

Aramaic Levi Document

Brief introduction

The Aramaic Levi Document (ALD) was composed in the Aramaic language at the latest in the third or the early second century BCE and most likely in Judea. It is a narrative concerning Levi's consecration to the priesthood and his teaching to his children.

This writing, which has not survived in its entirety, is also sometimes known confusingly as "Aramaic Testament of Levi" or "Aramaic Levi." Since neither the beginning nor the end of the work has survived, it is not clear that it was a testament and its literary genre remains unknown. Moreover, ALD must be distinguished from the Greek work, Testament of Levi (TPL), which is one of the parts of the pseudepigraphical *Testaments of the Twelve Patriarchs*.

ALD is one of the earliest extra-biblical writings, and it is highly significant as such. More or less contemporary with the oldest parts of *I Enoch*, both these works contribute to our understanding of Judaism in a period of which we know little, the third century BCE. ALD deals with a number of interesting subjects. One substantial part, presented as Isaac's instruction of the newly-ordained priest, Levi, is composed of cultic regulations, specifying the different sacrifices and the amounts of incense, oil, fine flour and salt to be used with each type of sacrificial animal. The order of butchering of the sacrificial beast is given and the types of wood to be burnt on the altar are listed. Most of this cultic material is neither drawn from Pentateuchal law nor paralleled by Rabbinic regulations. The question arises whether it reflects the practice of the Temple (or of some

sectarian group) at the time or whether it is ideal and theoretical. Equally intriguing is the mystery of the identity of the work's authors.

ALD uses a 360-day solar calendar of the type promoted by *Jubilees* and the Enochic *Book of the Luminaries*. Later, the same calendar was also advanced by the Dead Sea Sect. Where it originated is still a mystery as is the question of its social location. Calendar has considerable sociological ramifications and acceptance or rejection of a particular calendar signifies adherence to a particular religious group or acceptance of a particular religious authority. In contradistinction to *Jubilees*, ALD does not make any polemical point about the use of this calendar. This might indicate that, while *Jubilees* was directed towards adherents of other calendars, ALD was not. How that is to be explained remains unknown, but it is surely related to ALD's social context and function.

A third significant point in ALD is its narrative structure and the chronological lists of events that are introduced into the work. These cohere for the most part with those in *Jubilees*. From a comparison of the events narrated and their dates with the corresponding events in *Jubilees* it emerges that ALD is prior to, and probably served as a source of *Jubilees*. ALD is also cited in the Damascus Document known from the Cairo Geniza and Qumran, and seems to be a source of TPL as well. The oldest of these three writings is *Jubilees*, composed in the first third of the second century BCE. The date of ALD can be inferred, then, from the fact that it is a source of *Jubilees*. Its Aramaic language also indicates (but does not prove) an early date.

Moreover, the messianism of ALD is of very great interest. That Judaism expected a future Messiah, a descendant of David, is well known. Less widely familiar,

but nonetheless broadly recognized, is that in certain texts and according to some groups, the restoration of the ideal polity of Israel will involve the re-establishment of both anointed offices, the High Priesthood and the monarchy. Such texts are Zechariah (Zech 4:3, 11-13), the Manual of Discipline from Qumran and the Damascus Document (12:23-18:1). Now it can be shown from various statements in ALD that its author(s) expected only a Messiah, son of Levi, i.e., a priestly Messiah, to whom it attributed both kingship and priesthood (Greenfield, Stone and Eshel, 35-39).

Finally, it should be noted that in ALD, Joseph is of great paradigmatic prominence. He is a wise and righteous man, and Levi calls on his offspring to model themselves on Joseph (13:6). Later, in the Christian *Testaments of the Twelve Patriarchs*, Joseph serves as a type of Christ and a figure whom one should strive to emulate. The description of Joseph in ALD shows that his special role antedates the Christian interpretation. A wisdom tradition is connected with Joseph and is early joined in ALD to the priestly.

ALD has reached us in a very complex way. At the end of the nineteenth century, two Aramaic sheets of it were discovered among the manuscript fragments from the Cairo Geniza. Soon after, it was observed that one of the manuscripts of TPL in Greek included additional passages some of which overlapped with the Geniza ALD fragments and supplemented them. A small extract in Syriac also turned up. Finally among the Dead Sea Scrolls, seven fragmentary manuscripts of ALD were discovered, one from Qumran Cave 1 and six more from Cave 4. The oldest of these are of the Hasmonean period. The work reconstructed from these fragments (which were published separately) has recently

been edited and translated as a whole, and now joins the corpus of early Jewish apocryphal writings.

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