

Title: Levi, a Priestly Zealot or Priest and Zealot? A study of Second Temple Era exegetical traditions  
surrounding Levi son of Jacob

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## I. A problem for Classical Jewish Exegetes

Genesis 34 relates an episode that is discomfoting, troubling, and morally ambiguous, which has plagued Biblical commentators for thousands of years. The chapter begins by relating how Dinah, the only daughter of Jacob, “went out to see the daughters of the land” (34:1), and was subsequently kidnapped and raped by Shechem, who is the son of Hamor, who is described as “the prince of the land” and the city of Shechem (34:2). At Shechem’s request, Hamor then asked Dinah’s father, Jacob, for Dinah to become his lawfully wedded wife, offering to have Jacob’s family and the people of Shechem intermarry, along with full property and trading rights in the area (34:4, 6, 8-10). While Jacob was silent, and waited for his sons to return from the field (34:5), his sons were furious about the rape, and, “במרמה” – generally rendered as “with guile” – said that they will only consent to do this if the entire city of Shechem undergoes circumcision, like the sons of Jacob, for it is a “חרפה” (“disgrace,” “reproach,” or “abhorrent thing”) for them to give their daughter to someone who is uncircumcised (34:7, 13-17). The “guile” in their words is soon revealed when Levi and Simeon slaughter every Shechemite male while they are at the height of their pain after circumcising themselves and take Dinah back, after which the rest of Jacob’s sons

pillage the city of Shechem (34:24-29). The Bible concludes its account of the episode by stating that Jacob rebuked his sons for putting the family in danger of attack by the other inhabitants of the land (an event which does not seem to happen), yet Jacob's sons defended themselves, asking their father "shall our sister be treated like a whore?" (34:30-31).

In the words of James Kugel states about this episode, "the story ends, quite literally, in a question mark."<sup>1</sup> To ancient interpreters, who Kugel notes read the Bible with certain *a priori*, notably that the patriarchal figures of Genesis were "moral exemplars" and the Torah, as the immutable and infallible word of G-d, has a reason for each word it includes, all the more so each narrative, this passages raises numerous questions:<sup>2</sup> Why include the narrative, if there are no long-lasting results from it (no child born to Dinah, no war with Canaanites, Dinah never appears in Bible again, no conquest of the city of Shechem, etc.)? How could the sons of Jacob lie about bringing the Shechemites into the sacred covenant of circumcision? Why did Shechem and his countrymen deserve death? What is the moral lesson? What was G-d's opinion on the various moral questions that arose throughout the episode?<sup>3</sup> Robert Kugler, in his explanation of why this story bothered ancient Jewish commentators, states that the Genesis narrative is critical of Jacob's sons, noting that Bible largely portrays the Shechemites as "reasonable men who sought to make the best of the horrible misdeed of one of their own," seemingly following Deuteronomic law on defilement of a virgin (cf. Deut. 22:28-29), while portraying the sons of Jacob as deceitful and violent.<sup>4</sup> Indeed, at the end of Jacob's life, he curses Simeon and Levi, the ringleaders of the violence against Shechem (Gen. 49:4-7), for their violent natures and deeds, apparently a reference to the Shechem episode, while the other brothers are blessed.

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<sup>1</sup> Kugel, James L, *The Ladder of Jacob*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006, p. 37.

<sup>2</sup> On this point, see *ibid.*, 1-3.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 37.

<sup>4</sup> Kugler, Robert A., *From Patriarch to Priest: The Levi-Priestly Tradition from Aramaic Levi to Testament of Levi*, pp. 11-12.

The final reason that the Shechem episode is so puzzling to ancient Biblical interpreters is best captured by the words of the *Sifre* to Deuteronomy 33:8:

“And of Levi he said”: Why was this (blessing) said of him (and not of Shimon)? Shimon and Levi drank of one cup, viz. (Gen. 49:7) “Cursed be their wrath, for it is fierce, and their anger, for it is sore. I shall divide them in Jacob, and I shall scatter them in Israel.” (*Sifre Deuteronomy* 349:1).

Deuteronomy 33:8 is the beginning of Moses’s blessing for the tribe of Levi at the end of his life, and assigned a cultic role as custodians of the Temple, and the *Sifre* sought to explain why the tribe of Levi deserved such an honor. As the continuation of this comment by the *Sifre* makes clear, Levi and Simeon, as the ringleaders of the attack on Shechem, acted incorrectly, yet only Levi’s descendants became the servants in the Temple, and one branch of Levi’s descendants, the sons of Aaron, became the priests. They are heaped with praise in Moses’s blessings of the tribe in Deuteronomy 33:8-11, and told they will be the one to teach G-d’s law to Israel and offer the sacrifices. Meanwhile, Simeon’s descendants receive no such status and are conspicuously left out of Moses’ blessings of the tribes of Israel in Deuteronomy 33. The question then becomes stronger. Why should Levi, who apparently acted incorrectly, be rewarded with the appointment of his descendants to the prestigious role of priests and servants of the Temple? This paper will discuss the ways in which these questions were addressed and understood by Jewish and early Christian interpreters in Late Antiquity, what various interpretations reveal about their respective authors, and will review some of the contemporary scholarship on how the ancients understood the Shechem episode and the role of Levites. Special treatment will be devoted to understanding what Kugler called the “Levi-Priestly Tradition (LPT).”

## II. Levi the Priest and Zealot: A Negative View of Levi’s Sack of Shechem.

A minority of ancient Jewish Biblical interpreters, accepted that Levi (and the other brothers) acted wrongly, even though ancient commentators tended to avoid critiquing the Patriarchs. This interpretation does not believe that Levi’s zealous vengeance against Shechem for the rape of Dinah was what earned him the priesthood. According to this view, zealotry was a separate aspect of Levi’s character.

This view is attested in the Palestinian Aramaic targums (pseudo-Jonathan, Neofiti, the fragment targums) on Jacob's non-blessing of Simeon and Levi in Genesis 49:5-7, all of which explicitly state that the incident that earned Simeon and Levi their father's rage was the sack of Shechem. An important example of this view – and an answer to the question of why Levi's descendants became priests but Simon's did not – is the continuation of *Sifre Deuteronomy* 349:1, cited above:

This is analogous to (the situation of) two, who borrowed from the king. One paid him back, and borrowed from him again, and the other — not only did he not pay him back, but he borrowed again. Thus, Simeon and Levi: Both “borrowed” [i.e. did what was displeasing to G-d] in Shechem, viz. (Gen. 34:25) “And there took, two sons of Jacob, Simeon and Levi, each man his sword, and came upon the city [Shechem] secure, and they killed every male.” Levi “paid back what he borrowed” [i.e. made up for his actions] in the desert, [in the incident of the golden calf] viz. (Ex. 32:26) “And Moses stood in the gate of the camp, and he said ‘Whoever is for the L-rd, to me!’ And there gathered unto him all the sons of Levi, etc.” And he “returned and borrowed” from the L-rd in Shittim, viz. (Num. 25:11) “Phinehas the son of Eleazar the son of Aaron the priest turned My wrath away from the children of Israel when he raged My rage in their midst, and I did not consume the children of Israel in My wrath” — whereas Simeon, not only did he not repay the loan, but he went and “borrowed” again, viz. (*ibid.* 14) “And the name of the man of Israel who was smitten, who was smitten together with the Midianite woman, was Zimri the son of Salu, chief of a father's house in the house of Simeon.”

This seems to be a fairly logical answer to the final question, how could Levi's descendants be rewarded so richly if their forbear, Levi, had acted so erroneously: they atoned for it by being zealous to do G-d's bidding on numerous occasions. It also explains why Simeon does not share the same reward. Indeed, this explanation seems to be backed up the Biblical narratives to which the *Sifre* refers. Following the Levites' zeal in following Moses's command to exact revenge against their fellow Israelites for the sin of the Golden Calf, Moses tells the Levites (Ex. 32:29):

“Consecrate yourselves<sup>5</sup> today to the L-rd, for every man has been against his son and against his brother; that He may also bestow upon you a blessing this day.”

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<sup>5</sup> Lit. “fill your hands.” Cf. Ex. 28:41, where the same language is used to refer to G-d's command to Moses to invest Aaron and his sons to the priesthood. See also Rashi's comment there, that “filling the hands” means “חינוך;” my thanks to Professor Moshe J. Bernstein for pointing out this comment. See also Kugler, 13.

Immediately following Numbers 25:11, cited by the *Sifre*, G-d continues saying to Moses, about Phinehas, the grandson of Aaron, a descendant of Levi (Num. 25:12-13):

“Behold, I give to him My covenant of peace; and it shall be to him, and to his seed after him, the covenant of an everlasting priesthood; because he was jealous for his God, and made atonement for the children of Israel.”

Thus the answer of the *Sifre* as to how Levi’s descendants could have been given their honored status if Levi was wrong to slaughter the Shechemites seems to be based directly on the Bible’s justifications for giving the Levites their role – it had nothing to do with Levi’s actions, but rather those of his descendants who were zealous to rout out evil and rebelliousness from the Israelite camp. The idea that the Levites earned the distinction of the Temple service through their zealotry against those who rebelled against G-d in the desert is also reflected in *Numbers Rabbah* 3:5, though this *midrash* does not directly address the Shechem episode. While the Levites are awarded their role in the Temple for their zealotry against those who practice idolatry, Levi’s zealotry in avenging Dinah’s rape is critiqued by this explanation. Levi’s zealotry is *not* considered to be a priestly attribute. What is the difference between Levi’s zealotry and that of his descendants? It is not entirely clear. When comparing Levi to the Levites who assisted Moses following the sin of the Golden Calf, it is tempting to say that the difference is between the two is that Levi acted wantonly out of anger, while the Levites acted at the command of Moses. Yet this criterion does not hold up, as Phinehas also acted wantonly without receiving any command. Perhaps violent revenge is a justified response to idolatry but not rape? Unfortunately, the ancient commentators who critiqued Levi’s sack of Shechem do not address the question, so we can only speculate.

### III. Levi the Tithe of Jacob’s Sons: Silence on the Shechem Episode.

Despite the straightforward explanation of *Sifre Deuteronomy*, this answer does not satisfy many Jewish exegetes of Late Antiquity. As we have noted above, Kugel has stated that an important *a priori* in Jewish exegesis of Late Antiquity is that the patriarchs were righteous and saintly figures. Furthermore, there is a tendency to understand the patriarch’s actions and the consequences to those actions, as well

as the blessings said about the patriarchs, to explain later Jewish history.<sup>6</sup> As such there is a desire among Jewish exegetes to locate an explanation of why the Levites had their special and unique role with Levi the son of Jacob. There are many examples in Jewish literature of late antiquity that do this without addressing the question of Shechem, identifying Levi's role with something unrelated to the Shechem episode. For example, one *midrash*<sup>7</sup> states that Levi's name was given by G-d at his birth and means "crowned," meaning that he was crowned with the twenty-four gifts to the priests. According to this *midrash*, G-d chose Levi to be the priest from birth, without any apparent connection to his later attack on Shechem.

One common theme is that Levi was the tithe of Jacob's sons.<sup>8</sup> This explains why Levi's descendants were the Temple servants in a way that locates the designation in Levi's lifetime, yet unrelated to the Shechem episode. It appears in *Jubilees* 32:3, which states that Jacob designated Levi as the tithe-son during a trip to Bethel (an event not recorded in the Bible) where Jacob repays the tithes he promised before fleeing his brother Esau.<sup>9</sup> In the *Jubilees* account, Rachel is pregnant with Benjamin, so Jacob counts youngest to oldest and Levi comes in the tenth place, making him the tithe-son.

While in *Jubilees* this event takes place shortly after the Shechem episode and *Jubilees* does connect Levi's appointment to the priesthood to the Shechem episode, the idea of the tithe-son may be separate from the narrative relating Levi's priesthood to the Shechem incident. As Kugel puts it, this explanation of Levi became a priest (and why Simeon did not) implies that the selection "was nothing

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<sup>6</sup> Kugel, *Ladder of Jacob*, 129. For example, Jacob's blessing and prediction about Judah that "the scepter shall not depart from Judah, nor the ruler's staff from between his feet; so that tribute shall come to him and the homage of peoples be his" (Gen. 49:10), is frequently understood to mean that Judah merited to have the Israelite kings and later the messiah descend from him. See, for example, the *Midrash Tanchuma* on this verse.

<sup>7</sup> Cited in Ginzberg, *Legends of the Jews*, vol. 1, 6:36.

<sup>8</sup> See Kugel, *Ladder of Jacob*, 127-136 for an extensive treatment of this exegetical theme, which he calls "Levi the Human Tithe," and how it addresses numerous questions that Classical Jewish exegetes had when reading the Bible. Kugel discusses how this motif connects to other exegetical traditions. Our discussion will focus more narrowly on what this exegetical theme shows about how Classical Jewish interpreters understood the appointment of Levi to the priesthood and the Shechem episode.

<sup>9</sup> See Gen. 28:22.

personal and had nothing to do with the previous conduct of either brother; it was simply a matter of blind arithmetic.”<sup>10</sup> That this theme seems to provide an explanation that competes with and is disjointed from other explanations of how Levi became a priest that connect the selection of Levi to his actions at Shechem suggests that it is a totally different understanding of the issue.<sup>11</sup>

Further evidence that the idea of Levi being the tithe of Jacob’s sons is an independent motif that explains Levi’s in a way that is entirely separate from the Shechem episode is its presence in other works.<sup>12</sup> Kugler notes that the idea that was a tithe appears in *Targum Pseudo-Jonathan* Gen. 32:25 and *Pirkei de-Rabbi Eli’ezer* 37, however there are some important differences in these two narrations. First, they place Levi’s selection in a different place in the story of Jacob’s life – his confrontation with the angel prior to meeting Esau in Genesis 32. The angel exhorts Jacob to fulfill his promise in Gen. 28:22 to offer a tithe of all his belongings, asserting that his sons were included in this vow. This is significant because while Jubilees locates the tithing of Jacob’s sons after the Shechem episode, allowing Levi’s selection to be in close proximity to his attack on Shechem, these authors distance the selection from the Shechem episode, placing it even before it occurs. This location for the tithing of Levi demonstrates that it is a separate motif. A second difference is that the way Levi comes out to be the tenth son is different. In these narrations, the firstborns of each of Jacob’s wives are excluded from the selection, presumably because they could not be given as the tithe-son, leaving eight children. Jacob starts with the oldest, Simeon, making Benjamin, the youngest, the eighth, so he starts again with Simeon, making Levi tenth.<sup>13</sup> In addition to these examples cited by Kugel, Ginzberg, in his *Legends of the Jews*, cites another variant of this motif,

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<sup>10</sup> Kugel, *Ladder of Jacob*, 128.

<sup>11</sup> See *ibid.*, 158-159, where Kugel argues that the author of *Jubilees* (like the *Aramaic Levi Document*) used multiple and sometimes conflicting exegetical traditions in creating his narrative. The notion that Levi became the priest because he was the tithe of Jacob’s sons competes with the explanation that he was rewarded with the priesthood for his vengeance against Shechem, and likely comes from a different exegetical tradition.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 129.

<sup>13</sup> The *Pirkei deR. Eli’ezer* also cites in the name of R. Yishmael the method for determining the tithe-son found in *Jubilees*.

this time taking place after Jacob blesses Ephraim and Manasseh and reckoning them as his own children.<sup>14</sup> Now that they are his children, he has ten children who are not the firstborns of his wives, and thus eligible to be tithed. At this time, Jacob tithes Levi.<sup>15</sup> This author also distances the tradition of Levi being the tithe of Jacob's sons from the Shechem episode.

What makes these narratives about Levi's selection to the priesthood significant for interpretation of the Shechem incident is not what they say, but what they do not say. The more common interpretation of the Shechem incident found in Jewish literature of Late Antiquity – found in various texts from the Qumran caves, works of the Apocrypha, Hellenistic Jewish literature, midrashic literature, and early Christian literature – is that Levi and Simeon were justified and correct in attacking Shechem, despite the fact that the Bible twice records Jacob decriing the act.<sup>16</sup> Furthermore, many of these texts explain that it was this act of righteous zealotry that earned Levi the priesthood. The fact that there are several texts which differ from this common explanation found in a diverse array of authors demonstrates the presence of an exegetical tradition that the priesthood was *not* awarded to Levi because of his massacre of Shechem, presumably because it was seen as unjustified, or at the very least, not a righteous act deserving reward.

#### IV. Levi the Priestly Zealot: A Positive View of Levi's Sack of Shechem.

This larger group of texts which argue that Levi and Simeon were justified in attacking Shechem and that it is what earned Levi the priesthood employ a diverse range of defenses to support Levi and Simeon's actions and to glorify Levi. This section will analyze the ways in which these texts cast Levi's

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<sup>14</sup> Ginzberg, *Legends of the Jews*, vol. 2, 1:375-376.

<sup>15</sup> Admittedly, this is a very strange variant for two reasons. Firstly, Manasseh is still a firstborn son, so it is unclear why he should count toward the number of sons that Jacob is obligated to tithe, assuming firstborns do not count (as many of these *midrashim* assume). Second, even if Manasseh counts, Levi should not be the tithe son, as he is the second son after discounting the firstborns, meaning counting upward from Ephraim, Jacob should have selected Simeon as the tenth child. It is clear that this author was drawing upon a tradition of Levi being chosen as a tithe and saw Jacob's elevation of Joseph's first two sons as an opportunity to make use of the tradition.

<sup>16</sup> This is, of course, assuming that the curse of Simeon and Levi in Genesis 49 is indeed referring to the Shechem episode.

actions at Shechem in a more positive light. Within this larger group of texts which view the Shechem incident as positive, there is a group of texts which seem to be very closely related, *Jubilees* 30-32, *Aramaic Levi Document*, and the *Testament of Levi* from the *Testaments of the Twelve Patriarchs*, relating a similar extra-Biblical narrative about Levi's life, featuring his priestly role and his attack on Shechem, which explicitly state that Levi was awarded the priesthood for his zealotry. The basic narrative of this group of texts is that Levi, zealous to do that which is right and to maintain the purity of Israel, (in some of these texts, based on a Divine vision and command),<sup>17</sup> sacks Shechem to avenge the rape of Dinah, and is rewarded by G-d with the priesthood, and invested to it both in heaven and on earth by Jacob and Isaac. This group of texts, dubbed the "Levi-Priestly Tradition" by Robert Kugler, understand Levi's zealous avenging of Dinah's rape as an act that demonstrated Levi's unique qualification for the priesthood, an office whose chief requisite appears to be zeal for purity.

A. Introduction to the Levi-Priestly Tradition.

The so-called Levi-Priestly Tradition is a group of texts, listed above, that reflect a shared exegetical tradition that retells the Biblical story of the rape of Dinah and the subsequent sack of Shechem in a way meant to cast Levi in a positive light and explain why Levi's descendants became the priests and temple servants. Though the Bible seems to describe the sack of Shechem as an act of wanton violence inspired by anger, in these texts Levi is described as someone who was divinely inspired and zealous for purity. In *Testament of Levi* (and possibly also *Aramaic Levi*, depending upon how the work is reconstructed from the existing textual witnesses),<sup>18</sup> Levi is commanded by God in a vision of the heavens to exact vengeance on the Shechemites. Levi is rewarded for this act by being invested as the high priest,

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<sup>17</sup> This is definitely present in the *Testament of Levi* and definitely not present in *Jubilees*. While Kugler argues vigorously that there was only one vision in *Aramaic Levi Document*, and therefore no divine command to execute vengeance against Shechem, most scholars, but not all, reject this reconstruction of *Aramaic Levi Document*, and assume that, like the *Testament of Levi*, it had a vision prior to the sack of Shechem. This paper will assume that *Aramaic Levi Document* had two visions.

<sup>18</sup>

and his descendants are designated for the priesthood in the future. In *Aramaic Levi Document* and *Testament of Levi*, Levi experiences visions of the heavens in which he is anointed to the priesthood following the attack, and in *Jubilees*, this information is provided by the angelic narrator of the work. In all three works, Levi's zealotry is connected with commandments about sexual purity. The three primary texts have diverse provenances and use this theme in different ways – *Jubilees* and *Aramaic Levi Document* are clearly Jewish works dating to the second or third century BCE while *Testament of Levi* as we know it is part of a larger Christological work and contains a number of Christological interpolations; *Aramaic Levi Document* and *Testament of Levi* are first person narratives by Levi, while *Jubilees* merges the plot into a larger narrative – but they all nonetheless make use of a common exegetical tradition on how to understand the Shechem episode and Levi's elevation to priesthood.

The exegetical argument made by these texts draws upon the same sections of the Bible as the claim made by the passage from *Sifre Deuteronomy* that indicted Levi. We noted above that the passage from *Sifre Deuteronomy* took Phinehas's zeal to smite Zimri and Cozbi to be what earned him the priesthood and took the Levite's zeal to answer Moses's call to punish the Israelites who sinned with the Golden Calf to be the what earned them the Temple service. We further noted that this interpretation was based on a literal understanding of what the Bible said; the Bible's recording of both of those events is followed with an explicit statement that Phinehas and the Levites would be rewarded for their actions with the priesthood and the Temple service, respectively. *Sifre Devarim* assumes that the actions of Phinehas and the Levites made up for the shortcomings of their ancestor Levi. By contrast, the texts of the Levi-Priestly Tradition use the actions of Phinehas and the Levites, and the praise that they earn for those actions, as a model to understand the Shechem episode.

The logic behind this retelling is straightforward. The Bible says that the Levites were zealous to do obey Moses to take up the call to arms and punish those who were sinning, for which they were charged with care of the Temple as a reward. The Bible says that Phinehas was zealous to stop the

violation of sexual ethics and the plague of idolatry from the Israelite camp, after Moses had ordered those Israelites who worshipped the idolatry to be put to death (Num. 25:5), causing G-d to declare that Phinehas has appeased his anger and for which he shall receive a “covenant of peace” and “the covenant of an everlasting priesthood” (Num. 25:11-13). Therefore, the authors of these works must have presumed, Levi’s anger and desire for vengeance must have in fact been zeal for punishing iniquity and sexual impurity, and for that reason, he must have been awarded with fathering the tribe of priests and Temple servants. The authors of the Levi-Priestly tradition identify in the narratives of the Bible and seek to strengthen in their own writings a connection between zeal for purity and the Temple.

This understanding of the logic behind the Levi-Priestly tradition has already been identified by numerous scholars, like Kugler, Kugel, and T. Baarda, and they have shown how the texts themselves contain linguistic hints pointing at the Bible’s accounts of the Golden Calf and Phinehas’s zeal. For example, Kugler notes that 4Q213 frg 15 contains the phrase “כהנות עלמא,” an Aramaic translation to a key phrase in G-d’s blessing to Phinehas in Numbers 25:13, “כהנת עולם,” i.e. “eternal priesthood.”<sup>19</sup> The language of Numbers 25 is also picked up in *Testament of Levi* 6:3 states, which states that he was “zealous” because of the “abomination which they performed in Israel.” The author of *Testament of Levi* uses the same term, “zeal,” to describe Levi’s motivation for sacking Shechem that the Bible used to describe Phinehas, who is described as zealous as well. T. Baarda comments on this verse that the author of the *Testament of Levi* “places Levi among those who have distinguished themselves by zeal for G-d, such as Phinehas, Elijah, and Mattathias.”<sup>20</sup> The basic premise of the Levi-Priestly Tradition is therefore to utilize later Biblical figures and narratives, especially the Pentateuchal descendants of Levi, Phinehas and the Levites of the Golden Calf incident, to rewrite the story of Levi to a heroic tale of a patriarch zealous

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<sup>19</sup> Kugler, 35.

<sup>20</sup> Baarda, 40. Obviously, Baarda’s comment that Mattathias was one of the heroes in the tradition of zealous defenders of Israelite purity that the author was looking up to can only be true for *Testament of Levi*, as *Jubilees* and *Aramaic Levi* are thought to have been written around the time of Mattathias, if not earlier. See Kugler, *passim.*, on the authorship of the different works of the Levi-Priestly tradition.

for Israelite purity and the word of God who is rewarded by being invested into the priesthood by angels and men.

#### B. What Would Jacob Do?

The biggest hurdle for these texts which sought to defend Levi's actions at Shechem is the fact the Bible twice records Jacob critiquing the actions of his sons, the second of which specifically cites Simeon and Levi. How could Levi and Simeon have been justified if their own father, Jacob, the father of the entire Jewish people, was against the act? Some texts seem to completely sidestep the issue. Philo, Judith, and *Jubilees* in their retellings completely leave out Jacob's objection to the sack of Shechem. Josephus mentions that Jacob was displeased and stunned by the act, but also states that as a result of a vision from G-d, Jacob came around to his sons' actions. Furthermore, as Kugel notes, they also leave out the ruse to persuade the Shechemites to circumcise themselves in order to make them weak and vulnerable to attack.<sup>21</sup> This convenient omission allowed ancient interpreters to avoid explaining how Jacob could disagree with the sack of Shechem if it was in fact the right thing to do, while also avoiding the problem of having to acknowledge that the patriarchs lied about circumcision.

*Genesis Rabbah's* treatment of Jacob's non-blessing of Simeon and Levi (*Genesis Rabbah* 99:7) seems to steer the critique of Simeon and Levi away from the Shechem incident and toward other events, while also mitigating the curse of Levi. *Genesis Rabbah* begins its explanation of Jacob's words by commenting on the words "Simeon and Levi are brothers" from Genesis 49:5: "You were brothers with Dinah... but you were not brothers to Joseph, for you sold him." The focus of Jacob's critique seems to be on Simeon and Levi's mistreatment of Jacob, rather than the Shechem episode.<sup>22</sup> It perhaps even allows the Shechem incident to be seen as a positive deed of familial loyalty in defending their sister's honor, though *Genesis Rabbah* later in its explanation identifies Simeon and Levi's anger in which they killed man

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<sup>21</sup> Kugel, *Ladder of Jacob*, 42.

<sup>22</sup> The continuation of *Genesis Rabbah's* comments explain how it must have been Levi and Simeon who created the plot to kill Joseph.

as referring to the Shechem incident, following an exegetical tradition that the sack of Shechem was wrong. Furthermore, the sins that Jacob prays not to be connected to are not the past sins of Simeon and Levi, but rather of their descendants, namely the illicit affair between Zimri and Cozbi (Zimri is from the tribe of Simeon, and he takes Cozbi, a Midianite woman, as a wife following an epidemic of Midianite women luring Israelite men into idolatry) and Korah's rebellion (Korah and his followers were all Levites, who, out of jealousy, accused Moses and Aaron of illegitimately taking power for themselves). This serves to deflect from the Shechem incident. Even more significantly, Jacob's curse of Simeon and Levi is interpreted in a way that is not particularly harsh on Levi. *Genesis Rabbah* understands the words "I will divide them in Israel" to mean that Levi's sustenance will come from gifts owed to them as Temple servants, for which they will have to travel, which it calls "providing for them in cleanliness." This interpretation is likewise found in the Palestinian targums. While *Genesis Rabbah* does not portray Simeon and Levi as free of fault by any means, it does shift the critique away from the Shechem incident, perhaps allow for a more positive understanding of it, and mitigate the curse of Levi.

T. Baarda notes that *Genesis Rabbah* 80:10 states that Genesis 48:22 is referring to an episode following Simeon and Levi's attack on Shechem in which the neighboring Canaanites took up arms against Simeon and Levi, and Jacob, though he disagreed with their actions, took up arms to defend them. He argues that this *midrash* is meant to emphasize that though Jacob may have disagreed with Simeon and Levi, he was intensely loyal to them.<sup>23</sup> This can be understood as another attempt to mitigate Jacob's critique of Levi and allow the incident to be understood in a more positive light.

It is important to note the differences in how different works that interpreted the Shechem incident understood why Jacob was so outraged by the sack of Shechem. Baarda notes that though the Biblical narrative, *Jubilees*, and *Pirkei deRabbi Eliezer* all state that the reason for Jacob's outrage was the fact that he feared military reprisal from the neighboring peoples, the *Testament of Levi* says that the

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<sup>23</sup> Baarda, 49.

reason for Jacob's anger is a moral outrage, that the Shechemites had already received circumcision.<sup>24</sup> Baarda suggests that this would give them the status of proselytes who could not be subjected to this violence (this makes sense, given that *Testament of Levi* says that it is Jacob who told Hamor and Shechem to become circumcised).<sup>25</sup> This makes another difference in the *Testament of Levi* account incredibly important: who is it that recommended the circumcision and what was Levi's reaction to it? This depends on how one reads *Testament of Levi* 6:3.<sup>26</sup> According to Kugel, following Charles's translation of the *Testaments*, the most accurate way to understand what happened is that Jacob and Reuben sought to have the Shechemites circumcised out of a sincere desire to intermarry with the Shechemites. Simeon and Levi argued that this should not be allowed, out of a desire to exact divine retribution against Shechem, which upon doing, irks the ire of his father.<sup>27</sup>

In a recently published article, Kugel re-asserts that Charles' reading of *Testament of Levi* was indeed correct.<sup>28</sup> This thesis is based on three primary arguments: (1) Charles' reading parallels the narrative of Theodotus's retelling of the Shechem incident cited by Eusebius; (2) a refutation of the claim of M. de Jonge and other scholars of *Testaments of the Twelve Patriarchs* who argue based on stemmatic evidence that the sole manuscript of the *Testaments* which actually contain Charles's reading was a late error, not a reflection of the original; (3) a new, recently published Genizah fragment of *Aramaic Levi Document* that, according to Kugel, corroborates Charles's reading. We shall leave aside the first two

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<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 50.

<sup>25</sup> See also Kugler, p. 157, ftn. 60, where he notes, but does not adopt, the position of Charles that this may be why Jubilees omitted mention of the circumcision).

<sup>26</sup> The debate is Levi states that he argued that the Shechemites "be circumcised" or "not be circumcised." The previous reading would suggest, as the Biblical narrative has it, that the circumcision was merely a ruse to disable the Shechemites, whereas the latter reading would suggest that the circumcision proposal by Jacob and Reuben was sincere, and Levi objected because he did not want peace with Shechem, he wanted to sack the city.

<sup>27</sup> Kugel, *Ladder of Jacob*, 43-45. The alternative reading, following H. W. Hollander and M. de Jonge, is that Levi advised Jacob and Reuben to have the Shechemites circumcised in order to make it easier to exact retribution. This follows the Biblical narrative closely and does not reinterpret the incident to keep the characters from lying, as T

<sup>28</sup> Kugel, James. "Simeon and Levi's Attack on Shechem, or: The Mystery of MS C of the Testament of the Twelve Patriarchs." *Sibyls, Scriptures, and Scrolls: John Collins at Seventy*, vol. 1. Eds. Joel Baden et. al. Leiden; Boston: Brill, 2017. Pages 655-672. Print. Series: Supplements to the Journal for the Study of Judaism, vol. 175.

arguments for the time being. The fragment, according to his reconstruction, which is not universally accepted, preserves enough key words to testify that *Aramaic Levi's* version of the events aligned with Theodotus and the Charles reading. While the relevant verse does not appear even in this new fragment, it does state that the circumcision proposal was specifically Jacob and Reuben's idea, and later contains the phrase "let them not leave until... they are all dead" prior to the actual attack on Shechem. Kugel argues that this evidence is sufficient to reconstruct *Aramaic Levi Document* in accordance with Charles's reading of *Testament of Levi*. Nonetheless, Kugel does not seem to be correct that *Aramaic Levi Document* actually is evidence one way or another for how to read *Testament of Levi* 6:3. Regardless of whether or not Levi encouraged Jacob and Reuben to go ahead with the circumcision plan, it is clear that all readings would have the plan originate with Jacob and Reuben (this is explicit in all editions of the text of *Testament of Levi*!) and Levi wanted to exact revenge on the Shechemites. As such, the new fragment does not seem to add anything. This point does not detract from Kugel's other well-reasoned arguments in favor of Charles's reading.

If Charles's reading is correct, as Kugel argues, and as Baarda seems to assume, then the *Testament of Levi* re-interprets Jacob's dissent to a question of what was objectively the right thing to do, rather than what was the most pragmatic thing to do in the context of being surrounded by potentially hostile neighbors. With this understanding that Jacob's reproach of his sons was on moral, not practical grounds, it remains to be seen exactly how Levi's image is rehabilitated. According to Baarda, *Testament of Levi* doesn't totally exonerate Levi.<sup>29</sup> The testament records Levi saying in 6:7a "for we sinned in that we had done this against his will." The sin that *Testament of Levi* ascribes to Levi is not having attacked Shechem, for that was done by divine command, but rather for having gone against his father's wishes. It is not clear what the correct course of action would have been. Perhaps Levi was meant to convince his father of the correctness of his actions? Baarda here suggests that a reader of *Testament of Levi* would

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<sup>29</sup> Baarda, 51-53.

understand that Levi was excused for his wrongdoing because of the fact that it was the divine will, and argues for Charles's reading of *Testament of Levi* 6:3 that would mean that Levi did in fact attempt to persuade his father to consent to the attack of Shechem.<sup>30</sup> Furthermore, Baarda calls this conflicting portrayal of whether or not the attack was just as a conflict between divine and human morals. This understanding seems strange, however. It seems clearer to understand according to the *Testament of Levi*, Jacob may have believed that it was wrong to seek vengeance, but was overruled by Levi and his divine vision. *Testament of Levi* chapter 6 can be in that understood as Levi's rebuttal to Jacob, who may have rebuked him over the attack, become sick upon hearing of it and given him a curse at the end of his life (based on Gen. 49), but as Levi asserts in 6:8, "but I [Levi] saw that the sentence of G-d was for evil upon Shechem," and justice is truly against the Shechemites.<sup>31</sup> The *Testament of Levi's* solution to the problem of Jacob's critiques is to have Levi argue that Jacob was incorrect.

One feature of the texts of the Levi-Priestly Tradition which seem to counteract Jacob's critique of the Shechem episode is the fact that Jacob plays an active role in Levi's elevation to the priesthood. As Kugler writes, the purpose of Isaac's blessings, Jacob's tithing to Levi, Jacob's dressing him in priestly garments to invest him in the priesthood, Levi's blessing to his fathers and brothers and their blessing of him in the middle portion of the narrative is to show how Levi's investiture into the priesthood was not only divinely ordained, but also carried out by the patriarchs. Kugler goes so far as to say that this patriarchal stamp of approval "legitimizes once more Levi's violence at Shechem, his prayerful plea for the priesthood, and his heavenly election to the office."<sup>32</sup> This creates a new understanding of the narrative of Jacob and his sons, including the Shechem incident. In Genesis, Jacob rebukes his sons for attacking Shechem and putting him at risk for attack by their Canaanite neighbors and at the end of his

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<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.* 37, 39-40.

<sup>31</sup> The ways in which this is argued shall be presented below.

<sup>32</sup> Kugler, 90-91. While Kugler is writing here about *Aramaic Levi Document*, most of these narrative features are present in all three LPT texts.

life curses his anger along with Simeon in Gen 49. However, in *Aramaic Levi* and *Testament of Levi* though Jacob does rebuke Levi for his actions in Shechem, he also pays his tithes to G-d through him, invests him as a priest, and blesses him. In *Jubilees*, the rebuke is not even present. These details help recast the Biblical portrayal of Levi and strengthen the author's view that Levi's attack on Shechem was meritorious and earned him the priesthood. In this exegetical tradition, Jacob seems to either have had a change of heart or to never have rebuked Simeon and Levi at all.

Kugler argues that *Jubilees* goes a step farther in recasting Jacob's role to be in line with Levi and his brothers. The purpose of *Jubilees*, according to Kugel, is "to compose a new charter for Hasmonean-era Judaism [the new laws and laws that needed to be emphasized, often combating Hellenization] that would have great credibility, found as it was on a claim to antiquity, heavenly revelation, and transcription by one of Israel's greatest heroes [Moses]." <sup>33</sup> Additionally, it seeks to shore up Jewish identity and rejection of Hellenism by making Jacob the central figure, emphasis on circumcision, Sabbath observance, and rejection of exogamy. <sup>34</sup> The Shechem story is meant to teach the importance of endogamy, the purity of Israel, and the evil of exogamy. As such, *Jubilees* could not allow Jacob to have been willing or acquiescent to intermarriage with the Shechemites, which is probably why *Jubilees* omits the circumcision ruse and makes Jacob a partner in the plan to smite Shechem. <sup>35</sup> Furthermore, by making the angelic announcement that Levi became a priest because of his zealotry in attacking Shechem part of the angel's comments to Moses looking back on the event, the author of *Jubilees* changes his narrative subtly from that of *Aramaic Levi* and *Testament of Levi*. While in these two works, Levi is invested as a priest by the angels themselves, in *Jubilees*, it is merely predicted by angels in 32:1 and recounted by the angelic author in a narrative aside to Moses in 30:18-20, while the actual investiture is done by Jacob in 32:3. <sup>36</sup> The author

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<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, 144.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, 145.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, 152, 156-158.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, 161

of *Jubilees* clearly views the Shechem incident as the morally correct thing to do, and is more concerned with putting Jacob back in the center of the narrative than on resuscitating Levi, who he would have believed to be acting in the right.

### C. Divine Will, Heavenly Sword.

One question left unanswered in the Biblical account to which classical exegetes demanded an answer was how G-d viewed the sack of Shechem. The Levi-Priestly Tradition texts answer this question loudly and clearly: G-d demanded vengeance against Shechem for the defilement of Dinah. This is clear from the end of the first vision in *Testament of Levi*, in which the angel instructs Levi, "Execute vengeance on Shechem because of Dinah, thy sister, and I will be with thee because the Lord hath sent me" (5:3), and in which Levi defends himself against Jacob's protest by asserting that he "saw that the sentence of God was for evil upon Shechem" (6:8). In *Jubilees*, the angel similarly makes it clear that G-d wanted the Shechemites punished and that Levi earned his role for carrying out the divine will (30:18-19): "And the seed of Levi was chosen for the priesthood, and to be Levites, that they might minister before the Lord, as we, continually, and that Levi and his sons may be blessed forever; for he was zealous to execute righteousness and judgment and vengeance on all those who arose against Israel. And so they inscribe as a testimony in his favour on the heavenly tablets blessing and righteousness before the God of all." *Jubilees* also uses the Shechem incident as the opportunity to teach the law against intermarriage, speaking of it in incredibly harsh terms, further revealing that this is contrary to the divine will.

Interestingly, both Kugel<sup>37</sup> and Baarda<sup>38</sup> point out that the idea that smiting Shechem is G-d's will is brought out through a theme found in *Testament of Levi* that appears to be echoed in Judith 9:2-4 and in *Joseph and Asenath* 23:14. This is the idea that G-d gave Levi (or, in Judith, Simeon, and in *Joseph and Asenath*, both Levi and Simeon) a sword with which to execute divine justice against Shechem. In

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<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, 38-41.

<sup>38</sup> Baarda, 34.

*Testament of Levi* 5:1-3, when the angel instructs Levi to execute justice against the Shechemites, he says that he has given Levi a shield and a sword with which to do it. In *Judith* 9:2-4, Judith invokes the way in which G-d gave her ancestor Simeon a sword to avenge the rape of Dinah in her own plea for divine assistance. The reference in *Joseph and Asenath* is a little less clear. The text reads, "and Simeon and Levi drew their swords from their sheaths and said, 'Behold, have you seen these swords? With these two swords the Lord God punished the insult of the Shechemites which they insulted the sons of Israel, because of our sister Dinah, whom Shechem the son of Hamor had defiled... their swords were flashing forth like a flame of fire'" (*Joseph and Asenath* 23:14). Kugel notes that though *Joseph and Asenath* does not say that the swords were given to Simeon and Levi by God, as *Testament of Levi* does, it is evident that they are relying on the same tradition from the fact in *Joseph and Asenath* the swords are said to have been used by God himself to punish Shechem, and from the last line which seems to describe them as supernatural weapons. The heavenly sword seems to represent the fact that G-d Himself was behind the battle, executing justice against those who had transgressed His will.

#### D. Shechem: Barbarian and Impure.

Even explaining that G-d desired vengeance against Shechem seems not to have been sufficient justification as classical exegetes seek to understand *why* it is that the Shechemites needed to be smitten. There are a few sub-questions relating to this issue, which we have addressed before: why did all of the Shechemites deserve to be destroyed? Why was death the appropriate punishment for a crime that Deuteronomy punishes relatively lightly? These two questions are answered generally by heightening the crimes of the Shechemites, and broadening the crime to the entire city of Shechem. For example, *Testament of Levi* 6:8-10 ascribes several extra-Biblical crimes to the Shechemites, saying that Dinah was only one example of Shechemite rapaciousness, others being attempts to seduce Sarah and Rebecca (which would elevate their crime to adultery, more severe than defiling an unmarried virgin), and harassing Abraham and an unknown slave. Furthermore, as members of the Canaanite nations (TL 7:1-2),

they are members of evil peoples destined to be obliterated one day. Ginzberg cites two *midrashim* which heighten the crime of Shechem. One states that Dinah only went out to see dancing girls who Shechem had hired to entice her to come out, and describes the rape as “beastly.”<sup>39</sup> The second states that Hamor and Shechem repented undergoing circumcision after Hamor’s father, Shechem’s grandfather, criticized them for adopting a foreign custom, after which they plan to go to war against the sons of Jacob. Dinah hears this plan, reports it to Simeon and Levi, and they then massacre Shechem out of self-defense while the Shechemites are still incapacitated.<sup>40</sup> This provides a clear justification for their actions.

In explaining the sinfulness of the Shechemites, an interesting insult is lobbed at them in many different texts from different contexts. T. Baarda notes that calling the Shechemites fools might be a pun on the name of Hamor, similar to what is found in Philo’s comments on the episode.<sup>41</sup> Philo, in *De Migr. Abr.* 224-225, interprets the rape of Dinah and Simeon and Levi’s revenge allegorically. Dinah is interpreted to mean judgment, standing in for rationality. Because Hamor means “ass,” Shechem son of Hamor and the Shechemites are understood to be wild men, “giving himself up to folly and being bred up with shamelessness and audacity,” that “attempted to pollute the judicial faculties of the mind.” The vengeance of Simeon and Levi are thus seen as zealous defenders of the soul from defilement of unrighteous action. In *De Mutatione Nominum*, 200, Philo also portrays Simeon and Levi positively for their actions, portraying them as defenders of purity, uses same allegory found above. This allegorical explanation seems to fit with other writings from this period which portray the Shechemites as sinful people, whose crimes earned them their deaths. Philo seeks to respond to the same questions that other exegetes had, attempting to justify the violent deeds of the saintly patriarchs. Philo’s explanation is still unique in its use of allegory and symbolic interpretation of the names of the characters.

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<sup>39</sup> Ginzberg, vol. 1, 6:214.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, *ibid.*, 6:221.

<sup>41</sup> Baarda, 57.

By contrast, the answer to this question according to *Jubilees* would be quite simple and would have little to do with the brutality or evil of the Shechemites. *Jubilees* detests intermarriage, as it pollutes the purity of Israel. As such, Shechem, who desecrated the sanctity of Israel, deserved death. This is highlighted in *Jubilees* 30:11-14, in which the laws of intermarriage are emphasized and re-emphasized, and said to lead to eternal pollution. Kugel notes that Judith and Josephus in their retellings of the Shechem incident also highlight Shechem's foreignness as reasons why the crime is abominable.<sup>42</sup> Kugel also notes that both *Jubilees* and Judith expand the guilt to all of the Shechemites, highlighting that it is "them" (in the plural) who defiled Dinah.<sup>43</sup>

#### V. Conclusion

This paper has explored different ways that widely varying Jewish and early Christian exegetes sought to understand the Shechem incident and how differing explanations of how Levi was selected to the priesthood is an important indicator for how differing thinkers understood the Shechem episode. While it showed that some interpreters interpreted the incident negatively, allowing later Biblical passages explain how the Levites attained their dignified status, many interpreters found it necessary place the selection of the tribe of Levi to the priesthood and Temple service to the life of Levi son of Jacob, and to understand the Shechem episode as a defining moment in Levi's life which earned him the priesthood.

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<sup>42</sup> Kugel, *Ladder of Jacob*, 54-55.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, 58.

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