



The Testaments of the Twelve Patriarchs (Translations of Early Documents Series I, Palestinian Jewish Texts)

R. H. Charles

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An excerpt from the INTRODUCTION - General Character of the Book:

The book purports to give the last words, at the approach of death, of each of the twelve patriarchs to his sons. It is evident that the general idea of the book is based upon Jacob's last words to his sons as recorded in Gen. xlix. 1-27. Just as Jacob portrays the character of his sons and declares to them what shall befall them, so in our book each of the patriarchs is represented as describing, in some sense, his own character and as foretelling what shall come to pass among his posterity in the last times. From this latter point of view the book partakes of the character of a prophetic-apocalyptic work. In six of the testaments, those of Reuben, Simeon, Judah, Dan, Naphthali and Joseph, there is a certain correspondence between our book and Gen. xlix. regarding the characters of the patriarchs; as for the remaining six patriarchs no such correspondence exists. Speaking generally, though there are considerable modifications of this in some of the testaments, each testament contains the three following component parts:

- (a) An autobiographical sketch in which the patriarch's special vice or virtue is described. In some cases the biblical story forms the basis for this; in others the Bible is not followed. But in each case the autobiographical details are enlarged by many haggadic embellishments.
- (b) A warning to avoid the special sin, or an exhortation to cultivate the special virtue, which each patriarch has declared to be specially characteristic of him.
- (c) A prophecy concerning the patriarch's posterity in the last times; in nearly each case the patriarchs foretell a falling-away of their descendants which will result in misfortune coming upon them; this takes the form, as a rule, of captivity among the Gentiles.

In some of the testaments sections of special content are introduced which have nothing at all to do "with the three main topics just enumerated. These sections have an interest of their own; but it may well be doubted whether they formed part of the original work. They are as follows:

- The seven spirits of deceit (Reuben ii. i-iii. 8).
- The vision of the heavens (Levi ii. i-v. 7).
- The vision of the seven men in white raiment (Levi viii. 1-18).
- A Messianic hymn (Levi xviii. 2-14).
- The spirits that wait upon man (Judah xx. 1-5).
- The constitution of man (Naphthali ii. 1-10).
- The vision on the mount of Ohves (Naphthali v. 1-8).
- The vision of the wrecked ship (Naphthali vi. 1-9).
- The two ways (Asher i. 3-vi. 6).
- Joseph's vision (Joseph xix. 1-12).
- The good inclination (Benjamin vi. 1-7). The sword of Behar (Benjamin vii. 1-5).

These offer much that is of great interest, and should be specially studied.

The original language of the book was, in all probability, Hebrew (rather than Aramaic); but the earliest form at present known to be in existence is a Greek translation of this.

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