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LEVITES AND PRIESTS
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THE VIOLENT ORIGINS OF THE LEVITES: TEXT AND TRADITION

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The various texts of the Hebrew Bible that deal with the Levites are in agreement that the Levites are considered a group apart, separate from the other Israelite tribes or the rest of Israelite society.¹ While any authentic historical reconstruction of the place of the Levites in ancient Israel, or the development of their role in society, is perhaps inaccessible with any degree of certainty, the traditional explanations for their separate status are present in a number of literary manifestations, particularly in the Pentateuch. The Priestly source attributes the separation of the Levites to a divine decree handed down at Sinai (Num 1–4), as it does for so many other phenomena, without any explanation for the choice of the Levites in particular.² The focus of this paper, however, will be on four other pentateuchal descriptions of the origins of the Levites' special status. Despite being spread across the books of the Pentateuch, and despite comprising both prose and poetry, all four of these texts—Gen 34, Exod 32, Gen 49, and Deut 33—hold in common the tradition that the Levites were chosen for special treatment as a result of an act of violence. The specific nature of this act, however, as well as its location both in time and space, differs among these passages. This paper will examine these four texts on their own and in relationship to one another, with an eye toward making some preliminary suggestions as to the literary and traditional relationships between them.

POETRY

In the tribal poem of Gen 49, the second set of sayings deals with Simeon and Levi together (vv. 5–7). They are described as angry and wrathful (v. 7), and violent (v. 5)—whatever we make of the word *מכרתיהם*.³ They kill, they

1. Cf. Exod 38:21; Lev 25:32–33; Num 1–4; 8; 18; 31:30; 35:1–8; Deut 10:8–9; 12:12, 19; 14:27, 29; 16:11, 14; 18:1–8; 21:5; 26:11–13; 31:9, 25; Jos 13:14, 33; 14:3, 4; 18:7; 21:1–41; Judg 17; 19:1; 1 Kgs 12:31; Isa 66:21; Jer 33:21–22; Ezek 45:5; 48:13; Mal 2:4; 1 Chr 6; 15; 23:25–32; 24; 2 Chr 8:14; 11:14; 19:8; 23:6, 18; 29; 31:2, 4; 35:3–6; Ezra 3:8; 6:18; 7:24; Neh 10:28; 12:47; 13:30.

2. See George Buchanan Gray, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on Numbers* (ICC; Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1903), 25.

3. For a summary of the various proposals, see Raymond de Hoop, *Genesis 49 in Its*

maim (v. 6), and as a result they are disinherited, divided, and scattered among the tribes of Israel (vv. 6–7). Unlike in the saying of Reuben (vv. 3–4), which explicitly mentions the specific crime for which Jacob’s firstborn is punished—“he mounted his father’s bed”—no details are provided in these verses to justify the attribution of violence to the two brothers. Though it is usual to draw a direct line between Gen 49:5–7 and Gen 34—and this connection will be discussed below—it is worth stating at the outset that there is nothing in the poem that makes any direct or even indirect reference to the events involving Dinah and Shechem in Gen 34; not a single word, beyond the two names, has any resonance with the earlier narrative.⁴ All we can say with certainty is that this passage represents a tradition in which Simeon and Levi are rendered landless because they are violent—apparently by nature.

The tribal poem of Gen 49 is usually and correctly understood as an originally independent piece, almost certainly part of a larger tradition of collections of sayings about the various Israelite tribes (cf. Deut 33; Judg 5).⁵ It is, however, embedded in the larger narrative of Jacob’s life, both by placement and by introductory and concluding transitions.⁶ Scholars have long recognized that the source in which this poem has been preserved, as Jacob’s last words, is J.⁷ While the author of J is not the author of the poem, the poem

Literary and Historical Context (OTS 29; Leiden: Brill, 1999), 101–9. The centrality of violence in this passage is emphasized by Hans-Jürgen Zobel, *Stammesspruch und Geschichte: Die Angaben der Stammessprüche von Gen 49, Dtn 33 und Jdc 5 über die politischen und kultischen Zustände in damaligen “Israel”* (BZAW 95; Berlin: Töpelmann, 1965), 7.

4. See John Skinner, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on Genesis* (2nd ed.; ICC; Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1930), 516: “the terms of the oracle are perfectly general and in part unsuited to the supposed circumstances [i.e., the story of Gen 34]; and it seems to me to be the habitual character of the tribes which is denounced, and not any particular action.” See also n. 33 below.

5. On the nature and age of the poem, see Frank Moore Cross and David Noel Freedman, *Studies in Ancient Yahwistic Poetry* (1950; new ed.; Biblical Resource Series; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997), 46–47.

6. The introduction, v. 1b, projects the sayings, originally understood as describing the present state of the tribes, into the future, as this is the only way the poem can fit into its narrative context; the conclusion, v. 28ab¹ (to אֲבִיךָ יִשְׂרָאֵל), describes the poem explicitly as the final words of Jacob, that is, as part of the overarching patriarchal narrative.

7. See Julius Wellhausen, *Die Composition des Hexateuchs* (4th ed.; Berlin: de Gruyter, 1963), 60; Benjamin W. Bacon, *The Genesis of Genesis* (Hartford: Student Publishing Co., 1893), 220; August Dillmann, *Genesis Critically and Exegetically Expounded* (trans. William B. Stevenson; 2 vols.; Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1897), 2:450; J. Estlin Carpenter and G. Harford-Battersby, *The Hexateuch According to the Revised Edition* (2 vols.; London: Longmans, Green & Co., 1900), 2:76; S. R. Driver, *The Book of Genesis* (12th ed.; WC; London: Methuen, 1926), 381; Hermann Gunkel, *Genesis* (trans. Mark E. Biddle; Mercer Library of Biblical Studies; Macon, Ga.: Mercer University Press, 1997; German original 1901), 453; Skinner, *Genesis*, 512; Richard Elliott Friedman, *The Bible with Sources Revealed: A New View into the Five Books of Moses* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 2003), 114.

belongs to the source J, just as in a novel in which a character sings a well-known song: the author of the novel is not the author of the song, but the song belongs to the novel.

While Gen 49:5–7 treats Simeon and Levi as a pair, the tribal poem of Deut 33 deals with the Levites independently—indeed, Simeon goes unmentioned entirely—and at some length (vv. 8–11). While Gen 49:5–7 seems to separate out the Levites as a result of their inherently violent nature, Deut 33:8–11 describes, albeit obliquely, a particular historical event: the testing of the Levites at Massah and Meribah—whatever form that testing may have taken—and their successful passing of the test, in the course of which they disregarded their kinship ties for the sake of upholding Yahweh’s commandments (vv. 8–9). The separation of the Levites in this case is not viewed negatively, but in exceedingly positive terms: far from being punished, they are rewarded with the role of cultic administrator (v. 10), they are blessed, and their enemies are to be smitten (v. 11).

The sense of violence is muted in this passage. The disregarding of family in favor of Yahweh, however, suggests that there must have been some act by which the Levites publicly and decisively made this choice. In addition, the conclusion to the saying about Levi has obvious violent connotations, the likes of which are not evident, at least not as explicitly, in the other sayings in this poem.⁸ We may say without hesitation, however, that this poem preserves a positive construction of the Levites, in which their action, whether or not we can tentatively call it violent, results in their being marked off as specially devoted to Yahweh, both in attitude and in practice.

As with Gen 49, Deut 33 is an originally independent collection of tribal sayings, and its composition should not be attributed to any of the four pentateuchal sources. At the same time, it is, like Gen 49, part of one of the pentateuchal documents. The question, however, is which one. We may begin with a process of elimination. Deuteronomy 33 is assuredly not P, which has no interest in poetry. It is also not E; to E belongs the poem in the preceding chapter, Deut 32, which has been introduced in the E portion of Deut 31 (vv. 16–22, 30).⁹ It also makes little sense in D, where it has no place either rhetorically or

8. In addition to the phrase “smite the loins,” the word חִילּוֹ, commonly taken as “substance,” has military connotations. The exception in Deut 33 may be the saying regarding Joseph, whose “horns” “gore the peoples, the ends of the earth altogether” (v. 17). The obscurity of this statement, however, renders it difficult to draw too much meaning from it.

9. See Otto Eissfeldt, *The Old Testament: An Introduction* (trans. Peter R. Ackroyd; New York: Harper & Row, 1965), 226–27; more recently and extensively Menahem Haran, *The Biblical Collection: Its Consolidation to the End of the Second Temple Times and Changes of Form to the End of the Middle Ages* (in Hebrew; 3 vols.; Jerusalem: Magnes, 1996–2008), 2:71–80, though I cannot agree with Haran’s view that this E passage was included by a Deuteronomic editor, or that there is any secondary D introduction to Deut 32; D knows

structurally.¹⁰ That leaves only J.¹¹ There are also positive reasons to think that this poem made up part of the J document. First, we know that the author of J included other extended poems in his work, Gen 49 and Exod 15.¹² Second, we already have the structurally similar use of another collection of tribal sayings at the end of Jacob's life: Deut 33 represents the final words of Moses, just as Gen 49 represents the final words of Jacob.¹³ Third, and perhaps most important, Deut 33 fits very well between the preceding and following pieces of J. The last time we encountered J, the Israelites had just reached the top of Pisgah in Moab, in Num 21:16–20.¹⁴ They were, in other words, at the very border with Canaan, at a spot that was traditionally understood to be the last stop before crossing into the promised land.¹⁵ The next piece from J is the notice of Moses' death in Deut 34:5.¹⁶ The poem of Deut 33 fits nicely between these two: the Israelites arrive at the place of Moses' death, he delivers his farewell speech, and then he dies; the parallel with Gen 49 is evident.

If Deut 33 is indeed from J, then we have to reckon with two conflicting views regarding the Levites in the two J poems: one in which they are judged negatively and one in which they are judged positively. This ostensible contradiction evaporates when it is remembered that the author of J is not the author of either of the poems. He uses them for the farewell speeches of his two great

nothing of this song (or Deut 33), and its inclusion here is due entirely to the pentateuchal compiler.

10. In the preceding D section (32:45–47), Moses tells Israel to take the words of the Torah (i.e., the laws of D) to heart; these words are a fitting conclusion to Moses' great speech to the Israelites, and their power would be strangely undercut by the poem of Deut 33.

11. See Benjamin W. Bacon, *The Triple Tradition of the Exodus* (Hartford: Student Publishing Co., 1894), 269–73; Menahem Haran, *Temples and Temple-Service in Ancient Israel: An Inquiry into Biblical Cult Phenomena and the Historical Setting of the Priestly School* (1978; repr., Winona Lake, Ind.: Eisenbrauns, 1985), 67.

12. On the attribution of the hymn in Exod 15 to J, see S. R. Driver, *The Book of Exodus* (Cambridge Bible for Schools and Colleges; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1918), 132–40; Frank Moore Cross, *Canaanite Myth and Hebrew Epic: Essays in the History of the Religion of Israel* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1973), 123–24; Friedman, *Sources Revealed*, 144–46.

13. Jacob's burial instructions to his sons in 49:29–32 belong to P.

14. See Joel S. Baden, *J, E, and the Redaction of the Pentateuch* (FAT 68; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2009), 135–37.

15. See the similar tradition regarding the top of Pisgah in Deut 3:27; 34:1.

16. The words "Moses died" in this verse must have been held in common by at least three sources: J, E, and P. J may have contained only these words, given the parallel of Gen 49:33; E would have read "Moses the servant of Yahweh died in the land of Moab," as this designation for Moses is a feature of E alone and this is how E refers to his burial place (in Deut 34:6); and P would have had "Moses died there at the command of Yahweh," as this phrase is unique to the Priestly source (cf. Exod 17:1; Lev 24:12; Num 3:16, 39, 51; 4:37, 41, 45, 49; 9:18, 20, 23; 10:13; 13:3; 33:2, 38; 36:5). It is unlikely, against most commentators, that D is present in this chapter.

protagonists, Jacob and Moses. As overviews of the community of Israel on the verge of its transitions from individuals to tribes and from tribes to territories, they serve his rhetorical purposes at these key moments. The precise contents of these poems were, to a certain extent, beyond the author's control, and therefore also the conflicting views therein regarding the Levites.¹⁷ Yet the author of J did choose these poems, perhaps out of many, and we can see his design in choosing which poem to insert at which place, especially when looking through the lens of the treatment of the Levites. The poem of Gen 49:5–7 talks about the Levites by reference to their ancestor Levi, who is, in the context of the narrative in which the poem is situated, still alive. The poem of Deut 33:8–11 describes the Levites as a tribe acting in unison, as makes sense given the situation in the overarching narrative, when the tribes as defined groups are about to take possession of their various land-holdings.

PROSE

It has long been recognized that the narrative of Dinah and Shechem in Gen 34 is composite, though the wide variety of reconstructions testifies to the difficulty of separating the passage into its constituent sources.¹⁸ The complete anal-

17. We may take under consideration the possibility that J altered the beginning of Gen 49 to elevate Judah to the highest position among the sons of Jacob; see David Carr, *Reading the Fractures of Genesis: Historical and Literary Approaches* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1996), 251. Yet the evidence suggests that these three tribes are disenfranchised not merely to serve the rhetorical purpose for a Judean author of elevating Judah, but because they historically had disappeared, or nearly so, as independent landed tribal groups within Israel. Thus it is quite possible that Gen 49 reflects this historical situation as well as that of the political rise of Judah, and that the verses about Reuben and Simeon and Levi are original.

18. See the variant proposals of, e.g., Wellhausen, *Composition*, 45–47; Abraham Kuenen, *An Historico-Critical Inquiry into the Origin and Composition of the Hexateuch (Pentateuch and Book of Joshua)* (trans. Philip H. Wicksteed; London: Macmillan, 1886), 326; W. E. Addis, *The Documents of the Hexateuch* (2 vols.; London: David Nutt, 1892), 1:68–69; Dillmann, *Genesis*, 2:293–301; Carpenter and Harford-Battersby, *Hexateuch*, 2:52–54; Edgar S. Brightman, *The Sources of the Hexateuch: J, E, and P in the Text of the American Standard Edition* (New York: Abingdon, 1918), 62–63; Bacon, *Genesis*, 177–80; Driver, *Genesis*, 302–8; Gunkel, *Genesis*, 356–65; Skinner, *Genesis*, 417–22; Claus Westermann, *Genesis 12–36* (trans. John J. Scullion; CC; Minneapolis: Fortress, 1985), 535–45. A summary and critique of older scholarly opinions may be found in Albert de Pury, “Genèse xxxiv et l’histoire,” *RB* 76 (1969): 5–49, esp. 5–9. Many scholars see P in this chapter, usually on the basis of the theme of circumcision and the use of the root נמט, yet this is unnecessary. The practice of circumcision was known to all the pentateuchal authors, and the word נמט does not have here the specific notion of ritual defilement that it takes on in P. There are also those who argue for the essential unity of the chapter, with or without a few secondary insertions: see, e.g., E. A. Speiser, *Genesis: Introduction, Translation, and Notes* (AB 1; Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1964), 266–67; Erhard Blum, *Die Komposition der Väterge-*

ysis of this passage is beyond the scope of this paper, but it will suffice to say that there appear to be two distinct versions of the event in the text.¹⁹ In one, Shechem sees and falls in love with Dinah, and goes through what would seem to be the standard procedure in cases of courtship between two foreign parties: the sending of a relative as a go-between, the tantalizing description of communal property, and the offer of a bride-price. In response to these advances, the sons of Jacob, speaking collectively, engage in the trickery involving circumcision and take advantage of the temporary disablement of the Shechemites to slaughter and plunder the entire town; Jacob is no more than a bystander, as his sons do all the dealing with Hamor and Shechem. In this story, Dinah is never violated; in fact, she is never even taken from Jacob's home.

In the other story in Gen 34, Dinah is indeed taken and kept in Shechem's house. Jacob hears about this first, because his sons are working in the field, but he waits for their return to say or do anything. Shechem's actions constitute an obvious violation of ethical, communal, and perhaps religious standards, and Jacob's sons, upon hearing the news, are rightly angered. Two of them—identified in marked terms as “two of Jacob's sons, the brothers of Dinah”—take it upon themselves to arm themselves and remove Dinah from Shechem's house by force. They do so, killing Shechem and Hamor along the way, and Jacob is unhappy. He is concerned that their hasty actions have put the entire family in danger from the surrounding peoples, but the brothers, Simeon and Levi, defend their actions as necessary for maintaining their sister's—and by extension the family's—honor. In this story, Jacob plays a larger role, albeit one mostly defined by absence of action; Dinah is in fact violated; and only Hamor and Shechem, not the entire town, are killed. There is no trickery here, merely the straightforward response of Simeon and Levi, alone among the brothers, to the actions of Shechem. Their response, however, is distinctively violent, at least insofar as they are contrasted in their action with the other brothers (and Jacob), who are inactive; Jacob's response further highlights the unusual nature of Simeon and Levi's action, although the author does leave them with the last word.

The first story, in which Dinah stays at home and the brothers all act in tandem, is to be ascribed to E. The trickery employed by the brothers is reminiscent of the despoiling of the Egyptians (Exod 3:21–22; 11:2–3; 12:35–36), and the depiction of Jacob and his sons as fearsome connects with what follows in E in Gen 35:5, in which the surrounding peoples are afraid of Jacob's family as they leave Shechem.²⁰ The second, in which Simeon and Levi are the main actors, belongs to J. The motif of being in the field is recurrent in the J

schichte (WMANT 57; Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener Verlag, 1984), 213–16; Friedman, *Sources Revealed*, 88–89.

19. I owe the basis of the following analysis to Dr. Baruch Schwartz.

20. There may be a connection also to the story in Judg 9, which has also been attrib-

patriarchal narratives (Gen 24:63–65; 27:27; 30:14–16; 37:7), and the view of circumcision in Gen 34, as a national custom necessary for belonging to the Israelite group, does not comport well with the magical sense of circumcision found elsewhere in J (Exod 4:24–26). Thus, to J belongs yet another tradition, this one presented in prose, of the Levites, or at least their ancestor Levi, acting in a distinctively violent fashion.

In Exod 32:26–29, the Levites answer the call of Moses, defining themselves, against the rest of the Israelites, as “for Yahweh” (v. 26).²¹ They are commanded to kill a number of their fellow Israelites, and they do so without comment (vv. 27–28). For this they are rewarded with blessing from Yahweh and the right to dedicate themselves to Yahweh (v. 29). As has long been noted, in the otherwise coherent and continuous E story of the golden calf in Exod 32 this episode stands apart. Not only does this passage contain no clear reference to the context of the golden calf; it is narratively problematic. It appears to be a punishment for the people’s sin, but the people are punished elsewhere in the story by being made to drink the water made from the calf in v. 20 and by a plague from Yahweh in v. 35—both of which passages do, in fact, have explicit connections to the surrounding narrative. Moses’ request in vv. 30–33 that the people be forgiven makes no sense after the sinners have ostensibly been punished in vv. 26–29. Because the verses about the Levites seem not to belong to E,²² and stand in contradiction to P (in which the Levites are invested in Num 1–4)²³ and D (in which the Levites are set apart after the giving of the second set of tablets; Deut 10:8–9)²⁴—both of which set the investiture of the Levites at the time and place of the revelation in the wilderness—these verses can be attributed only to J.²⁵

Yet these verses are equally out of place in the J Sinai narrative. In their current location, they come between the ascension of Sinai by Moses, Aaron,

uted to E by Menahem Haran, “*Pirqê šəkem*,” in *Miqrā’ w’ōlamō* (Jerusalem: Magnes, 2009), 360–89 (at 385 n. 57).

21. Exodus 32:25 is more properly the conclusion to the preceding section, vv. 21–24.

22. There is also no mention of this episode in D’s recounting of the events at Horeb, which follows the E narrative of Exod 19–24; 32–34, thus strongly suggesting that this passage was not part of E. On D’s dependence on E, see Baden, *Redaction*, 99–195, esp. 153–72.

23. Thus, these verses cannot be due to a priestly author or interpolator, as suggested by Addis, *Documents*, 152; Yehezkel Kaufmann, *The Religion of Israel: From Its Beginnings to the Babylonian Exile* (trans. and abridg. Moshe Greenberg; Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1960), 195.

24. Thus, these verses cannot be due to a Deuteronomical author or interpolator, as suggested by Kuenen, *Hexateuch*, 247.

25. See Bacon, *Triple Tradition*, 137–38; Carpenter and Harford-Battersby, *Hexateuch*, 2:131–32; Driver, *Exodus*, 354–55; A. H. McNeile, *The Book of Exodus* (2nd ed.; WC; London: Methuen, 1917), 207–9; John Van Seters, *The Life of Moses: The Yahwist as Historian in Exodus–Numbers* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1994), 316–17; Haran, *Temples*, 66–67 n. 11.

Nadab, Abihu, and the seventy elders in Exod 24:1–2, 9–11ba and Yahweh’s speech to Moses in Exod 33:1–5. The narrative of the Levites assumes that Moses is back in the camp (32:26), while both of the surrounding passages locate him on the mountain (and there is no notice of his descent or re-ascent). More important, there is no notice in J’s narrative of any sin by the people that would justify the Levites’ massacre: as far as we are aware, the people are waiting patiently at the foot of the mountain. In light of Deut 33:8–11, however, we may consider relocating Exod 32:26–29 to the end of J’s narrative of the episode at Massah and Meribah, in Exod 17:1bβ–7.²⁶

Such a move is not purely speculative. First, there are verbal connections between Exod 32 and Deut 33, especially in the instruction by Moses to the Levites to kill “brother, neighbor, and kin” (v. 27) and his statement that the Levites had each been “against his son and brother” (v. 29); both utterances resonate directly with Deut 33:9.²⁷ Both passages also conclude with blessing (Exod 32:29; Deut 33:11). Second, the idea of Yahweh punishing the people after they have complained—and even after Yahweh has acted in response to their complaint—is attested elsewhere in J, in the similarly constructed narrative in Num 11.²⁸ There the Israelites complain about a lack of meat (Num 11:4–6), while in Exod 17 they complain about a lack of water (vv. 2–3); Moses, exasperated, turns to Yahweh in despair (Num 11:13), just as he does at Massah and Meribah (Exod 17:4); Yahweh provides the meat to satisfy the people (Num 11:18–23, 31–32), as he does with the water (Exod 17:5–6); and immediately thereafter he strikes the people with a plague (Num 11:33). This final element is ostensibly missing from the narrative in Exod 17; the story of the Levites in Exod 32 would fit nicely there. And, of course, the narrative of Exod 17 and the poem of Deut 33 would thereby be brought more closely into line; if the story of the Levites does not belong with Exod 17, then we are left to wonder what the author of Deut 33 imagined had happened at Massah and Meribah that involved the Levites, as well as what the author of J thought the Levites were responding to in Exod 32.

26. The connection between Exod 32:26–29 and 17:1bβ–7 was drawn by Karl Budde, *Der Segen Moses: Deut. 33* (Tübingen: Mohr, 1922), 25; Samuel E. Loewenstamm, “The Investiture of Levi,” in idem, *From Babylon to Canaan: Studies in the Bible and Its Oriental Background* (Publication of the Perry Foundation for Biblical Research in the Hebrew University of Jerusalem; Jerusalem: Magnes, 1992), 55–65. Yet Loewenstamm discussed only the tradition, attempting to explain how the tradition of the investiture of the Levites moved from Massah and Meribah to the golden calf episode, and thus his conclusions belong to the preliterary stage. As I am describing this as a literary process—and a post-authorial one at that—my views are somewhat different. Similarly, Van Seters (*Life of Moses*, 316–17) argues that both Exod 17:1bβ–7 and 32:26–29 have a common origin in Deut 33. On the assignment of Exod 17:1bβ–7 to J, see Baden, *Redaction*, 174–77.

27. See Van Seters, *Life of Moses*, 317.

28. On the source division of Num 11, see Baden, *Redaction*, 108–10.

We are still left, then, with the question of why the pentateuchal compiler would have moved these verses from the end of Exod 17:1b β -7 to their current location in Exod 32. The most compelling reason would have been the historical claim implicit in the J narrative (and Deut 33:8-11): that the investiture of the Levites took place before the revelation in the wilderness. This claim, as we have already seen, contradicts the testimonies of P and D, both of which locate the event at the mountain. The compiler would have seen that this was an event that could hardly happen twice—at least not at two different times in two different places—and would therefore have looked for an appropriate place for it in the Sinai/Horeb narrative. Since the passage involves a major punishment for a communal Israelite sin, there could hardly be any other choice than precisely where these verses are currently located.

It thus seems likely that the narrative of Exod 32:26-29 belongs to J, and belongs more properly with J's narrative of Massah and Meribah in Exod 17:1b β -7. The Levites are blessed and granted the right to serve Yahweh because they alone observed Yahweh's commands, and the proof of their devotion was the slaughter of their fellow Israelites, disregarding all kinship ties. As with Deut 33:8-11, the picture of the Levites here is undoubtedly positive, despite the fact that—indeed, precisely because—they commit a savage act of violence against their own people.

COMPLEMENTARY TRADITIONS

It seems, then, that J preserves two traditions regarding the Levites, each represented in both poetry and prose. These two traditions have in common the notion that the Levites are separated from the rest of the Israelites as the result of an act of violence.²⁹ Yet there the similarities end. The first group, Gen 49:5-7 and Gen 34, focuses on the actions of the eponymous tribal ancestor, Levi. He is described in both texts, in conjunction with his brother Simeon, as violent by nature, more so at least than the rest of Jacob's sons. His violent act is directed against non-Israelites, and the reaction to this act, if not from the author himself then certainly from his character Jacob, is negative. This tradition, furthermore, has no apparent connection with the priestly role of the Levites. It is, rather, entirely focused on the rationale for the ancestor's—and by extension the tribe's—land disenfranchisement.

The second tradition, in Deut 33:1-8 and Exod 32:26-29, is, by contrast, entirely about the manner in which the Levites acquired their priestly role in Israelite society. In both texts the Levites are treated as a tribe, as is only fitting given the historical context in which the poem and story are set. In this

29. See A. H. J. Gunneweg, *Leviten und Priester: Hauptlinien der Traditionsbildung und Geschichte des israelitisch-jüdischen Kultpersonals* (FRLANT 89; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1965), 46.

tradition the tribe as a whole answers the call to dedicate itself to Yahweh and is rewarded with the service of the deity. The Levites' violent act is directed against Israelites, against their own kin, as both texts emphasize, and the reaction to this act is entirely positive, even resulting in blessing. If the first tradition has no connection with priestly service, it is equally true that the second tradition has no connection with land disenfranchisement.³⁰

Thus the two traditions preserved by J are complementary. In the combination of the two, the author of J has produced a complete picture of the Levites: landless and engaged in the service of Yahweh. (Note that these two aspects of the status of the Levites are combined by P in Num 1–4.³¹) Though one portrayal is negative and one positive, they are separated in the narrative by generations, and are not contradictory. We may see the earlier disenfranchisement of Levi as a necessary precursor to the later special status of the Levites. We may also take the raising of the Levites to the status of temple servant in the second group of texts as a conscious reversal of their previously lowly status. This reading is appealing because it takes into account the difference between the reaction to Simeon and Levi's actions in Gen 34 according to Jacob and according to the author of J: Jacob is distressed and disinherits the brothers, but the author of J, by giving them the last word in Gen 34:31, seems to view their action positively. This sets up a sense that Jacob has perhaps wronged Levi in Gen 49:5–7, and that their positive status in the subsequent texts stands not only as a correction but as a justification of their behavior.³² A sequence of prioritizing can be seen in the traditions of the Levites adopted by J: they value kin over custom (Gen 34:31), and YHWH over kin (Exod 32:26–29//Deut 33:1–8).

30. Whether this distinction is a result of the earlier-versus-later dating of the two traditions, as has been frequently proposed, is beyond the scope of this paper. Suffice it to say that the simple linear progression of traditions seems, at least in my opinion, highly unlikely, and there is no obvious reason why two contemporaneous lines of tradition could not emphasize different aspects of a single group. Genesis 34 and 49 present a "secular" tribe of Levi because according to none of the sources has a professional priesthood arisen in Israel in the patriarchal period—indeed, there is not as yet such a thing as Israel. Too often the narrative context is disregarded in tradition-critical reconstruction.

31. Again, the combination of traditions in P does not necessitate a later dating of P relative to the other texts under consideration here. It simply means that P has taken the two traditions also known to J and combined them in his own manner, with his own historical assumptions, theological ideas, and literary style.

32. Kaufmann takes Exod 32:26–29 as evidence that the Levites redirected their violent nature to the service of protecting the portable tent and Moses (*History*, 238).

BETWEEN POETRY AND PROSE

If the poems of Gen 49 and Deut 33 are indeed earlier collections of tribal sayings incorporated into the J narrative, then it must be asked whether the J prose passages in Gen 34 and Exod 32:26–29 are to be understood as based on their poetic counterparts.³³ The answer is, most likely, yes and no. Genesis 49:5–7 preserves the tradition that Levi was violent, but makes no clear reference to any historical situation in which that violence manifested itself.³⁴ Conversely, Gen 34 does not clearly articulate the disenfranchisement of Levi as part of its narrative. Yet J's version of the events in Gen 34 does seem to be to some extent dependent on the assessment of Levi in Gen 49:5–7. The two narratives in Gen 34, E and J, have in common the idea that there was some relationship between Dinah and Shechem, and that Jacob's sons responded to this relationship with an attack on Shechem. If this was the traditional base on which both E and J wrote their versions of the story, then we have to account for the particulars of J's narrative: why are Simeon and Levi the ones singled out for the act of vengeance? We can see how the author of J came to this conclusion: he had before him an old tradition in which Simeon and Levi were particularly violent—so much so that Jacob saw fit to disinherit them—but the tradition, at least in the poetic version the author of J had to hand, contained no specifics. And he had before him a tradition in which Jacob's sons acted violently, in the story of Dinah and Shechem. The combination of the two traditions would have made easy sense. Indeed, the story of Dinah and Shechem may have been the only one for which J could have adopted the allusion in Gen 49; there is no other story in which Jacob's sons act violently (at least not that

33. This question is usually put the other way—are the poetic passages based on the narratives, or at least on the traditions behind the narratives?—as if the prose traditions must be earlier, though it is unclear why this should be the case. In fact, if we accept the suggestion that the author of J took the older poem and inserted it into his newly created narrative, the question must be whether the narrative—not the underlying tradition, but the literary product itself—is based on the poetry; or, at least, how is the narrative related to the various older traditions, including the poetry, available to the author?

34. See Skinner, *Genesis*, 516 (quoted above in n. 4); Westermann, *Genesis 37–50*, 226; de Pury, “Genèse xxxiv,” 30–33; James L. Kugel, *The Idea of Biblical Poetry: Parallelism and Its History* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1981), 32–33 n. 83. Contra Driver, *Genesis*, 307, 383; Gunkel, *Genesis*, 359; Martin Noth, *A History of Pentateuchal Traditions* (trans. Bernhard W. Anderson; Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1972; repr., Chico, Calif.: Scholars Press, 1981), 86; Gerhard von Rad, *Genesis* (trans. John H. Marks; OTL; Philadelphia: Westminster, 1972), 423; de Hoop, *Genesis 49*, 98–101. It is hard to imagine how one could, without having Gen 34 already in mind, reconstruct even a shred of the narrative of Dinah and Shechem from Gen 49:5–7. As a parallel case we might take the song of Lamech in Gen 4:23–24 (also from J, and strikingly similar; cf. Kugel, *Idea*, 32–33 n. 83), the story behind which, if a story is indeed assumed, is impossible to reconstruct.

Jacob is aware of such that he might respond; he is never enlightened as to the circumstances surrounding the attempted murder and sale of Joseph).

The author of J constructed his version of this story in accordance with the judgment of Gen 49:5–7, emphasizing two key features: the singling out of Simeon and Levi as the protagonists, and Jacob's negative response to their action.³⁵ The actual disinheritance was not included in Gen 34 because this took place only on Jacob's deathbed, in his farewell speech. But the historical event that justified the disinheritance could be described, at its proper time. We can draw a direct analogy with J's treatment of Reuben.³⁶ Again, Gen 49 preserves a disinheritance, this time of the eldest brother, on the basis of an obscure reference, "mounting his father's bed" (v. 4). The author of J provides in the note in Gen 35:22a the historical referent for this allusion—but no more, except to make the necessary statement that Jacob found out about Reuben's actions—so that when the reader or listener comes to the poem in Gen 49:3–4, Jacob's disinheritance of Reuben does not come out of the blue.³⁷

It is important to remember that the J story in Gen 34 was not composed entirely on the basis of Gen 49. The author of J knew the tradition of Dinah and Shechem and would have written it anyway, we may assume, even if he did not know Gen 49 and plan to include it in his work, just as E did. Yet the particular shape that he gave to the story in writing it was dependent on Gen 49:5–7, at least in part. Similarly, we should keep in mind at least the possibility

35. This analysis is similar to that of Sigo Lehming, "Zur Überlieferungsgeschichte von Gen 34," *ZAW* 70 (1958): 228–50. Lehming, however, does not hold to the same source analysis, and therefore his conclusions differ somewhat. Whereas he sees the inclusion of Simeon and Levi as a late stage in the literary composition of the story, my claim is that it is a J variant of the tradition contemporaneous with that of E. We agree insofar as the inclusion of Simeon and Levi is in any case not a basic part of the oldest tradition, but is rather a development that is rooted in the description of the two brothers in Gen 49:5–7. Blum argues for the dependence of Gen 34 on Gen 49:5–7 but believes Gen 34 to be for the most part a unified composition (*Komposition*, 216–21); so too Eduard Nielsen, who argues that the Levites were added secondarily to the narrative of Gen 34 (*Shechem: A Traditio-Historical Investigation* [Copenhagen: G. E. C. Gad, 1955], 281–83). Ulrike Schorn argues that the beginning of Gen 49 (vv. 3–8) was edited by the same person who wrote Gen 34:30 and redacted the chapter as a whole (*Ruben und das System der zwölf Stämme Israels: Redaktionsgeschichtliche Untersuchungen zur Bedeutung des Erstgeborenen Jakobs* [BZAW 248; Berlin: de Gruyter, 1997], 258–59).

36. See Blum, *Komposition*, 218.

37. Although it may be assumed that the tradition on which J based the note in Gen 35:22a contained some version of Jacob's disinheritance of Reuben, we should not therefore assume that the author of J preserved this continuation in his narrative. Indeed, the fact that the disinheritance comes later, in Gen 49, speaks strongly against this possibility; had the author of J included it here, it would have been redundant later. The same is, of course, true of the disinheritance of Simeon and Levi, which J has presented in the narrative as mere approbation—the disinheritance proper is yet to come.

that the oblique reference in Gen 49:5–7 is in fact to the tradition of Dinah and Shechem, if not to its literary manifestation in Gen 34; in other words, it is possible that Simeon and Levi were known to a strand of Israelite tradition as the brothers who acted violently in defense of their sister, and that both Gen 49:5–7 and Gen 34 are reflexes of this tradition.³⁸ Yet the lack of any reference to the story of Dinah and Shechem in Gen 49 speaks against this possibility.

As for the second tradition, that of Deut 33:8–11 and Exod 32:26–29, a similar situation obtains. The author of J did not invent the story of getting water from a rock in order to provide a historical background for the description of the Levites in Deut 33:8–11. The tradition of Moses getting water from the rock was evidently a common one, as the P version in Num 20:2–13 attests, and the dual name Massah and Meribah is also part of a defined strand of tradition.³⁹ Again, however, the particular shape that J's version of this event takes is due in part to the presentation of Deut 33:8–11.⁴⁰ We may suppose that both the author of the older poem and the author of J knew a tradition in which the Levites were invested at the site where Moses drew water from the rock (and that this took place before Sinai rather than after, as in P), in which case this element was drawn not from Deut 33, but rather from the common tradition underlying both texts. Yet we might also note that J seems to have little interest in the priesthood in general,⁴¹ and this instance of special recognition for the Levites is somewhat out of character. If so, then it is possible that the author of J did in fact base the inclusion and actions of the Levites on Deut 33—perhaps in lieu of a divine plague, as in Num 11. Certainly some of J's wording derives from the poetic description, most distinctively in the kinship language, and perhaps also in the element of blessing.

In both narratives, J relates a common Israelite tradition, whether of Dinah and Shechem or water from a rock, and also particularizes it in light of the description and assessment of the Levites in the older poetry. The prose passages are therefore not dependent on the poetry in the absolute sense—the stories would presumably have been included in J's narrative in any case, as they are in the other pentateuchal sources—but J's unique versions of these

38. See Noth, *Pentateuchal Traditions*, 86–87; Gunneweg, *Leviten*, 50–51.

39. It appears in Exod 17:1b β –7; Deut 33:8; and Ps 95:8, where its presence seems to confirm that the combination of these names is part of a tradition, rather than the invention of either the author of J or the author of Deut 33.

40. See Bruno Baentsch, *Exodus–Leviticus–Numeri übersetzt und erklärt* (HKAT I/2; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1903), 272–73; Van Seters, *Life of Moses*, 316–17. Stefan Beyerle takes the opposite approach and sees the elements of Deut 33:8–11 that are most strongly parallel to Exod 32:26–29 as redactional and explicitly based on Exod 32 (*Der Mosesegen im Deuteronomium: Eine text-, kompositions-, und formkritische Studie zu Deuteronomium 33* [BZAW 250; Berlin: de Gruyter, 1997], 133–34).

41. Haran, *Temples*, 65.

stories do betray a knowledge of the poetic traditions as well as a reshaping on the basis of them.

THE VIOLENCE OF THE LEVITES

We may finally consider the commonality underlying all four texts: the violence of the Levites as a determining factor in their tribal and social status. Despite the different manifestations of this violence, and the opposing evaluations of it, it is hard to overlook the fact that this quality is in the forefront of both traditions. The basis for the association of the Levites and violence, however, is not obvious. We might look to the narrative of Pinehas in Num 25:6–13 as an example of priestly violence against fellow Israelites on behalf of Yahweh's laws (v. 8),⁴² and also to the story of 2 Chr 23, in which the Levites are given the task of guarding the young king Joash and slaying anyone who enters the temple, where he was being kept (v. 7). If these stories add depth to the portrayal of the Levites as zealously violent on behalf of the laws, the temple, and the divinely ordained king, however, they can be related to only one of the two pentateuchal traditions, that in Deut 33:8–11 and Exod 32:26–29. We are still left to wonder how this violence took on a negative aspect when retrojected back onto the tribal ancestor Levi. Furthermore, the story in Num 25 belongs to P, and does not refer to Levites but rather to the line of Aaron in particular, that is, the high priesthood, while the story of 2 Chr 23 depicts the Levites as only one group of many engaged in the defense of the king (or more properly the temple), and then only under orders. Even if we suppose that these passages are manifestations of the same tradition of levitical violence as Deut 33 and Exod 32, they do not help much in understanding the underlying tradition itself.

The evidence does not allow us to make any conclusive statements as to the origin of the connection of Levites and violence. Yet the connection is undeniably present, and the variant reflexes of it in the J source attest to its age and flexibility in the service of describing the salient features of the status of the Levites in Israelite society.

42. This connection is alluded to by Michael Fishbane, *Biblical Interpretation in Ancient Israel* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1985), 398.