Simeon and Levi’s Attack on Shechem, or: The Mystery of MS C of the Testaments of the Twelve Patriarchs

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The Testaments of the Twelve Patriarchs is an ancient composition purporting to contain the last wills and testaments of the twelve sons of the biblical Jacob. Our present version of the Testaments is based on a number of medieval manuscripts written in Greek, Armenian, Slavonic, and other languages. However, most scholars agree that the composition of the Testaments goes back far earlier and that, despite its survival in Greek and in secondary translations dependent on the Greek, at least some parts of the Testaments stem from material originally written in Hebrew or Aramaic.1 This is especially likely with regard to the numerous bits of ancient biblical interpretation that dot the work. One striking example is the “Testament of Levi” section of the Testaments (T. Levi), which shares a great deal of exegetical material with an ancient Aramaic text, the Aramaic Levi Document (ALD), parts of which were discovered in the Cairo Geniza and at Qumran.2

Among the subjects treated in T. Levi is the grisly story of the rape of Dinah (Gen 34) and the subsequent revenge inflicted by Dinah’s brothers on the inhabitants of the city of Shechem (T. Levi 5:3–7:4). According to the biblical account, Dinah’s brothers tricked the Shechemites. Following the rape, Hamor, the city’s chief, asked that Dinah be given in marriage to his son (also named Shechem) and that Jacob’s family be merged with the people of Shechem. Dinah’s brothers pretended to agree, insisting, however, that all the adult males of Shechem undergo circumcision before the marriage could take place. The Shechemites accepted this condition and all were circumcised. However, at the height of their disablement following this mass surgery, Dinah’s brothers

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1 For an overview of scholarship on this question, see Howard D. Slingerland, The Testaments of the Twelve Patriarchs: a Critical History of Research (SBLMS 21; Missoula, Mont.: Scholars, 1977); Robert Kugler, The Testaments of the Twelve Patriarchs (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2001), 21–39.

Simeon and Levi came charging into the town and slaughtered all of the men, after which they took their sister Dinah back home.

In relating these events, *T. Levi* stays fairly close to the biblical text. Levi thus reports on the matter of circumcision in keeping with the Genesis account:

After this I advised my father and my brother Reuben to tell the sons of Hamor to be circumcised, since I was so stirred up by the outrage that they had committed in Israel. And I killed Shechem first, and Simeon [killed] Hamor. And after these things my brothers struck the city at sword-point. (*T. Levi* 6:3–5)

However, one manuscript of the *Testaments*, *ms* c, has Levi give exactly the opposite instructions in 6:3:

After this I advised my father and my brother Reuben to tell the sons of Hamor *not* to be circumcised, since I was so stirred up by the outrage that they had committed in Israel.

1 **A Significant Difference**

What might first appear to be a trivial copying error is actually of great significance to the entire story—and beyond. The reason is that the biblical story contains within it a glaring contradiction. According to the Genesis account:

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3 In this account Simeon and Levi are held to have killed a single person each, in order to bring the events in harmony with what Jacob says about them in Gen 49:6 (“in their anger they killed a man”). The same motif is echoed in the account of Theodotus. See below, as well as James Kugel, “The Story of Dinah in the Testament of Levi,” *HTR* 85 (1992): 1–34, esp. 12–14.