LEVI AND LEVITES IN THE SECOND TEMPLE PERIOD*

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Despite the plethora of articles and books on the subject of Levi and the Levitical clan as reflected in the Aramaic Levi Document and in the Book of Jubilees, several points still require clarification. This paper focuses on two questions: Why the story of Levi’s elevation to the priesthood, which is not mentioned in the Bible, is introduced into Aramaic Levi, and the relationship between Aramaic Levi and Jubilees.¹

Levi’s Elevation to the Priesthood

Aramaic Levi, a pre-Qumranic document representing a priestly view,² is the first to mention the elevation of Jacob’s son Levi to the priesthood. As Kugel stresses,³ this is an innovation; no such role is attributed to Levi in the Bible. Rather, it is Aaron, a fourth-generation descendant of Levi (Levi-Kehat-Amram-Aaron) who is anointed. His descendants are priests while Levi’s are the Levites.

The emergence of this tradition can be explained by noting its end: the tradition denies the existence of non-priestly descendants of Levi, and in its view all of Levi’s descendants should have been priests. Note that the description of Levi’s anointing makes no sense in a reality where Levites are common. It seems that the story about Levi’s

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¹ These two questions were recently discussed by J. Kugel, “Levi’s Elevation to the Priesthood in Second Temple Writings,” HTR 86 (1993) 1-64, and by R.A. Kugler, From Patriarch to Priest: The Levi-Priestly Tradition from Aramaic Levi to Testament of Levi (SBL Early Judaism and Its Literature 9; Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1996). I shall present answers that differ from theirs. See Kugler for a summary of all the previous studies.


elevation emerged from the need to explain the absence of Levites at some point in history. I would like to suggest that this tradition grew out of a priestly need to explain, in the course of a dispute with their opponents, the dearth of Levites during the Second Temple period.\footnote{Hultgård was the first to relate the status of the Levites in the Second Temple period to the tradition of Levi's elevation. See A. Hultgård, L'eschatologie des Testaments des Douze Patriarches, (Acta Universitatis Upsaliensis, Historia Religionum 6 & 7; Uppsala: Almqvist & Wiksell, 1977/1982) 1.39-41.}

The assumption that the Levites' absence was the subject of controversy can be strengthened by the observation that other documents from the Second Temple period that represent the priestly view, namely the Qumran Scrolls, also struggle to explain the lack of Levites. The scrolls, however, give another solution. The writers of the Qumran literature create a fictive existence for the Levites, a literary creation designed to camouflage their scarcity.\footnote{See, for example, The Rule of the Community. In Column 2, the Levites appear in the ceremony of the covenant but not in the description of the ordering of the Yahad. The contradictory descriptions of the status and role of the Levites in the Qumran literature, which for the purposes of this paper provide more evidence for the absence of Levites, are discussed in Stallman's survey: R.C. Stallman, "Levi and Levites in the Dead Sea Scrolls," JSP 10 (1992) 163-89. J. Milgrom ("The Qumran Cult: Its Exegetical Principles," Temple Scroll Studies [ed. G.J. Brooke; JSPSup 7; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1989] 177) was the first to point out the unrealistic status of the Levites in The Temple Scroll. Note the transformation of the verse from Ezekiel in CD: "The priests the Levites the sons of Zadok" (Ezek. 44:15) becomes: "The priest and the Levites and the sons of Zadok..." (3:21-4:1). Here the introduction of and appears to make a great difference.}

At first glance, the claim that priests in the Second Temple period were disturbed by the lack of Levites is not self-evident. Yet, we must remember that the Bible portrays the priests as members of the clan of Levi. Opponents of the priestly trend could employ the dearth of Levites to their advantage, pointing to Jacob's curse of Levi in Genesis 49 as sufficient reason for the disappearance of the Levites and hence, also for the rejection of the priests' (also part of the clan of Levi) claim to power. The answer of the priests was two-fold. Genesis 34, which describes the massacre of the Shechemites by Levi and Simon, became a point of departure for the proclamation of Levi's elevation to the priesthood with no mention of Jacob's disapproval;\footnote{See Aramaic Levi Bodleian Geniza frag. a; Jub. 30:18; and see the discussion below.} Jacob's curse (Gen. 49:5-7) was ignored and the absence of the Levites was obscured, as we have seen, by two different explanations.