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NEW LIGHT SHED ON ANCIENT JEWISH AND CHRISTIAN TEXTS

Ancient Bible-like tales written by Jews, Christians and pagans dating from the 3rd century BC to the beginning of the Middle Ages are to be translated - many for the first time - by divinity scholars.

Researchers at the University of St Andrews have launched a major project to translate the ancient texts, some written in the name of Old Testament characters such as Moses and Enoch, into English. The tales include legends about numerous biblical characters, books of proverbs and wise sayings, sermons, magical and astrological handbooks, poetry, visions, oracles, and apocalyptic prophecies.

Often described as 'quasi-biblical', the texts do not tell us more about the Bible or its history, but they are important because they provide unique insights into the ways in which later people in the ancient church, the ancient synagogue, and even the ancient pagan temple interpreted biblical stories.

The documents demonstrate that ordinary Jews and Christians wanted to know more about biblical characters and enjoyed imaginative literature that told good stories about them. The new translations will make the lost writings accessible to the modern Western world for the first time, since many of them have never before been translated into English.

Dr James Davila and Professor Richard Bauckham of the School of Divinity at St Andrews will head a team of thirty international researchers. An £84,500 research grant to the University from the Leverhulme Trust has meant that a research fellow could be appointed to co-ordinate the project. Dr Alexander Panayotov is a Bulgarian scholar who has recently published a collection of ancient Jewish inscriptions from Eastern Europe. It is expected that another ten to twenty more researchers will be recruited as new texts are identified.

The texts, dating from the third century BCE (BC) to the year 600 CE (AD), are known as 'Old Testament Pseudepigrapha'; ancient texts similar to biblical texts, but written much later by unknown authors. These books retell Old Testament stories or reuse Old Testament themes, and also include stories about Jews in the Second Temple period (536 BCE to 70 CE) and even of pagan prophets of the biblical period. Texts of this nature were among the important documents found in the Dead Sea Scrolls, famously discovered in caves in the middle of the 20th century.

Dr Davila explained: "Some of these books are surprisingly unorthodox. We learn, for example, that some Christians and Jews enjoyed provocative stories about miscegenation between angels and human beings; some wrote oracles in the name of a pagan prophetess; and some even ignored biblical laws against magic, making use of spells and incantations that were attributed to biblical characters and which even invoked pagan gods."

The fifty documents about to be translated have been discovered in a variety of locations over the years by historians. Though many documents only survive in small fragments on papyrus or parchment made from animal skin, complete parchment and paper manuscripts of others from late antiquity or the Middle Ages still exist and are preserved in museums and libraries throughout Europe and the Middle East, and even in India. It is not known how

many texts of this nature exist, but the researchers are still actively exploring libraries in Russia, Greece and other countries for additional manuscripts.

The documents include the tantalisingly entitled 'Testament of Adam', 'Apocalypse of the Seven Heavens', 'Apocryphon of Jacob and Joseph', 'Queen of Sheba', 'the Cave of Treasures', 'the Book of Giants' and 'Visions of Heaven and Hell'. There are several texts written about Moses and Joseph, as well as papyrus fragments of unknown texts. One book contains claims that documents were hidden in the Pyramids when they were built; others are apocalypses, claiming to reveal heavenly secrets and mysteries of the final judgment.

Another text to be translated was very popular in the medieval West: 'Signs of the Judgement' is a set of cosmic signs that supposedly tell when the Day of Judgment is approaching. 'The Book of Mysteries' is a Jewish handbook of magical incantations and spells that sometimes invoke pagan gods, while two books of oracles are attributed to the pagan prophetesses called 'Sibyls', who also figure prominently in Michelangelo's Sistine Chapel ceiling paintings.

The new translations will build upon a 20-year-old collection of Pseudepigrapha, 'The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha' edited by James H. Charlesworth, which is an indispensable resource for scholars in the fields of early Judaism, New Testament, and early Christianity. The need for a supplementary collection has become clear in recent years. Not only will the new edition include a comprehensive list of all known (surviving or lost) Old Testament Pseudepigrapha from antiquity to the present, but it will revisit some of Charlesworth's texts with some important new textual evidence.

Professor Bauckham added: "Many of these texts that were written originally in Hebrew, Aramaic or Greek have survived only in translation into the languages of various Christian traditions: Latin, Syriac, Arabic, Ethiopic, Coptic, Old Slavonic, Armenian, Georgian and Old Irish. They were often edited and reshaped in a variety of forms at different times and places.

"Many were popular in the Christian churches of the East - Ethiopia, Egypt, Syria, Arabia, Armenia - but unknown in the West, so publishing them will help to open up those neglected Christian traditions to modern Western readers."

For more information see: <http://www.st-andrews.ac.uk/academic/divinity/MOTP/index-motp.html>

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NOTE TO EDITORS:

Dr Davila is available for interview on 01334 462834 or 462850 / 51 or email jrd4@st-andrews.ac.uk

NOTE TO PICTURE EDITORS:

An image of one of the texts (the opening verses of the Syriac Apocalypse of Baruch) is available from the Press Office – contacts below.

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On behalf of the University of St Andrews

Contact Gayle Cook, Press Officer on 01334 467227 / 462529, mobile 07900 050 103, or email gec3@st-andrews.ac.uk

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