CHAPTER TWO

THE PSEUDEPIGRAPHA AND CHRISTIANITY, REVISITED:
SETTING THE STAGE AND FRAMING SOME
CENTRAL QUESTIONS

1. Introduction

As those who know me well will understand, I am not usually in favor of simply reading formal prepared papers to groups of informed scholars as a way of advancing study of the topics at hand. I think that such an uninterrupted public oral approach often is ineffective, and in any event may be an irresponsible use of available time and resources. Thus I propose to follow up on the excellent general opening remarks made earlier by Dan Harlow, to present some additional ideas about the topic, and to encourage input and discussion from the group as we proceed. Perhaps then we can make better progress towards identifying issues that call for closer attention.

As usual, my focus is on method—on self-conscious and consistent approaches to the subject, exercising as much “control” as possible, by which I mean operating from the more securely known aspects to the more problematic.

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1 Based on a presentation made at the SNTS Congress in Tel Aviv, Israel, in August 2000, a version of which appeared in *JSJ* 32 (2001) 371–95; an updated version has been made available on the internet.

2 The primary background for this discussion is my article drafted for the 1976 SNTS meeting at Duke University a quarter century ago (above, Chapter One). In what appears below, I’m especially grateful for the comments and suggestions from the participants of the 2000 SNTS Seminar, most notably from Jan Willem van Henten, and subsequent to the Seminar from Ross S. Kraemer and Marinus de Jonge. The central point(s) that I want the reader to take from this presentation are that the subject is extremely complex, and in many respects the surface of scholarly research has barely been scratched. In what follows, I attempt to examine various facets of the situation, from various vantage points, and with particular focus on the methodological problems encountered. Relevant literature in the subject area is vast, and I do not try to do much more here than to give some pointers to recent research. I apologize for the repetitions, which reflect my frustrations in finding effective ways to approach this complex subject.

With most of the materials of interest for this study—“Jewish sources”—our main avenue of discovery starts in Christian contexts. That is, with rare exceptions provided mainly by discovery of ancient manuscripts (most notably the Dead Sea Scrolls) and by continuous Jewish transmission, our knowledge of “Jewish sources” relating to the period of Christian origins comes through Christian interests and transmission. While this fact is widely recognized, it is not always taken seriously in the study of those materials. For example, while we are often warned—quite appropriately—that the rabbinic Jewish sources are relatively “late” in their preserved forms and therefore can only be used with great care and caution in the study of Christian origins, the same sort of methodological circumspection seldom is voiced with regard to the use of the “pseudepigrapha” and related materials, which are often also relatively “late” as we find them in their preserved forms and have come to us through clearly Christian hands and interests. (For examples see further below.)

This does not mean that it is impossible to use such materials to “get back” to the earlier period that may be the focus of our interest, any more than the rabbinic sources should be considered irrelevant or impervious for such purposes. What it does mean is that similar care is necessary in determining how to use these materials responsibly. They are, first of all, “Christian” materials, and recognition of that fact is a necessary step in using them appropriately in the quest to throw light on early Judaism. I call this the “default” position—sources transmitted by way of Christian communities are “Christian,” whatever else they may also prove to be.

This is not a new insight, as is clear from reading many of the pioneers of the study of these materials (e.g., Batiffol, M.R. James, Harnack). But it is an insight that tends to get lost as scholarly confidence grows in our ability to recognize what is “Jewish” (or otherwise non-Christian) in the sources. Yet that ability, as with all historical research, is not something static. New discoveries and new insights change the playing field in various ways, sometimes almost imperceptibly, some-

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