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From Priest to Patriarch
Genealogical speculations around Levi

I. Introduction

Pseudepigraphy – as is well known – is a very common feature in the literature of Second Temple Judaism and its environment. Interestingly, some of the central characters of pseudepigraphic literature play only a minor role in the Bible: Enoch, about whom the Bible tells almost nothing, becomes the father of several works. Baruch, the scribe of Jeremiah, and Ezra are – for obvious reasons – likewise suitable. the sme is true of Levi, the hero of the so called *Aramaic Levi Document* (ALD), extant at Qumran. Even though ALD is just one, fragmentary preserved work about this son of Jacob, it shows the prominent role, which he gained in the literature of the second temple: In the *Testaments of the Twelve Patriarchs* – a work that is nowadays downhanded just in Christian circles, but which is for sure Jewish in its origins – he is the main character: To him and his brother Judah the other brothers and their offspring shall submit, while Judah is subordinated to Levi. According to *Jubilees*, Levi and Judah are the sons of Jacob, which are said to accompany him to his father Isaac to receive his blessing. The first to receive it is Levi! In *Joseph and Aseneth* Levi again has the leading part from the time of his occurrence. He is an omniscient prophet and a hellenistic popular philosopher; he initiates Aseneth into Judaism; he prevents his brothers from a murderous fraternal strife. And finally Pharao prostrates before him – but not before Joseph! In the *Assumption of Moses* with "Taxo" even a messianic figure is awaited from the tribe of Levi. In ALD, as far as one can say according to the fragments, the priestly functions of Levi come to the fore.

This last point draws the attention. While Levi is most prominent, there are two characters of whom one would think first, when priesthood is concerned, but who play an astonishingly marginal role: Aaron and Zadoq. Of course many Qumran scriptures speak of the "Messiah of Aaron" but as far as I can see there is neither a "Testament of Aaron" nor are there "Words of Zadoq". The Qumran texts have a distinct priestly interest, but neither Aaron nor Zadoq have, besides stereotyped phrases, a narrative life of their own. *Jubilees* does not even mention Aaron!

From the offered examples we may draw first conclusions:

1. Levis importance in second temple literature is only partly supplied by the biblical texts. Often it exceeds this account or even stands in contradiction to it. [see *Joseph and Aseneth*]
2. The interest in Levi could possibly not only refer to the person itself but to what he may represent or what comes from him, that is his descendants. [see "Taxo" in the *Assumption of Moses*]
3. Levi is several times sketched as a priest, while in the (narrative) texts of the Tana"ch he never appears in priestly functions. [see *ALD*, but compare also *Mal 2*]

This last point is by no means limited to Levi alone. *ALD*, the *Testament of Qahat* and the *Visions of Amram* constitute a chain of Pseudepigrapha with priestly interests, named according to the fathers of the three generations before Aaron (and Moses). Levis father Jacob is omitted from the priestly line in ALD by means of an elaborate construction and the priestly succession goes from the grandfather Isaac to Levi. The reason therefor is simply Jacobs limping due to his injury in the fight at the Jabbok river and the resulting *halakhic* incapability for priesthood. Furthermore in *ALD* and *Jubilees* with Noah and Abraham another two biblical main characters become priests. While these works might be of pre-qumranic origin, they are of importance for the Qumran library as evidenced by the number of remaining copies. Obviously there is a broad interest to anchor priestly functions and priestly knowledge before the Sinai and hence before Aaron and the tabernacle.

There are a number of questions resulting from this:

1. For what purpose did ancient Jewish writers exceed the revelation on Mt Sinai backwards? Is there some kind of anti-attitude involved, which would probably be concerned with a devaluation of the Sinai revelation, the eclipsing of Moses or something similar? And how can one classify this historically?

2. How are these traditions related to traditions, that do explicitly assign priesthood to Levi and do not know priesthood before Levi, as for example *Theodotus* and *Pseudo-Philo* in the reception of *Genesis 34*?
3. How should one understand, that Levi is on the one hand relevant because of his functions, that is his progeny, and on the other hand his descendants "take a back seat" and do not develop a literary life of their own?

In addition to this, there is another problem, which we have so far dealt with only marginally: Which role does this figur named Levi play in determining the relationship of priests and Levites? In sum: If anyone wants to understand the development and the meaning of the figur of "Levi", he is bound to draft a short history of the Levites in biblical times. It will be shown, that there are already interesting innerbiblical processes of reception, that parallel some tendencies in other second temple literature.

However, this paper is concerned with just one detail, namely the genealogical anchorage of Levi. At first I will present some philological comments.

II. Philological Remarks

The Hebrew Bible knows the word לוי in a twofold sense: On the one hand as a proper name – that is Levi, son of Jacob. It is intriguing, that he is the only bearer of his name in the Bible. Sharing this fate with some of the most prominent figures in the bible is for sure no coincidence. On the other hand לוי is to be understood as a term for – in the broadest sense – cultic officials or specialists. It is again worth noting, that the ancient and modern versions follow the Septuagint in differentiating these meanings by two different words: There is "Levi" and there is "Levite" (gr. *^{h}o Leuitäs*). The Hebrew language does not know this morphological distinction. This distinction is strictly in respect of content and context, not of linguistic features, and that means, it is sometimes ambiguous. As we will see, there are examples, where tradtion may mislead us.

With regard to the meaning "Levite" we realise this word as being a normal Hebrew noun. One can form the plural (לוים), it may be determined by the article (הלוי), and it may even be determined by pronominal suffixes (לוינו – Neh 10:1). One may even imagine feminine forms, yet they are not documented. As is commonly known, all of these grammatical features, plural and determination are unapplicable to proper names.

As I have mentioned before, the use of “Levi” as a personal name in the Hebrew Bible is limited to Jacob’s son. In Jewish contexts, the name occurs in epigraphic witnesses, but not before the first century B.C.E. It does not occur in Elephantine, in the Samaria Papyri, in the tomb inscriptions of Leontopolis or the Papyri of the Jewish *politeuma* from Herakleopolis. We find several persons named “Levi” in the Mishna and the New Testament. I tend to interpret this as a temporary fashion and aftermath of the biblical “Levi”. In the languages of the ancient orient there is – as far as I can see – likewise no evidence for a comparable personal name. Finally “Levi” does not follow the established patterns of building personal names in western semitic languages. In his “biblical family” Egyptian names are prevalent, so one may think of a Egyptian derivation of his name too. But no attempt was convincing yet. What furthermore distincts „Levi“ from „Moshe“ oder „Phinehas“ is its use as a common noun. In short: initially “Levi” is not a personal name. In later times there are many persons named “Levi” because of the biblical “Levi”. Levi, the son of Jacob, is nothing but the *heros eponymos* of the “Levites”, as are Ammon and Moab the *eponymous fathers* of the Ammonites and the Moabites. There is just one difference: They are fictitious ancestors of tribes, while Levi is initially the fictitious ancestor of a socially defined group. I still did not find an exact parallel for this, but a potential example might be the proper name Iddo (e.g. Zechariah’s grandfather in Zech 1,1), which we may connect to the עדדן/prophets (?) in the ZKR-inscription. Probably more convincing is a hint in the Bible itself: The children of Lamech (Gen 4) are described as forefathers of several professions by means of a pun on their names.

However: based on a fictitious ancestor there could develop a tribal or genealogical definition of a group, which is reflected in terms like “children of Levi”/בני לוי or „tribe of Levi“/שבט לוי or מטה. Speaking in terms of a relative chronology, at the beginning there is a “Levite”, out of whom “Levi” develops, from which the “children”, the “clan” or the “tribe” of Levi descend. To avoid misunderstandings: I refer to *group* (self)definitions with a genealogical background. The son or daughter of a “Levite” is at all times a בן or בת לוי.

Following modern research on the pentateuch, we may assume a late date of composition of those texts, that speak of the “children” or the “tribe of Levi”, e.g. Dtn 10:8; 18:1 (a gloss); and most occurences in Num. For today, I will not take into consideration the question of “levitical priests”/כהנים לוים, a term that is prevalent in Dtn, and furthermore in Jer 33 (but not Jer.LXX) and Ez 43f.

III. Ex 2:1 – “Bet-Levi” and “Bat-Levi”

Ex 2 is the marvellous beginning of a new story. A man מבית לוי went and took [“to wife” is meant, but intriguingly this is missing, compare in contrast Ex 6:20,23,25!] את בת לוי. These two, the names of which we do not know [Targum Jonathan does already here], become in the course of the story the parents of a little boy, to whom Pharao’s daughter gives the name “Moses”. Strange enough, the mother raises the abandoned child but still remains nameless, as does the child’s sister. The ancient and modern versions oscillate in how they shall translate לוי: We find “tribe of Levi”, “house of Levi”, “familiy of Levi” oder “levitic family” [lat. *stirpis suae = of his tribe/origin*]. The *masoretic* Hebrew text reads בת לוי with the *nota accusativi* את, so the expression must be understood as determined, and therefore “Levi” as a personal name. This reading presupposes a reader coming from Genesis, who knows the twelve sons of Jacob. But due to this there are several problems: first of all again the names. Why does the reader not know a daughter of Levi until now and why is her name not told even now? Though female names are frequently omitted in the Hebrew Bible, this is not the case when they are important for the ancestral lineage. The same applies to the man: If one should see him as a descendant of Levi, son of Jacob, why is his name untold? Were his wife indeed *the* daughter of Levi, what descendant of Levi at all could he be, to conduct a legal marriage? According to tradition, Moses’ father is a grandson of Levi, that is his wife’s nephew. This leads to two more problems, but this will be dealt with later on.

These questions do not arise just for the modern reader, as is evidenced by Septuaginta and Vulgata: In LXX a man of the tribe (*phyle*) of Levi marries one of the daughters (*toon thygatéroon*) of Levi. This usage of the genetive plural may be understood as “descendant of Levi” or “of levitical origin”. Vulgata lets Moses’s father marry a woman *stirpis suae*, meaning „of his origin“. Again this is a more multivalent formulation compared to the *masoretic text*. The versions show, that the text is worked with. It is impossible to prove, whether a more ancient version of the Hebrew text contained the *nota accusativi* or not, although the latter seems likely to me. However, I have aimed to demonstrate, that the story is plainly and better understood, if in both cases no genealogical reference to Levi, son of Jacob, is intended, but rather two people of Levitical origin are meant. Besides: this parallels the ancient oriental story of Sargon, whose parents are priests, although this is disputed and depends on translation.

Already by means of literary criticism Ex 2:1 is seen as the beginning of the pre-priestly Moses-narrative, a narrative that did not know Genesis. I agree to this whithout reservation

and hope that our short considerations referring to the usage of לוי contribute a small piece to this bigger mosaic. Ex 2:1 should primarily be understood whithout the precursory genealogy of Jacob's twelve sons in Genesis. The "pre-priestly Moses" is of levitical descent, but he is not the grand-(grandson) of Levi, his sister is nameless, and his brother Aaron does probably not exist.

IV. Ex 6 – A Levitical Genealogy

Looking now into the genealogy in Ex 6 we miss out some epochs of the Hebrew Bible's literary history: This chapter tells about Mose's vocation in the priestly version. Although there is too much we will never know about this important peace of hebrew literature, we may with some certainty claim, that the priestly writing bridges from Genesis to Exodus and knows Aaron.

Now, according to scientific *communis opinio* Vv. 14-30 do not belong to the original inventory of this chapter. The doubling and resumption of V. 13 show the redactional work. I would even say, this is one of the most convincing examples for literary criticism. The genealogy of Moses and Aaron belongs thus to the post-priestly time, i.e. to the latest literary layers of the pentateuch. That means even the priestly source, inspite of its distinctive interest in genealogies, bridges from Genesis to Exodus, but not whith respect to a family history. [Compare the depiction in *Jubilees* and *Pseud-Philo*].

Most intriguing, Ex 6 shows similarities to the genealogies in Gen 46 and Num 26, but is not complete and tracks instead only those families, that it is apparently interested in. We hear of the sons of Ruben, Shimon and Levi, but not of Jacob's other sons. Then the line follows Levi's second son Kehat to Amram-Aaron-Eleazar-Phinehas or to Izhar-Korah. The stories of Korah (Num 16) and Phinehas (Num 25) are at sight, and there is obviously no interest in Moses's children! The reception of these texts from Gen 46 and Num hint again for the late date of Vv. 14-30.

This familiy tree explicitly connects Jacob's sons from Genesis with the leading characters of the Exodus. Moses's and Aaron's father is Kehat, son of Amram, son of Levi. He takes Yochebed, דודתו, to wife (V. 20). דודה is "aunt" – whether we understand the word as "sister of the father" or "wife of the father's brother". But since the last case is – for obvious reasons – excluded here, Yochebed must therefore be, although it is not formally stated, a biological

daughter of Levi and not just daughter of a Levite. And likewise is Amram from the "house" of Levi: He is not his son, but his grandson.

This innerbiblical interpretation bears new problems as noted above: Amram marrying his aunt did something illegal according to the Tana"ch, and that regardless of how we understand דודה (compare Lev 18:12 against 18:14; 20:20). The *Temple Scroll* 11Q19 even tightens this prescription! Furthermore one must assume, that Amram married a much older woman, what is, given the above mentioned problem, admittedly negligible. LXX and Vulgata solve the problem in another manner: As equivalent to דודתו the greek version reads "daughter of the brother of his father" [so do *Demetrios* and *Targum Neofiti*] and the same is meant by latin *patruelis* [offspring of the *patruus*, i.e. the father's brother]. Yochebed is therefore not Amram's aunt but his cousin. So both the problem of differing generations and the question of legitimate marriage are solved. The readers of LXX and Vulgata may look back to Ex 2 with comfort, while the observing reader of the Hebrew Bible is confronted with open questions. In exchange, LXX and Vulgata have a problem in Num 26:59, where the (grammaticly difficult) text labels Yochebed a daughter of Levi.

One further note is to say about Aaron's marriage: His spouse is אלישבע בת עמינדב אחות נחשון. Nachschon ben Amminadab is actually not known to the reader and will not be mentioned until Num. There he is the נשיא of the tribe of Judah. An elaborate genealogy is given in 1Chr 2 and Ruth 4. Again we may take this as a proof for the late date of Ex 6:14-30. Presuming the same length for every generation, Elisheba would be at the age of Aaron's – her husband's! – granddaughter. At any rate Elisheba, the wife of Israel's first highpriest, is not from the tribe of Levi and thus, at least in the paternal line, not of priestly origin!

V. Solutions and Speculations in Jubilees and ALD

To begin with Jubilees, it does not seem to be of great help solving our problem. It names Levi's wife as "Malka" and denotes, that she is from the Mesopotamian kin [Shimon's first wife is not!]. We get to know Levi's first three son's names and some his life's details. Amram and Yochebed are mentioned as Mose's parents; and Amram apparently stayed for a while in Canaan when he and others tried to to bring there Joseph's mortal remains [compare also *Visions of Amram*]. Oddly enough, Mose's brother Aaron is not mentioned at all and there is no genealogical bridge to Levi. But Levi is custodian of "the scriptures" [ch. 45] and Amram instructs Moses in "the scriptures" [ch. 46; in the *exagoge of Ezekiel the tragic poet* it

is the mother]. There is no genealogical clarification, but may one presume this knowledge with the readers? I suppose so and, even more, Levi is the last person in a chain from Noah via Abraham and his son, who transmisses the scriptures. And Moses is the addressee of the revelation on Mt Sinai, thus of the book of Jubilees. The priestly instruction is a strong link between them and compensates in my opinion the unmentioned family connection, whether it did not exist for the authors of *Jubilees*, whether they presupposed it. At any rate, Levi is thus the interface between the Patriarchal stories and the Exodus.

The same is true for two Qumranic Texts: Pseudo-Jubilees (4Q225) and Biblical Chronology (4Q559).

ALD goes another way. It contains an autobiographic paragraph about Levi [overlap MS Athos to Cambridge c-e]. We hear again of Levi's wife Malka and got to know their family tree. According to it she is Levi's cousin. *ALD* thus enforces the family relation compared to *Jubilees*. We learn of Levi's and Malka's three sons, the rejection of Gershon, the firstborn, with regard to priesthood, and that Kehat is the chosen one. After a pun on the name "Merari", the third son, also Yochebed's birth is told. Her name is given an exegesis, which foreshadows her illustrious children. At last, the names of Levi's son's children are given, not the names of his daughter's children [which would be Moses and Aaron]! But only to the grandson Amram is given weight, because he receives his name from his grandfather Levi; his name is interpretated – with respect to the Exodus – and his marriage with Yochebed is mentioned. Everything points at Moses, Aaron, and Mirjam, although they are not mentioned!

Peculiar to *ALD* is the dating of all events. Levi becomes father of Kehat at the age of 34, father of Yochebed at the age of 64. The older brother is therefore at the age of 30, when he gets a little sister and a son. As *ALD* states, Yochebed and Amram, aunt and nephew, are born not only in the same year but also at the same day. Really a sensational incidence for the couple-to-come. The problem of divergent generations is thus solved. Further on unsolved is the problem of illegitimacy of that marriage between aunt and nephew. Later midrash tradition offers some solutions therefor, but this is beyond the scope of this paper. Endogamy of priestly families seems to be a propulsive motif in *ALD*. Nevertheless it is astonishing, that this contradiction to the biblical Law or the *halakhah* is not dealt with. May be this is due to the *halakhah* not given until Mt Sinai, but I am not sure of that.

VI. Conclusion

What we saw was an ongoing chain of interpretation and re-interpretation, starting as an innerbiblical process and continuing into the versions and other works second temple literature: (1) “In the beginnig” of the tradition there is a story about Moses and his parents of levitical origin [Ex 2]. This story is in no way connected to the Patriarchal stories. (2) The priestly source builds the bridge between Genesis and Exodus. This bridge has no other function than to guarantee the continuity of traditions. The additions to the priestly source [Ex 6] tie the knot as well on the family level. It is noteworthy, that at first only the children of Levi are named up to the time of the Exodus. [Chronicles continues this tendency of tightening the connection between Genesis and Exodus by providing elaborate family trees for Jacob’s other sons.] (3) By re-reading Ex 2:1, now with a genealogical background, logical or exegetical problems arise. LXX and following LXX also Vulgata and e.g. Demetrios solve this problem of an illegitimate marriage and divergent generations by changing the family relationship in Ex 6. ALD solely alignes the generations by means of chronology. This sophisticated construction confirms indirectly the version of the *masoretic text*, but leaves the question of legitimacy unanswered.

In the end, Levi is the pivotal connection between the Patriarchs and the Exodus. He transmits universal human wisdom in a chain from Enoch and Noah on the one hand, on the other hand he prefigures his famous descendants Moses and Aaron [and Mirjam]. One can write about Levi and talk about Moses, Aaron, and the priests without mentioning them. Returning to the introductory question “Why Levi?” we may state: The combination of the Genesis traditions and the Exodus traditions is thus the key that makes Levi one of the most prominent figures in Second Temple Judaism.

Göttingen - X/2009

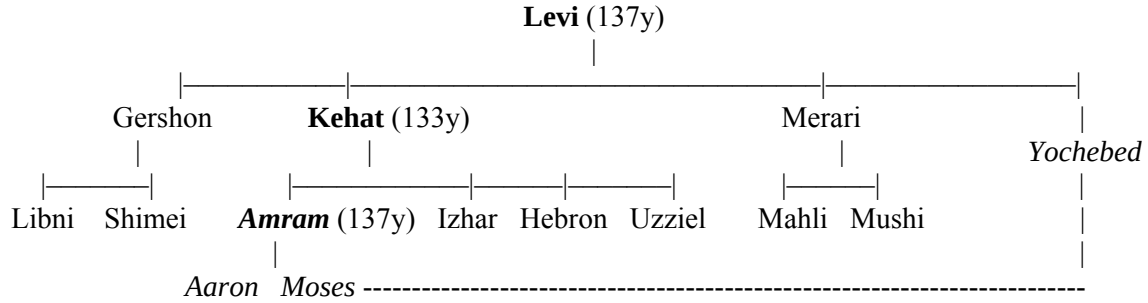
H. Samuel

Shemot 2:1

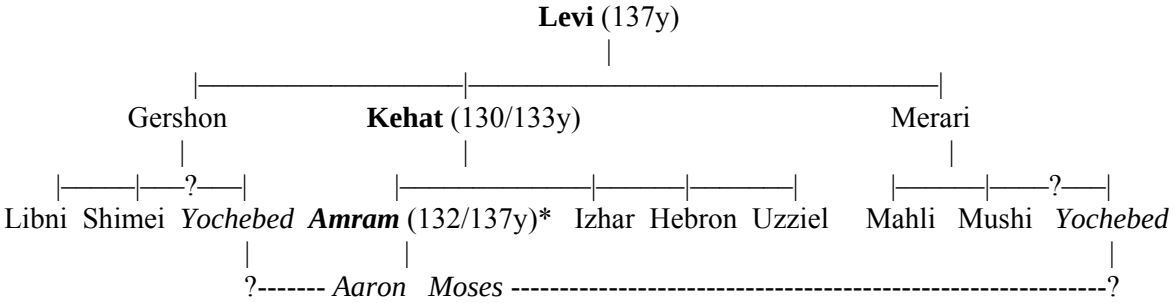
Massoretic Text: **וַיֵּלֶךְ אִישׁ מִבֵּית לֵוִי וַיִּקַּח אֶת־בַּת־לֵוִי׃**

LXX: ἦν δέ τις ἐκ τῆς φυλῆς Λευι ὃς ἔλαβεν τῶν θυγατέρων Λευι καὶ ἔσχεν αὐτήν

Shemot 6:14-30 (Hebrew Text)



Exodus 6:14-30 (Greek/Latin Text)



* Note: in LXX 132y except Codex Alexandrinus, who reads 136y