

ENOCH ARCHIVES

Forbidden texts • Lost chronicles • The secrets of ancient ages



THE SEALED EARTH

Five parts about a world that was written down
and then sealed

ENOCH • ARCHAÏOS • HISTORY

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Forbidden texts · Lost chronicles · The secrets of ancient ages

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The book draws on apocryphal and ancient texts — on the Book of Enoch, on Mesopotamian and Levantine sources, on the books of the Bible and on their modern translations and interpretations. The interpretations and the connections drawn between them are the author's own treatment, not academic consensus.

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PART I



THE WORLD BEFORE MAN



PART ONE OF FIVE

01

THE WORLD BEFORE THE WORLD



WE SHALL BEGIN WITH A SINGLE SENTENCE. IT IS MORE THAN TWO thousand years old, it stands at the very end of the book of the prophet Daniel, and it sounds like an order that makes no sense. A man is standing by a great river, seeing things he does not understand, and he does what any of us would do. He asks how it all turns out. The answer he receives is not an explanation. It is an instruction. Go, Daniel, for those words are shut up and sealed until the time of the end. Read that again and notice how strange it is. Someone receives an answer and is told at the same time that he is not receiving it. Not because he asked badly. Not because he was unworthy. Simply because he is asking too soon.

There is an answer, there is a book in which that answer stands, and the book is closed because the reader it was written for has not yet been born. That is the beginning we shall take here as a rule. And in order to understand it exactly, we first have to say what it actually meant in antiquity to seal a book, because almost everyone pictures it wrongly. When we hear the word seal today, we see a lock. We see something that bars access, something that must be broken open — violence at the start, treasure at the end. But in the world that sentence comes from, a seal did not mean a lock. It meant a signature. In Mesopotamia a man went about with his own seal hung on a cord around his neck or fastened at his wrist, and it was the most personal thing he owned. It was a small stone cylinder, sometimes of limestone, sometimes of haematite or of lapis lazuli, as long as a finger joint, bored through from end to end. An image was carved into its outer surface. Carved in reverse, in the negative, because it was never meant to look at itself.

When he had to confirm something, he laid that cylinder on damp clay and rolled it across, like dough under a rolling pin. And out of what had been cut into

the stone, a band of images appeared in the clay. An endless frieze. Figures, animals, gods, the owner's name in cuneiform. It was not decoration. It was identity. If someone today compared two impressions and said they came from the same person, he would be holding something very like a signature witnessed by a notary. And now imagine what happened next, because that is where the important part lies. A clay tablet bearing a letter or a contract was often wrapped in a second layer of clay, in a kind of envelope, and only then was the seal rolled across that envelope. The clay dried and hardened. From that moment the message could not be read without breaking the envelope. It could not be read in secret. It could not be read and closed again. Sealed did not mean that something terrible was inside. It meant that inside was something someone had vouched for, and that the way to it ran in one direction only: forward, with the wrapping damaged, in public.

This is an intensely practical matter, and yet out of it grew one of the most enduring ideas in the history of human thought. The idea that there exists a closed document about the world. That what we know is not everything that was written down. That somewhere there lies a text with someone else's signature on it, and we are walking around the envelope. And here I shall admit what this book wants and what it does not. It does not want to break anything open. I do not intend to offer you a key at the end, because I have no such thing, and anyone who offers you one is selling a certainty he has nowhere to get. I want something else, and it is stranger. I want to read the impression in the wax.

Because when you roll a cylinder across clay, the cylinder itself does not stay in the clay. It leaves. What remains after it is its inverted image, faithful in every detail but reversed, hollowed, mirrored. And from that image one can read. From it you can tell what was cut into a stone you have never seen. You can tell how large that stone was around, where the pattern repeats, whether it was carved carefully or in haste, whether it is worn. You can even tell from it whether someone had a new seal cut after he became someone else. We are looking at this impression all the time and taking it for background. It is the old texts. Not the ones read in churches, but the others — the ones nobody selected, the ones copied out somewhere off to the side, the ones that were buried or forgotten or kept in a language spoken by a few thousand people at the edge of the map.

And when you lay them side by side, it looks like a jumble. Egyptian lists next to Sumerian ones, Greek poems next to texts from caves by the Dead Sea, a Mayan book next to a Babylonian epic. But they are all impressions. And they all carry the same oddities in the same places. There is a single week after which this conversation could no longer be had the way it was had before. Two years, in fact, but two years that look like one tilted moment. In December of nineteen forty-five, in Upper Egypt, beneath a cliff near a village whose name is written today as Nag Hammadi, a peasant was digging sabakh, the soft fertile earth used to manure the fields. His spade struck a clay jar, almost as tall as his arm, sealed. By his own later account he hesitated. He was afraid there was a djinn inside, a spirit shut up in it, because that is exactly what people had been telling one another about sealed vessels for generations.

Then it occurred to him that such a vessel might also hold gold, and he broke it open. There was no gold and no spirit. There were thirteen leather bindings and in them over a thousand pages of papyrus written in Coptic. Barely two years later, at the other end of that same old landscape, on the north-western shore of the Dead Sea, a Bedouin boy looking for a stray goat threw a stone into a hole in the rock and heard something break inside. In the cave stood clay jars, and in them were scrolls. Scarcely twenty months lay between the two. Two finds, two countries, two accidents, two people who were not looking for books. Both sealed in clay. Both hidden deliberately.

And both hidden at roughly the same period, in the first centuries of our era, when it was being decided what would go on being copied and what would not. We must clear up one word here, because it is used as an insult and means something entirely different.

Apocrypha. It sounds like a forgery, like a counterfeit, like something that was exposed and thrown out. In Greek the word simply means hidden. Set aside. Not publicly read. That is all. It says nothing about truth; it says something about placement. Canon, again from Greek, is a measuring rod, a ruler, the thing by which everything else is straightened. When you translate the two words back, you find that they describe a library, not a court. One shelf is the one you measure by.

The other shelf is the one nobody goes to. And the books on the second shelf did not disappear because it was proved that they lie. They disappeared because people stopped copying them, and that is something else entirely, to which we shall return many times. And remember one thing meanwhile, which I shall leave lying here like a stone on the path and pick up later. There is a book we shall appeal to in this account more than to any other, a book which as recently as two hundred years ago was spoken of in Europe as irretrievably lost. All that time it was perfectly fine. It was not buried, it was not in a cave, nobody was looking for it, because it was not lost. It sat on shelves in Ethiopian monasteries, it was part of the biblical canon there, and people read it aloud, while European scholars wrote that it had not survived.

That is not a detail. It is one of the rules of this book. Texts do not survive where they are most valuable, but where someone copies them. And then there is the last thing we have to begin with, because it is beautiful and terrible at once and I shall never get used to it. The best-preserved part of human memory survived thanks to fires. The clay written on in cuneiform was not normally fired. It was left to dry in the sun. Sun-dried clay is brittle and softens in damp; it crumbles, it goes back into the ground. But when fire bursts into a house holding such tablets, something happens that nobody planned. The fire bakes the clay. It turns it into ceramic. It turns a document into a shard that will last thousands of years.

When Nineveh fell in the year six hundred and twelve before our era and the library of the Assyrian king Ashurbanipal burned, the ceilings came down, the shelves came down, the tablets shattered and fused together in heaps. And that is precisely why we have them today. That is precisely why we know the epic of Gilgamesh; that is precisely why we know the flood story on its eleventh tablet; that is precisely why we can speak at all about what we are going to speak of here. That library was not saved in spite of destruction. It was saved by destruction. That is exactly the type of event this book will be about. An erasure that preserves. An ending that closes something in on itself and hands it on in such a form that it cannot be read fluently, only in pieces, in fragments, with holes in the middle of sentences. That is what almost everything we have about the earliest ages looks like. A broken text in a foreign language, preserved