

For over a century a small cadre of scholars have shared an on-again, off-again fascination with an early Jewish text concerning Levi, son of Jacob. Preserved in fragments from Qumran and the Cairo Geniza, in addition to the Mt. Athos manuscript of the Testaments of the Twelve Patriarchs, and in a small Syriac fragment, Aramaic Levi, or as it is generally known now, the Aramaic Levi Document, has drawn such sustained attention in part because the evidence for it only gradually emerged over the course of the past century. But at least as significant a factor in the attention given the Aramaic Levi Document is the tantalizing evidence it provides for at least one Jewish group’s views on the priesthood as early as the third c. B.C.E. The fact that those turn-of-the-era Jewish sectarianists in the Judean desert, ninth-c. C.E. Jews of the neighborhoods of Cairo, and eleventh-c. C.E. Christian monks at Mt. Athos were also transfixed by Aramaic Levi only confirms the enduring hold it has on the imagination.

For all of that, though, Aramaic Levi’s fragmentary survival leaves us perpetually uncertain of its full scope and organization, not to mention its provenance, date, and purpose. All of these matters remain uncertain, although there has been no shortage of attempts to attend to them. Two recent volumes present editions and translations of the manuscript evidence for Aramaic Levi, along with commentary of starkly differing scope.

The more ambitious volume of the two is Henryk Drawnel, An Aramaic Wisdom Text from Qumran: A New Interpretation of the Levi Document. The introduction covers previous research and provides a survey of the text of the document, a proposal regarding the order of events covered in the surviving evidence for Aramaic Levi, and speculation on the language, author, date, place, purpose and genre of the work. The second chapter is a painstaking presentation of the text of the reconstructed Aramaic Levi Document Drawnel posited in the previous chapter. In DJD-fashion he presents a transcription, followed by notes on the readings, a translation, and comments on the translation. Drawnel’s third, and by far his largest chapter is a section-by-section commentary on his notion of Aramaic Levi. For each section of text Drawnel offers general opening comments followed by verse-by-verse, phrase-by-phrase commentary. In this section, as well as the preceding section’s presentation of the text, Drawnel attends closely to prior studies to demonstrate how he considers his readings and interpretations to compare with those; not surprisingly he often claims victory over his forebears. The vol-
ume concludes with another 150 pages of material: an appendix that conveniently includes Drawnel’s reconstructed text and translation of *Aramaic Levi*; Aramaic, Greek, and Syriac concordances; a bibliography, the standard indexes, and plates of all the manuscript evidence for *Aramaic Levi*. All told the volume comes to over 500 pages.

In sharp contrast, Jonas Greenfield, Michael Stone, and Esther Eshel, The *Aramaic Levi Document*: Editions, Translation, Commentary (“GES”) runs to just over 295 pages and is sparse in the extreme. An introduction of 50 pages covers, among other things, the witnesses to *ALD*, the principles that guided the making of the edition (summed up best in the single word “conservative”; see below), questions of date and provenance, the language of the text, related testamentary works, and special topics (e.g., the relationship of the work to *Testaments of the Twelve Patriarchs*; the two spirits theme in *ALD*, sapiential characteristics of the priesthood in *ALD*, and the sacrificial ordinances in the work). After an oddly-placed set of indices and apparatuses (and plates showing the Cairo Geniza fragments only) the authors provide their sparse edition, translation, and commentary.

As for the distinctive perspectives on *ALD* reflected in these two works, Drawnel’s is by now likely well known: his special contribution is to draw attention to the possibility that scribal school practices from Mesopotamia influenced the composition of *ALD* (especially the metrological section). One might find it more difficult to put a finger on the special contribution of the Greenfield et al. volume because it is so sparse, but to the eye of a reader long engaged with *ALD*, it is precisely that feature that makes the book attractive in spite of any flaws it might contain: it leaves a great deal to the reader when it comes to making sense of this strange document, burdening her neither with much of the editors’ own interpretive commentary, nor with much of the perspective offered before them by other scholars. If you want “just the facts,” this could be the entrée to *ALD* for you.

The latter comment is a convenient jumping off point for one gentle critique of both volumes that focuses less on substance than on style. While I count it a certain kind of virtue that the GES volume is so frugal, Eshel and Stone might have done well to be more forthcoming both with regard to their debts to their predecessors in contending with *ALD*, as well as their disagreements with those scholars. By contrast, Drawnel might have lightened the load for his readers a bit by devoting less space to discrediting competing perspectives. (At the level of production quality, both volumes suffer from the difficulties that beset such typographically complex works as these in a day-and-age of light editorial touches from presses.)

Criticisms aside, these two books add much that is important to the discussion of this curious Aramaic text. While a seasoned student of *ALD* may find much to object to in both books, I also find much to admire in all four scholars’