

Dr. Elaine Phillips, Introduction to Biblical Studies, Session 16, Testamentary and Martyrdom Lit.

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This is Dr. Elaine Phillips and her teaching on Introduction to Biblical Studies. This is session 16, Testamentary and Martyrdom Literature.

We are moving into another type of pseudepigrapha with this lecture.

We're going to do a review in a moment, but just to, from the title, indicate where we're going. There is a whole set of materials called Testamentary Literature, and probably the classic example of that is indeed going to be the Testament of the Twelve Patriarchs, which I'll unpack momentarily. Tagged on to the end of this, I don't want to miss an example of martyrdom literature as well because obviously, again, we're talking about the time when pseudepigrapha was composed.

This was a very, very difficult time when God's people themselves were undergoing all kinds of persecution, so martyrdom literature is a very timely genre within this idea of pseudepigrapha. One of our classic examples is going to be the texts that became what's called the Martyrdom of Isaiah. Let's review just a little bit, first of all, with some of our observations and things we've said already, but just to remind ourselves.

I can't emphasize enough how well these folks knew their scriptures and explored the meaning for their day. Again, canon, community, commentary, continuity—keep those things in mind, especially the whole idea that they knew their Bible. If you get no other application out of this study, just understand and appreciate these folks who had a profound sense of what was actually in scripture.

The Hebrew Bible is indeed the foundation. New Testament writers drew on this richer way. We just said this at the end of our last lecture, but just to remind ourselves, they are taking the biblical texts that they know really well and interfacing them with their own experiences, ideas, and concepts that are part of their day.

Moving from that broad review into what is called testamentary literature, let's get a couple of things on our radar screens because, as we might expect when we're talking about testamentary literature, there is a canonical base for this. Then, of course, we have to ask, what is it? Well, it's kind of interesting. When we look at Genesis 49, we have the blessings.

We have the blessings uttered on or about the 12 sons of Jacob or Israel. He's on his deathbed, and this is considered each one of those blessings, Reuben, Simeon, Levi,

Judah, et cetera, right on down. Each one of those is a prophetic statement in one form or another from Israel, Jacob on his deathbed, about them.

What we're going to have then is, at least in the Testament of the Twelve Patriarchs, but our other testamentary literature is going to follow that same pattern. Some known figures in the biblical text, we have a testament of Abraham too, for example, is going to be represented by this community as being close to death and therefore uttering something that is supposed to be of value to the people gathered around him with regard to ethical teaching and sometimes with regard to prophetic statements about their future. Now, we're going to focus on the Testament of the Twelve Patriarchs because it draws right into the next generation, if you will, of those names that show up right in Genesis 49.

So, that's our pattern. It's drawn from Jacob's blessings on his sons, but it's also going to have an impact because each one of those, according to our authorships, is going to give a blessing as well. So, just some of our common characteristics.

I've kind of summarized them already, but it certainly won't hurt to go over them. As I said, generally, a deathbed scene is not always the case, by the way, but generally, a deathbed scene modeled after Genesis 49 usually starts out with a confession. The person is breathing their last, and so these are the things that I've done wrong, and of course, that's the basis then for my appeal to God for grace and mercy, but also as kind of a foil against which this individual is going to say, here's what you ought to do right.

So, we then have some instructions, ethical emphasis, if you will, and then most of them, not all, most of them include some kind of prophetic statement, as the Genesis 49 articulations with regard to each of these sons did as well. So, kind of hold on to that whole complex of Genesis 49 and then these components that are part of it. Obviously, as this says, within the prophetic part of it, we're going to have whatever apocalyptic tendencies come out.

That's the backdrop. As I said, there are other testamentary literature, but we're going to focus on, first, the Testament of the Twelve Patriarchs, happily abbreviated TTP, just so we don't have to write so much, and then within that, we're going to focus on Levi, right? So, we're narrowing down testamentary literature, Testament of the Twelve Patriarchs, and then eventually Levi. So, we've said most of this already, but our general contents of all of these are going to be presumably, it's represented this way, the final utterances of each of these sons of Jacob in order.

But of course, each one, as it's being represented, is going to, amongst all the other things they do say, oh, and Levi needs to be specially honored, and Judah, special honor and blessing and praise given to them. And, of course, that's not a surprise because Judah, the line from which the king would come, the line of David, and Levi,

of course, Aaron and the priesthood. In terms of our testaments, just to see where they're preserved, unlike our Enoch literature, for example, which seems to have been preserved in the church, we have Greek, Armenian, Slavonic.

That's a wide range of church audiences. But we also have the Testament of the Twelve Patriarchs in Hebrew fragments and Aramaic as well. So even looking at that, the languages that are represented in what we have of these texts tells us, this was a wide-ranging, much-used, much-adopted text.

Dates are sometimes a little hard to ascertain, but the general idea is that we're talking about the second century B.C. So put that in together with what we said about the first part of the 1 Enoch because that, too, was early on. Having said that, as people study this Testament of the Twelve Patriarchs, there are places where we see what appear to be Christian interpolations. I'll give you an example in just a moment.

And there are enough of those that some folks think this is originally a Christian document that then got redone into Hebrew-speaking, Aramaic-speaking circles. I wouldn't go in that direction myself, but that's at least a suggestion. Again, this is just a reminder that we may wonder a little bit about Christian interpolations coming into a text, but text boundaries in that context are a lot more fluid than the way we think of them now.

Here are just a couple of examples. They show up in a number of places. The Testament of Simeon has this, and I've just taken a little bit out of it.

God hath taken a body, and eaten with men, and saved men. That doesn't sound like it came out of the second century B.C., so something seems to have possibly been added in here in this Testament of Simeon. I would admonish you, by the way, go back and read the whole thing, because I'm just lifting pieces out.

This one's particularly interesting, and it does come out of the Testament of Levi, that's T.L. Behold, I am cleared from your—I think that should read, it is clear. Maybe not. Behold, I am cleared from your ungodliness and transgression, which you shall commit at the end of the ages against the Savior of the world, Christ.

Again, not a second-century B.C. statement. Acting godlessly, deceiving Israel, stirring up against it great evils from the Lord. Ye shall deal lawlessly together with Israel, so he shall not bear with Jerusalem because of your wickedness.

But, another clause which sounds straight out of the Gospels, the veil of the temple shall be rent. So these are just a couple of a number, not a huge number, but a number of things that clearly seem to come through Christian hands dealing with these texts. But let's go on.

A few additional comments to make with regard to this. We've already seen how what we have in the Testament of the Twelve Patriarchs survives in a number of languages, which tells us something. It seems also to reflect a little stronger emphasis on ethical issues, teaching, instruction.

Now, that's not terribly surprising because if we have presumably patriarchs giving advice based on their own experience as to how their followers, the next generation, should act, of course, it's going to be ethical instruction. But having said that, some people do see it as interfacing a little bit more with the wider Greek culture, Hellenistic culture, which did focus on virtues and living according to that, and therefore Torah, not just Torah as instruction, but Torah represented in some of these texts more as a Greek wisdom type thing. We also do see that through this text, Hellenism, Hellenism not just in terms of ethical instruction, but piety being expressed there.

We see some apocalyptic stuff. We see some exhortations to divest oneself of everything that could be sumptuous, sensuous, ascetic kinds of exhortations. And then there are clearly, as you see when you read these, clearly embellishments from our Genesis narratives.

We're going to focus on Levi in a moment, and we'll see a couple of those are very interesting embellishments and how they're used by the authorship of this text. As I said in conjunction with our Enoch lecture a little bit ago, we have references in the Testament of the Twelve Patriarchs to Enoch. So again, what Enoch literature is doing is circulating through these communities and being recognized as sufficiently important that it gets quoted.

So, you know, if you wanted to do sort of the contemporary of it, you could take one of the major figures in, well, Christian writing these days and see how many times that individual is referred to. Timothy Keller gets referenced a lot. N.T. Wright gets referenced a lot.

You know, important figures. It seems like the Enoch literature was important because you'll see the Testament of Simeon, the Testament of Levi, and the Testament of Judah all refer to Enoch in one sense or another. There's also, especially in the Testament of Reuben, a sense in terms of how particular components of the culture viewed women.

Now, one of the reasons for just landing on this a little bit is to remind ourselves that this is the cultural backdrop, or at least part of the cultural backdrop, against which Jesus will have women amongst his followers, against which Jesus will indeed give priority in terms of revealing his identity to women. So, Jesus is shocking in a context

that would say the kinds of things that we're going to read in a moment. Having said that, don't lose sight of Proverbs 31.

All right, but here we go. Of course, you know, this is in the Testament of Reuben. There's no surprise there.

What was Reuben's problem? Well, he defiled his father's bed by sleeping with his father's handmaid. Of course, there's going to be a sexual component that was ill-advised, promiscuity in the worst. And so that provides the groundwork for the authorship to now give all sorts of exhortations about women and engaging in intercourse with women.

And it's going to be this audience or this authorship; I should say, who's going to kind of retool that. So, well, here's how it goes. In other words, you know what? It was probably Bilhah's fault.

Women are evil since they have no power or strength over man. They use wiles by outward attractions that they may draw him to themselves by means of their adornment. They deceive first their minds and by the glance of the eye instill the poison.

And then, through the accomplished act, they take them captive. Pause, pause, pause. Flee fornication, my children.

Command your wives and your daughters that they adorn not their heads and faces. For thus, they allured the watchers who were before the flood. The women gave birth to giants.

For the watchers appeared to them as reaching even unto heaven. So, again, there's all sorts of things we could unpack in that context. But I simply want us to see it as a reflection of a cultural context that seems to have been relatively suspicious of women and the roles of women.

And then this particular Genesis Reuben incident gives them the groundwork for developing this kind of statement. Well, just to say it again, Jesus is very different, obviously, from this particular attitude. Let's talk a little bit about the major theological emphases, and then we will focus for the rest of our time on the Testament of Levi.

Clearly, we're coming back to one of our typical apocalyptic themes, evil. Our Enoch text tried to deal with origin of evil. This text is going to say God judges evil.

God's going to deal with evil, all right? We also see an emphasis on dualism. There's a spirit of truth. Its counterpart is a spirit of error.

There are two ways to take it. We're going to be coming back to that as well. And by the way, even though we're not studying 4th Ezra, 4th Ezra picks up on these two inclinations things quite a bit.

Another one of those major emphases is the transcendence of God. We've mentioned that already. We saw it in terms of our seven levels of heaven, or maybe 10 in 2nd Enoch.

But in the Testament of Levi, we also have levels of heaven. God is too holy. God is too pure.

It has to be separate in some way, and so these levels are in there again. We see a Messianic figure. So, all those major theological emphases are showing up here.

We will see specifically with regard to Levi, the Testament of Levi, that we have some articulation of king and priest. And then, no surprise, there's an eschatological focus as well, the end days. With that in mind, finally coming down from our testamentary literature, Testament of the Twelve Patriarchs, Levi himself.

And again, this is such a great read. I'm only quoting little bits of it. In this Testament, unlike the others, you know, Levi is not presented as being on his deathbed.

Levi, instead, is in full health. Levi's descendants as priests are going to be a major focus here, and we'll see how that works out.

So, it's not necessarily all an apocalyptic prophetic statement. There's some of that there. But it's going to be priestly material.

Well, Levi's sin. Simeon and Levi. We know that because of their sister, Dina, they connive and basically end up slaughtering the people, the men of Shechem.

So that's his sin, the slaughter of the Shechemites. And you may remember I said a moment ago that we have in these embellishments of the Genesis narrative. I'm just going to give you a couple of places where this Testament indeed embellishes that particular narrative.

Because, well, here's the problem, folks. Levi is going to be a priest. That's a fairly exalted place to be called.

How on earth can someone who has committed this kind of slaughter ever be installed as a priest? How could that possibly be? Our authorship needs to wrestle with that. And we're just going to get a tiny glimpse into how they do it. It's going to show up in terms of the holiness of God and the judgment of evil.

We've seen that with regard to all the Testaments. Those themes come back into this context. But, oh, they do so in such an interesting way.

Here it is. And, again, I've boiled it way down. You can actually flesh it out.

It turns out that as this Testament unfolds and as the information from the heavenly realms is conveyed, it turns out that what Levi was supposed to do, what he ended up doing, was already ordained. It had been written on the heavenly tablets. It was preordained.

He was called to bring judgment against these evil people or Shechem. And that's why he did, along with Simeon, because not only did they end up abusing Dina, but they already had had some very ill designs against other women who belonged to this covenant people as well. They had ill designs against Sarah, the matriarch, and against Rebecca.

The fact that there was this obvious horror that was part of who they were meant that, written on the heavenly tablets, it's ordained that Levi, oh, Simeon, along with him as well, but Levi was to indeed effect judgment against these evil people. And it goes so far as to say, oh, they mistreated Abraham as well when he was in their context. So, do you see what's happening here? The character of Levi is getting whitewashed.

The narrative in Genesis is embellished. And it's being done because there is just, as I said a moment ago, an impossibility in their minds that someone who has committed such a heinous slaughter could possibly be called a priest unless there was a divinely ordained reason for that slaughter. All right.

So that's first. Second thing then, his priesthood is indeed ordained in the heavens. Investiture means putting on those priestly garments.

So, he is going to now be a maid priest. Again, I've kind of, not kind of, I have really condensed this, but we'll at least get a glimpse. This has to happen in the heavenly realm.

So, Levi beholds a high mountain. Behold, the heavens were open. An angel of God said to me, Levi, enter.

And I entered from the first heaven, saw a great sea hanging. Further, I saw a second heaven, far brighter and more brilliant, for there was a boundless light also there. And I said to the angel, why is this so? And the angel said to me, don't marvel at this because you're going to see another heaven, more brilliant and incomparable.

And when you have ascended thither, you will stand near the Lord and shall be his minister. In other words, functioning in the context of the tabernacle temple, which represents God's heavenly dwelling. And therefore, Levi, as he's called, ordained to function in that earthly shadow temple, is, in order to do that, has to be ordained in the heavenly realms.

Thus, he is invested in the third, the highest heaven, Shemei HaShamaim. Well, we can say a little bit more about that. Not just three heavens, not just happening in God's presence.

But we have a continuation. Here, regarding the heavens which have been shown you, the lowest is gloomy. It beholds all the unrighteous deeds of men.

A little elaboration now. Some of it sounds a lot like what we saw in our levels from 2nd Enoch. It has fire and snow and ice made ready for the day of judgment.

A little aside. The book of Job, when God starts talking about this, will talk about hail being used as judgment. This authorship is probably drawing on that.

In the second level are the hosts of the armies which are ordained for the day of judgment to work vengeance on spirits of deceit and of Beliar. And above them are the holy ones. In the highest of all dwelleth the great glory, far above holiness.

And now we seem to have more of an expanse, even beyond three, maybe. The heaven next to it is the archangels who minister and make propitiation to the Lord for all the sins of ignorance of the righteous. And in the heaven below this are the angels who bear answers to the angels of the presence of the Lord.

And in the heaven next to this are thrones and dominions. Here's what's fun about this text. With 2 Enoch we saw 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, and so forth.

Here, there seems to be a little bit more perceptual complexity in the relative locations of these heavens. Whatever you want to do with that. It's interesting that our authorship does interesting things with that.

More important for us, as we're moving continually onward through the text, the investiture doesn't mean only going into the heavenly realms. It means getting invested. Taking on the garments of priesthood.

And here's what the text says. I saw seven men in white raiment saying to me, by the way, watch this carefully, arise, put on the robe of the priesthood and the crown of righteousness and the breastplate of understanding and the garment of truth and the plate of faith and the turban of the head and the ephod of prophecy. Now, two things might leap to our mind.

Maybe even three. The first one might be Exodus 28, where the garments of the high priest are described in terms of what he wears. A number of those reverberate in here, don't they? Exodus 28 and the garments of the high priesthood are there.

One that's less likely might be Isaiah 59. I'll just quickly summarize that. I don't think I printed it here.

Where, you know, they're looking around. The Lord looked, and he saw no one to execute judgment. So he put on the breastplate of righteousness, and he put on the garment of truth.

God puts those things on in order to execute judgment. That might underlie this. We also see in a moment how this particular garment and vestiture is going to be related to the Messianic persons, i.e., the different Messiah figures.

Here they are. Levi, your seed is going to be divided into three offices. But now look, these are a little bit ambiguous as well.

Sign of glory of the Lord who is to come. The first portion shall be great, greater than none can be. The second, by the way, notice ambiguity there.

Not sure what that is, but nothing greater than. The second shall be in the priesthood. And the third shall be called by a new name because a king shall arise in Judah and establish a new priesthood after the fashion of the Gentiles.

That bracket might be another one of those Christian interpolations to all the Gentiles. And his presence is beloved as a prophet of the most high at the seat of Abraham, our father. So we've got right after that investiture, right after the putting on of the garments, then we have these figures that are described, and they reverberate with things we've already seen in terms of the understanding of some kind of Messianic figure.

Now, there is much more to say in terms of the eschatological material at the end of the Testament of Levi. But we want at least to give ourselves a little time to move into martyrdom literature. The pattern runs like this.

The martyrdom of Isaiah is another one of these texts that seems to have fluid boundaries. As I say, you can see several parts, maybe two, maybe three. We have both the ascension of Isaiah, which brings him through our by now very familiar characteristic seven heavens.

But we also have a particular description of Isaiah's martyrdom. And here's the pattern for the martyrdom part. Just a reminder, pseudepigraphic literature,

apocalyptic literature, second century B.C. and onward times of terrible persecution, that's when this particular piece at least begins to take shape.

So, one of God's prophets envisions his own death. Fine, that's part of the pattern. This isn't just the martyrdom of Isaiah. It's other martyrdoms as well.

There's going to be the true prophet who knows what's coming. You've got wicked false prophets. So, here's our dualism coming in now in the prophetic sphere.

Good prophet of God, wicked false prophet. They're going to revile this person. It's going to be Satan who's going to be behind it or Belial or Beliar.

The ruler who is in charge is going to condemn the true prophet to death. And there's going to be persecution. In Isaiah's case, it'll be torture.

But the prophet will, regardless of what he's going through, die faithfully. And again, that's our pattern for our martyrdom literature. And we certainly see that as we look at the martyrdom of Isaiah.

And again, I'm skipping all of the ascension of Isaiah. We're leaving that out. Just a brief look at the contents.

Because guess what? There's a reason for taking a look at this. Presumed historical context? Well, we're talking about Isaiah. And so we know that Isaiah prophesied during the reigns of Uzziah, Jotham, Ahaz, and Hezekiah.

But we also know he lived into the reign of Manasseh. So here's our note. Hezekiah, good king.

Manasseh was a truly wicked king and reigned, sadly, for 55 years. Now, that's the context. As the martyrdom of Isaiah text develops itself, you have a scene where Hezekiah is still alive.

Isaiah is still in his presence, prophesying in his presence. And Isaiah says, your son Manasseh is going to turn away, and he is going to actually do in the prophetic voice. So, there's a prophecy that's being made.

Manasseh is not there to hear this, but he certainly lives up to it anyway because, as we know, he does turn away. We also have the figure of Beliar, sometimes known as Belial. Belial is a Hebrew term that means of nothing worthlessness, but it becomes sort of a proper name in our intertextual period for a devil, Satan figure.

And so he shows up in this text, and in the context, he prompts someone who was called the Samaritan to denounce Isaiah to Manasseh. And so, Manasseh is now the good father of the scene. Manasseh is out to get Isaiah.

Well, what happens? In the interval, Isaiah leaves. He goes to the area of Bethlehem. And by the way, there are other prophets that are gathered in the Bethlehem area.

There's a very interesting combination of historical anachronistic things, because it turns out Micaiah is there, Elijah is there. They're a little early for this, but they're there. Somebody betrays Isaiah.

He leaves the area of Bethlehem and goes up into a high mountain, and that's where he's hiding. But his hiding place is given away, and he's captured. But here's the interesting thing.

Manasseh sends and seizes Isaiah, and he sawed him asunder with a wood saw. And as if we don't get it enough, the text actually says this about four times. He sawed him in half.

He sawed him in half. He sawed him in half with a wood saw. We get a distinct sense from this text, written in the second century B.C., may preserve an ancient tradition, but it certainly a backdrop to what we have in Hebrews chapter 11 because in the catalog of faithful people, the author of Hebrews is talking about, he does reference judges, et cetera, prophets, some of whom stopped the mouths of lions, but some of whom were sawn asunder.

And that verse 37 is probably referencing this tradition that's out there because it's probably out there by the time that the author of Hebrews is writing. And he references something that people know as part of their tradition through the centuries prior to that. Well, that's just the quickest of quick looks at both testamentary literature and related martyrdom literature.

They, along with our Enoch literature, give us kind of an interesting picture, as we've already said, of what's going on in the whole religious, theological, philosophical backdrop and cultural historical as well. Okay, we're going to pick up rabbinical literature next time.

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