

SUMMER SERMON SERIES – THE PSEUDEPIGRAPHA
THE BOOK OF ENOCH
July 18, 2014

Shabbat shalom!

For several years now I've been offering a summer sermon series – several presentations on a theme that we normally don't cover – that, indeed, is likely to be completely new to most of us, and that also fascinates me personally.

This year's theme is the Pseudepigrapha – great Jewish writings from the late biblical period that never made it in to our Bible, usually because these writings were too controversial or didn't reflect the thinking of community leadership. "Pseudepigrapha" comes from the Greek expression for "false writings," that is, heresies that deviated from the truth that our religious tradition was trying to teach.

You know the old saying, "History is written by the winners." I often tell students that if they read a history of the Civil War written by a northern historian, and another by a southern historian, they will see two very different histories. We think of Jewish teachings – or Christian, for that matter – as having been set in stone since time immemorial, but it's simply not so; for centuries Jewish teachings were in great flux, and as early rabbinic Judaism tried to define itself, any books that didn't reflect their view were simply cast aside. Just take, as one more preliminary comment, the Torah itself. The Torah devotes more than half its space to the rights and privileges – and powers – of the priesthood. Which class in Judaism were most likely the editors of the final text? Surprise: almost certainly the priests.

So too with this week's topic, the Book of Enoch, one of about 200 ancient books that were NOT written by the winners. Here's a Bible quiz for you: Who knows who Enoch was? [Noah's grandfather].

The Torah doesn't consider Enoch to be all that important. Torah devotes just two verses to the man – compared with chapter after chapter on Abraham, or Jacob, or Joseph or, of course, Moses. Two verses! Yet Enoch was essentially unique in Torah, as the only man who.....didn't die. Here's the verse, in the 4th chapter of Genesis, part of a list of the generations of descendants after Adam and Eve: "Jared had lived 70 years when he begot Enoch. Enoch had lived 65 years when he begot Methuselah. After begetting Methuselah, Enoch walked with God 300 years;

and he begot sons and daughters. The years of Enoch's life came to 365. Enoch walked with God and then was no more, for God had taken him.”

Not only did Enoch not die, he “walked with God” for 300 years! Abraham may have heard God's commands, and Moses met God at the Burning Bush and Mt. Sinai, but no one walked with God for 300 years.

The Torah is silent about what they talked about, or what Enoch saw, or why he merited such divine attention. The Torah is silent because the tradition was repressed, and Enoch's story couldn't be allowed to stand.

The Book of Enoch – a major body of Jewish literature running over 90 chapters, and going back several centuries before the time of Jesus – marks the beginning of Jewish mysticism. Mysticism is based on mystery: the secret wisdom, passed down through the generations, of how to get so close to God that the material world falls away; how to experience a sense of divine so profound that you become one with the Ultimate One, the universe itself – in short, to walk with God as Enoch did in the earliest days of mankind.

The problem with mysticism is that the mystical experience is so deeply personal. It's just between you and God – no need for priests or rabbis or Jewish law or even community. Mysticism is the opposite of community. The mystical approach undermines community. Who needs community if you can walk with God?

In the Book of Enoch we read that Enoch was so righteous that God or various angels on God's behalf gave him a personal tour of each level of heaven, ten levels in all. The law revealed to Moses on Mt. Sinai isn't even mentioned; instead, God's revelation went directly to Enoch, long before there was even Judaism, and the divine secrets were passed down to a very select few for generations on end. The true story, according to Enoch, can only be found not in Torah, but in [surprise, surprise!] in the Book of Enoch!

What were some of the secrets?

One long section – the first such in Jewish literature – describes a Final Judgment at the end of days, and the messianic kingdom that will follow. Torah is silent on this subject. In Torah, those who follow God's laws (as interpreted by the priests, of course) will thrive, while those who stray from God's laws will perish – all in this life. The Book of Enoch comes up with a new theory – which it justifies by its tradition that this is part of the secret teaching going back all the way to Enoch –

that reward and punishment will play out in the World to Come. If it looks like the wicked are thriving or the righteous are suffering, just wait! All will be made right in the world to come.

Again, such an idea must have been anathema to the priests who compiled the Torah. For them, all that mattered was the law in the here and now, as overseen by themselves. But the common folk found this teaching to be revolutionary, and very attractive.

Then there's the Messianic Age. The Book of Enoch – again, enunciating a tradition it says goes back millennia – is the first to use the word Messiah who will redeem humankind and start a new kingdom, including resurrection of the dead. The Messiah is referred to as Son of Man, or the “Chosen One,” who will lead people on the path of righteousness in the Messianic Age.

Any of this sound familiar? These Jewish teachings were widely known by the end of the Second Temple period. Jesus knew of them. His followers embraced the secrets of Enoch with a passion; in the first couple of centuries after Jesus died, we see numerous references to Enoch in the writings of the early Church. Jesus himself was identified with Enoch in some early texts. But as Jesus took on more divine aspects in church teachings, the memory of Enoch faded away and was lost for centuries, in both Jewish and Christian circles, until rediscovered in modern times, including among the Dead Sea Scrolls.

The Jewish religious leadership – the early rabbis, after the Temple's destruction in the year 70 – had to distance itself from Enoch, especially after his identification with Jesus. There were other factors as well: Enoch lived to be 365 years old in Torah, and the Book of Enoch concludes that a solar calendar of 365 days to a year makes more sense than the lunar calendar of priestly Judaism. As I said last week, he who controls the calendar controls the community.

It's a shame that we don't pay more attention to these texts. Enoch's is a teaching of hope. To list some of these teachings is to find inspiration and consolation – and to understand why we often say that Judaism itself is an optimistic religion. Enoch teaches that

Justice dwells inside each of us; justice dwells inside the Messiah; in a sense, then, there is something of the Messiah in each of us.

The Messiah will be a light unto the nations, and will sit with the righteous through all eternity.

The Messiah will sit on God's throne and judge all mankind with perfect wisdom. Messiah's glory and strength will endure forever.

Enoch ascended to Heaven, and the book that bears his name quotes Enoch's testimony with these words: "And there I saw one who had a head of days, white like wool; and with him there was another, whose face had the appearance of a man, and his face was full of grace, like one of the holy angels. And I asked one of the holy angels who went with me, and showed me all the secrets, about the Son of Man, who he was, and whence he was, and why he went with the Head of Days. And he answered and said to me, "This is the Son of Man who has righteousness, and with whom righteousness dwells; he will reveal all the treasures of that which is secret, for the Lord of Spirits has chosen him, and through uprightness his lot has surpassed all before the Lord of Spirits forever. And in those days the Chosen One will sit on his throne, and all the secrets of wisdom will flow out from his mouth; the mountains will leap like rams; the hills will skip like lambs and all will become angels in heaven, and their faces will shine with joy."

Reading a text like Enoch, we can understand why the Christian message seemed so attractive, and the Judaism of the time so austere. I submit that it is high time we Jews reclaim the wonderful teachings of these once lost Jewish texts; we have much to learn, and broadening our horizons to include these once heretical materials would be a good place to begin.