see a work of such genuine learning, and such true perception of the problems of theology, issuing from a Scottish manse. Even by his title Mr. Thomson has done much to awaken an inquiry which must be faced in order to a true understanding of the Gospels. His theory, no doubt, will be much questioned. Is it legitimate, it must be asked, to speak of the Essenes in such a wide sense, as if all the genuine piety and all the longing for the promises, which existed at that time in Palestine, belonged to this one sect? Do the sources warrant the belief that all who were pious by other rules than those of the scribes and Pharisees and Sadducees might be called Essenes? Was the development of the national hope confined to this body? On these and on many points we have noticed in Mr. Thomson's book we cannot agree with him; but for all that we hail his work with genuine admiration and real pleasure, as a sign of good things to come for Scotland.