Critical Dictionary of Apocalyptic and Millenarian Movements

Testaments of the Twelve Patriarchs

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Introduction

The *Testaments of the Twelve Patriarchs* are a set of twelve texts that claim to be the final words of the sons of the biblical patriarch of Israel, Jacob. The twelve sons—Reuben, Simeon, Levi, Judah, Issachar, Zebulun, Dan, Naphtali, Gad, Asher, Joseph, and Benjamin—are themselves regarded as patriarchs of the twelve tribes of Israel. The text is one of the longer texts in the so-called Old Testament Pseudepigrapha. Every testament has a similar form: the patriarch is about to die and calls his family together, reflects on his life, exhorts his audience to live better lives, gives apocalyptic prophecies of the future, and dies. Each text's focus is exhortation, with its ethics being grounded in the double commandment to love God and love one's neighbour. In the *Testaments*, Jacob's favourite son, Joseph, plays an important role as the ethical example that should be emulated. The *Testaments*, though consisting of twelve separate texts, are intended to form a whole, with themes being developed from testament to testament.

The *Testaments* are apocalyptic by nature. Though much of the text focuses on biographical exhortation, the inclusion of prophecies in each testament (usually near the end) puts the text in an apocalyptic framework. In some testaments the apocalyptic or eschatological sections are but a few verses; in others they span almost the entire testament. In general, passages pertinent to this discussion are *Testament of Reuben* 6; *Testament of Simeon* 5–7; *Testament of Levi* 2, 3, 8, 10, 14–16, 18; *Testament of Judah* 18, 22, 24, 25; *Testament of Issachar* 6; *Testament of Zebulun* 9, 10; *Testament of Dan* 5, 6; *Testament of Naphtali* 4, 8; *Testament of Gad* 8; *Testament of Asher* 7; *Testament of Joseph* 19; and *Testament of Benjamin* 3, 9–11.

From a critical point of view, the *Testaments* have not been considered to be a formal 'apocalypse.' The genre of the testaments is taken to be either 'farewell discourse' or 'testament,' but there are many similarities between apocalyptic and farewell/testament genres (Rowland 1982, 18). The strongest argument to differentiate these two genres is the source of information and authority. An apocalypse reveals knowledge through the mediation of an otherworldly journey, whereas a testament's hidden knowledge comes from the prophetic nature of the person and the nearness of their death (Kolenkow 1975). Yet, testaments can contain apocalypses. Levi's vision of the heavens in *Testament of Levi* 2–5 is generally accepted to be an apocalypse (Collins 1979, 8; Kugler 2001, 21). Some authors, such as Christopher Rowland, consider *Testament of Naphtali* 5–7 to also be an apocalyptic writing, based on the

two visions that Naphtali receives (Rowland 1982).

But working with a [broader definition](), there is much more evidence of apocalypticism in the *Testaments* than just those two sections. Firstly, throughout the testaments there are apocalyptic themes in the texts' cosmologies, anthropologies, and eschatologies. Secondly, there are the passages where the nation of Israel is sent by God into exile and subsequently, through divine intervention, returned from captivity. There are fourteen such passages, which are usually referred to as Sin-Exile-Return (SER) passages. In these passages there is a periodisation of history and complete transformation in the existing religious and social order—one of the characteristics of an apocalypse under a broader definition. Thirdly, there are a number of passages in which a messianic figure intervenes in history, creating a new world order. This occurs in around twenty passages.

The history of scholarship on the *Testaments* has been muddied by discussions of its provenance. A large part of this discussion is based on the apocalyptic passages, which often rather obviously refer to Jesus Christ. Yet, the framework of the text is Jewish, asserted through the last words of the twelve sons of Jacob. In pre-critical times this was taken at face value. Take, for example, Matthew Paris's invective thirteenth-century reflection on the *Testaments*' recent publication:

> *they had been unknown for a long time and had been concealed by the envious Jews on account of the clear prophecies of the Saviour contained within them. … Because of the scheming of the Jews with their ancient malice, the text was unavailable to Christians at the time of St. Jerome and the other blessed interpreters. However, this glorious text—strengthening the Christian faith and greatly confounding the Jews—was translated plainly and clearly by the bishop. (Chronica Majora 4.232–233, translation from Nisse 2007)*

Paris's view that this Jewish text clearly supports Christian beliefs was by no means unique, and Judeophobic readings of the *Testaments* exist to this day (see, for a recent Judeophobic reading of the text, Garcia 2018). With the rise of critical biblical studies, the simple reading of the text as either originally Jewish or as the authentic testaments of the twelve sons of Jacob fell by the wayside. In 1698, Joannes Grabe suggested that while the book originally was Jewish, Christians later interpolated the text, adding the obviously Christian sections. Since that date, scholars have, in general, argued about the extent and nature of these Christian interpolations (see, for recent detailed discussion, Kugler 2001, 31–38; de Bruin 2015, 11–34).

Two *fin-de-siècle* authors have been particularly influential on *Testaments* scholarship in the last century. Both Friedrich Schnapp (1859–1918) and Robert Charles (1855–1931) developed similar interpolation theories. Schnapp argued for three levels of interpolation in the *Testaments* (Schnapp 1884, 1900). The text was originally simply biography and exhortation. Later, extensive Jewish apocalyptic and messianic passages were added to the existing text, in Schnapp's opinion spoiling the text. Christians later edited and interpolated *only* these secondary apocalyptic and messianic sections. Influential in the English-speaking world were Charles's publications in the early twentieth century, where he argued that the text was written between 109 and 106 BCE and later interpolated by both Jewish and Christian writers (Charles 1908, [1908] 1960). In his view, the Jewish interpolations are to be found in the apocalyptic sections (specifically in SER passages), where the writer describes Israel as an evil nation. These are to be seen as

a critique of the high priesthood of the Maccabean era. The later Christian additions were similarly in the apocalyptic sections, and generally change theophanies and apocalyptic events into descriptions of Jesus Christ (see Charles [1908] 1960, xlvi–li). Thus, both of these independent interpolation theories set out specifically the apocalyptic sections as the locus of the later interpolations.

In the mid-twentieth century, Marinus de Jonge (1925–2016) challenged Charles's thesis and, since his publications, current scholarship is divided into two camps. Some scholars (e.g., Jürgen Becker, Anders Hultgård, Jarl Ulrichsen, Howard C. Kee, and Dixon Slingerland) follow Schnapp and Charles's ideas, seeing the text as originally Jewish, with later strata of Jewish and Christian interpolation. Yet, each scholar adapted the interpolation theories while developing their own. Thus, scores of redaction hypotheses have been proposed without any sort of consensus emerging. Alternatively, a group of scholars follow de Jonge, the so-called Leiden school (e.g., Harm Hollander, H. J. de Jonge, Theo Korteweg, and Tom de Bruin). They take the text to be originally a second-century CE composition by a Christ-follower based on older, unrecoverable, and unrecognisably changed sources. Other scholars have adopted this view, with some minor variations (e.g., Robert Kugler, Vered Hillel, Joel Marcus, Philipp Kurowski). The Christian authorship hypothesis appears to be dominant in scholarship in recent decades, though other opinions exist (David deSilva, Stefan Opferkuch). It is important to note here that the distinction *Jewish-Christian*, as it was used for much of the twentieth century, has become increasingly problematised in recent decades as scholars have begun to argue that the relationship between the two is more complex and the two more mutually implicated than many have assumed (cf. Becker and Reed 2007), yet, in the case of the *Testaments*, this distinction remains vital (de Bruin 2019a).

The text is included in the modern-day collection called the 'Old Testament Pseudepigrapha.' This group of texts, in general, includes ancient texts that are not included in most Bibles but which contain or refer to characters from the Hebrew Bible (for a discussion and critique of the corpus from the point of view of the *Testaments*, see de Bruin 2015, 27–35). *Testaments* is significant for studying both Second Temple Judaism and early Christianity. Contemporary scholarship has attempted to move beyond the discussion of provenance, yet this topic remains under the surface. Scholarship of recent decades has shown that the text interacts uniquely with specific themes in ancient Judaism and early Christianity. The text has been found to be a valuable source for thinking on anthropology, cosmology, ethics, Satan and demons, the relationship between Christ-followers and Judaism, and ancient scribal and editorial practices (Hillel 2010; de Bruin 2015; von Gemünden 2016; Newsom 2017; de Bruin 2019a, 2019b, 2020; von Gemünden 2021; Newsom 2021; de Bruin 2022, 2023).

General Apocalyptic Elements

The *Testaments* contain many aspects which fit into apocalyptic frameworks. Most obvious is the fundamental worldview of the text, which places everything in a cosmological conflict between good and evil, between God and the opponent (de Bruin 2015). The *Testaments* usually use the name Beliar to refer to the opponent, but also refer to this character as Satan or the devil. The name Beliar/Belial is not uncommon in Jewish and Christian texts from this era (cf. Jubilees 15:32; Ascension of Isaiah 2:4; 2 Corinthians 6:15).

In the *Testament of Reuben* 2–3, the patriarch recounts his vision on the nature of humanity. At creation,

when God imbued humanity with eight motivating spirits, Beliar added the spirit of deceit to the mix. Thus, Beliar created another eight spirits that inhabit each human: fornication, greed, battle, flattery and trickery, arrogance, lying, unrighteousness, and sleep. All of human action is defined by these two sets of eight spirits, with the second set being responsible for leading humanity into sinfulness. The audience should choose their side carefully, to quote *Testament of Levi* 19.1: "Therefore, choose either darkness or light for yourselves, that is, either the law of the Lord or the actions of Beliar" (cf. *T. Iss.* 6.1; *T. Dan* 6.1; *T. Naph.* 2.6, 3.1). The conflict, which is both cosmic and internal to each individual, will come to an end at an apocalyptic event. At this time both the anthropological and cosmological dualism will end. Humans will tread the spirits underfoot (*T. Iss.* 6.6; *T. Levi* 18.12; *T. Zeb.* 9.8), they will be set free from the slavery to Beliar (*T. Dan* 5.10), and they will rule over the spirits (*T. Iss.* 6.6; *T. Zeb.* 9.8). Cosmologically, the spirits will be destroyed, sometimes by angelic hosts (*T. Levi* 3.3; *T. Benj.* 3.8), as will Beliar, often by the messiah or by fire (*T. Levi* 18.12; *T. Jud.* 25.3; *T. Dan* 5.10–11; *T. Benj.* 3.8).

Secret, hidden knowledge, revealed only to a select few, abounds in the *Testaments*. This is implicit in the form of the text. A person's last testament was seen to be an event of prophetic disclosure to the closest of family (Kolenkow 1986). The revelation of hidden divine knowledge is also explicit in places. Reuben, the very first patriarch to speak, declares that he will share what things he has hidden in his heart (*T. Reu.* 1.4), and Levi recounts heavenly visions that he has kept secret (*T. Levi* 8.19). There is also the revelation of earthly secrets, such as when Zebulun shares hidden knowledge about the betrayal of Joseph (*T. Zeb.* 1.1–7).

The *Testaments*, in their predictions of the future, often periodise history. This is specifically done in almost every SER passage (see below) but also, at times, more generally. *Testament of Levi* 8, for example, divides Israelite history by three offices representing salvation: the office of the believer, the office of the priesthood, and the office of a new priest after the fashion of the Gentiles. More extensive in its periodisation is *Testament of Levi* 16–17, which divides the history of Israel from Levi to the coming of the messiah into seventy weeks and seven jubilees. There is a strong expectation of the end, associated with the coming of the messiah. Generally, God will send a saviour to rescue the Gentiles and Israel. He will judge all. A selection of people will be resurrected. Beliar and the spirits will be destroyed, and humanity will live in eternal peace in Eden. In the text as we have it, the messiah is usually clearly identifiable as Jesus Christ. He is often called the ruler of heaven, humbled to human form (*T. Zeb.* 9.8; *T. Benj.* 10.8). References are made to Jesus's life according to the Gospels, including his baptism (*T. Levi* 18.7,11; *T. Jud.* 24.2; *T. Ash.* 7.3), him eating and drinking with others (*T. Ash.* 7.3), his nature as only begotten (*T. Benj.* 9.3), his crucifixion (*T. Benj.* 9.3), and his death causing the curtain of the temple to tear (*T. Levi* 10.3; *T. Benj.* 9.4). Many of these passages have been identified as Christian interpolations by various scholars, but those identifications are strongly contested.

Apocalyptic Sections in the Testaments

Testament of Levi

The third and second-longest testament, the *Testament of Levi*, contains a long description of Levi's tour of the heavens, including the ministrations of the angelic powers, and his investiture as priest. This passage stands out in the *Testaments* as, generally, the work is not interested in cosmology or angels.

Falling asleep after praying to the Lord, Levi sees the heavens open and an angel invites him to enter. Levi travels through seven heavens. *Testament of Levi* 3 is an explanation of the heavens by the angelic guide. The first three heavens are focused downwards toward the earth; the last four are holy and they look upwards to God. The first is a gloomy heaven, as it is nearest human iniquity. The second heaven contains fire, snow, ice, and spirits of retribution for the day of judgement. The third has legions of warriors who will destroy the forces of darkness on the day of judgement. In the fourth heaven are thrones and powers, God is continually praised here. The fifth heaven contains angels who serve as messengers. In the sixth heaven are angels of the Lord's presence, who minister and atone for unwilling sins of the righteous. Finally, in the seventh is the holy of holies: a holy temple with God on a throne. Entering the seventh heaven, in *Testament of Levi* 4–5, Levi is invested as a priest. Levi hears of the forthcoming judgement of humanity, including cosmological signs such as the drying up of the waters and the destruction of the spirits, and of the coming of the saviour.

This miniature apocalypse has many of the aspects associated with the generic biblical studies category of an apocalypse. In the *Testament of Levi*, an otherworldly being discloses a transcendent reality to a human recipient. This reality involves another world, the seven heavens, that are supernatural and distinct from the human world. The revelation is also temporal as it discloses future and end-time events, and the ultimate salvation of humanity. The revelation discusses judgement and destruction of both the wicked and evil elements in creation (cf. Collins 1979, 14; 1998, 137–39).

Testament of Naphtali

Testament of Naphtali 5–6 contains two visions which have apocalyptic aspects—specifically, allegorical imagery. In the first, Naphtali sees himself and all his brothers trying to catch the sun and moon. Judah and Levi succeed, grabbing hold of the moon and sun respectively. The brothers then try to catch a horned and winged bull, and Joseph ascends on the bull. The vision ends with a prophecy of the captivity of Israel under many foreign nations.

In the second vision, Naphtali sees an unmanned ship, full of fish, named the 'Ship of Jacob.' Jacob and the twelve sons board the ship, with Jacob at the helm. A storm arises and Jacob is blown away. When the ship breaks apart and starts to sink, Joseph escapes on a lifeboat; the rest drift on planks of wood, with Judah and Levi sharing a single plank. The family is scattered over the earth, but Levi intercedes in prayer. Then the storm ceases, the ship arrives safely, and all are reunited.

Sin, Exile, and Return Passages

Since 1953 it has been common to identify certain passages in the *Testaments* as Sin-Exile-Return (SER) passages. Marinus de Jonge identified these in his influential thesis from 1953 and they have since been widely adopted. There are fourteen SER passages found in nine testaments, with four testaments containing more than one SER passage (*T. Levi* 10; 14–15; 16; *T. Jud.* 18.1, 23; *T. Iss*. 6; *T. Zeb*. 9.5–7; 9.9; *T. Dan* 5.4; 5.6–9; *T. Naph*. 4.1–3; 4.4–5; *T. Gad* 8.2; *T. Ass*. 7.2–4; 7.5–7; *T. Benj*. 9.1–2). The passages have a common structure consisting of four parts: introduction, sins, exile, return. Not every part is always present in every occurrence.

The following passage is an example of a typical SER passage, with the parts identified:

> [introduction] I know, my children,
> [sin] that in the last times your sons will turn their backs on simplicity and become obsessed by greed: they will abandon innocence and resort to cunning; and, forsaking the Lord's commands, they will attach themselves to Beliar. And they will give up farming and follow their own wicked inclinations;
> [exile] and they will be dispersed among the Gentiles and enslaved by their enemies. And tell your children this, so that, if they sin, they more quickly return to the Lord;
> [return] for he is merciful and will deliver them and restore them to their land. (T. Iss. 6.1–4)

This example demonstrates the way SER passages are used. They serve to place the history of Israel in an apocalyptic framework, identifying the current readers as living in the last days. In this way the text highlights how important righteous behaviour is, that forgiveness awaits those who repent, and that merciful salvation is available to the repentant.

Whereas in this passage Issachar gives no indication as to how he came about his prophetic knowledge, in the Introduction the patriarch usually refers to an esoteric source: a tradition from the fathers, heavenly tablets, and—most often—Enoch, another biblical character traditionally associated with apocalypticism in early Judaism. The Sin section recounts future sins of either the descendants of the patriarch speaking or the Israelites in general. Usually, the sins are generic transgressions of the commandments of the Lord, which in the *Testaments* is always the double commandment to love God and one's neighbour, and often also sins against Jesus Christ. These sins often take place in the last days or the consummation of ages. Some testaments, notably both *Testament of Levi* 14, 16 and *Testament of Judah* 23, give more detailed lists of the sins. In the Exile part, captivity and exile among the Gentiles is foretold, sometimes including a mention of the destruction of the Jerusalem temple. The exile is followed by a merciful Return, which is often preceded by the offspring's repentance.

In these passages, apocalyptic elements are present in both the Exile and the Return inasmuch as they foresee a radical transformation in the existing political, social, and religious order. Looking at the Exile first, some testaments give a more extensive discussion of the imminent social upheaval; others are more succinct. *Testament of Zebulun* 9.6–7, for example, simply promises captivity among enemies, oppression by the Gentiles, and suffering weakness, distress, and anguish. *Testament of Judah* 23, on the other hand, gives a rather extensive picture of a complete breakdown of society, promising famine, sickness, death, war, savage dogs, taunting friends, blindness, loss of children, wives, and possessions, destruction of the temple, desolation of the land, enslavement, and forced castration. Following this, the *Testament of Judah* promises a Return and the coming of a sinless descendent of Judah who will judge and save all who call on the Lord. There will be a resurrection, which is followed by a description of a new world order:

> There will be one nation of the Lord and a single language. No longer will there be Beliar's spirit deceit, for it will be thrown into fire forever and even longer. Those who died in grief will arise in joy, those in poverty for the Lord will be made rich, those in need will be fed, those in weakness will be made stronger, and those who died for the Lord will awaken to life. Jacob's deer will run in joy,

> *Israel's eagles will fly in delight. The ungodly will mourn, the sinners will cry, and every nation will glorify the Lord for ever. (T. Jud. 25.3–5)*

In this passage, current social situations will be reversed, but more importantly for the theology of the *Testaments* there will be a large cosmological and anthropological change: the destruction of Beliar's spirits. These sprits are fundamental to the theology and exhortation of the book and are portrayed as internal human spirits that became part of humanity at creation. They are the source of human evil, against which there is no protection but a strong will to withstand their influence (de Bruin 2015, 97–163). The destruction of these spirits implies a complete recreation of humanity. Other SER passages contain similar apocalyptic elements (*T. Zeb.* 9.8–9); others include more elements such as the promise of living in Eden, in a newly created Jerusalem (*T. Dan* 5.7–13).

Messianism

In the *Testaments*, messianic passages abound and have been, as discussed above, the topic of much debate. Core to the discussion are two related issues. Firstly, the messianism in the *Testaments* is not entirely internally consistent when it comes to the descent of the messiah and the number of messiahs. In some places the messiah appears to be a Levite priest while in others they are a Judahite king. Sometimes there might well be two messiahs, and sometimes the messiah is a priest-king, both Levite and Judahite. Secondly, in some passages the messiah is clearly Jesus Christ, whereas in others this is not as obvious.

The already complicated issue of interpreting messianic passages in *Testaments* was further muddied by the discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls and their association (in scholarship at least) with the Jewish group known as the Essenes. In the early days of Scrolls research, many scholars pointed to similarities between the scrolls and the *Testaments* concerning multiple messiahs, with Marc Philonenko calling them "identique" and arguing for Essene authorship of the *Testaments* in 1960 (Philonenko 1960, 7). With the publication of more texts from the Judaean desert, these arguments have fallen by the wayside.

Throughout the *Testaments* the tribes of Levi and Judah have a special position. The children of the patriarchs are exhorted to obey and honour either Levi or Judah, or both (e.g., *T. Reu.* 6.8; *T. Sim.* 7.1; *T. Gad* 8.1; *T. Jos.* 19.11). Often the patriarch justifies this exhortation by referring to a special role that the tribes play (e.g., *T. Reu.* 6.8–12; *T. Sim.* 5.4–6; *T. Jos.* 5.7–8), or because they will bring forth salvation or the messiah (e.g., *T. Sim.* 7.1; *T. Dan* 5.10; *T. Naph.* 8.2). The first reason pertains to the historical role of the tribes in Israel, and it is specifically the second reason that is of interest to the apocalypticism in the text.

Following Charles and Schnapp, many scholars have tried to solve these internal inconsistencies and obvious Christian elements with a variety of redaction hypotheses, but this has had little success. A useful case study to elucidate the issues of interpreting messianic passages while hypothesising interpolation theories is *Testament of Levi* 8.11–16:

> *And they said to me: 'Levi, your descendants will be divided into three offices, as a sign of the glory of the coming Lord. The first will be the believer: a greater portion than theirs will not exist. The*

> second will be in the priesthood. The third will receive a new name, for a king will arise from Judah and he will make a new priesthood, according to the type of the Gentiles, for all nations. His presence will be marvellous, like a high prophet, from the descendants of our father Abraham.

This passage divides time into three distinct time periods, symbolised by three offices for the Levites. The first is the faithful, they are greatest; the second the Levitical priesthood; and the third is a wholly new office, a reflection of the Gentiles. The third office appears to be apocalyptic in nature, being final and universalist. In this third office there is evidence for two potentially messianic figures: a king from Judah who establishes a new priesthood with a new name and a marvellous presence.

Charles, working with his own eclectic Greek text and his interpolation theories, read this passage rather differently (Charles 1908, 44–46). For the first he read "and the first portion shall be great; yea, greater than it shall none be," following a minority textual variant that omits 'the believer.' For the third office, he makes two significant changes. Firstly, he reads "a king shall arise in Judah," replacing 'from' with 'in' and thus reading Judah as a geographical area rather than the tribe. In this way, the passage is no longer messianic and can easily refer to a historical king (e.g., John Hyrcanus). Secondly, he argues that the messianic reading is a scribal error. Thus, he removes 'for all nations,' allowing the priesthood to no longer be universalist. And, so, Charles argues for a reading of the first office being Moses, the second the Levitical priesthood, and the third the Maccabean priest-kings of the first century BCE. In this way, Charles attempts to reconstruct a pre-Christian version of this apocalyptic passage, but his method is haphazard and his conclusions have been strongly contested.

Reading the text as it stands, which the Leiden school argue is methodologically sound, gives a competing second-century CE reading, which fits rather well amongst contemporary Christian writings: it is common to read about the primacy of faith in Christian texts (Romans 4, Galatians 3, Hebrews 11); Christians often interpreted Old Testament passages which mention a new name as referring to themselves; a high-priesthood after the fashion of the Gentiles for all nations is a common interpretation of Jesus's ministry (Hebrews 7); the first coming of Jesus is called the 'appearance' (παρουσιά/*parousia*); and Jesus is seen to be a great prophet and from the seed of Abraham.

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