

Nostalgia, novelty, and the subversion of authority in *Testaments of the Twelve Patriarchs*

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[0.1] Abstract—The *Testaments of the Twelve Patriarchs*, by negotiating the authorship and authority of its derivative readings, discusses the place of Judaism vis-à-vis Christianity through near-fannish retellings of the lives of the patriarchs of Israel. The text thereby walks a line between nostalgic and novel readings of foundational narratives, in some places perpetuating canonical authority and in others subverting it. The outcome of this interplay is the displacement of the Jewish author and the Christianization of Jewish history and religion. Contemporary fan fiction studies discourse provides useful tools for analyzing this negotiation of textual authority.

[0.2] Keywords—Early Christianity; Fan fiction; Judaism; Parting of the ways

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1. Introduction

[1.1] The *Testaments of the Twelve Patriarchs* is a collection of texts read and produced by followers of Christ in the second century CE. In the first and second centuries, Christian reflections often focused on the Jewish religion, its role in salvation, and its rejection of the Christian Messiah (Hollander 1995). Most Christian reflections took place in philosophical treatises or debates: Paul's letter to

the Romans, Justin Martyr's *Dialogue with Trypho* and *Apologies*, and Tertullian's *Against the Jews* all discuss Judaism. However, *Testaments* is a fundamentally different type of writing reflecting on the place and role of Judaism vis-à-vis Christianity (de Jonge 1985, 1986; Hollander 1995; Hollander and de Jonge 1985; Nicklas 2014). The text claims to be twelve separate documents that contain the final words of the ancient progenitors—the patriarchs—of the twelve tribes of the Jewish people. This means that the persons to whom the words are explicitly attributed are not the actual writers ([note 1](#)) of these texts. Based on earlier traditions, each writer has woven an intricate narrative around each of these patriarchs of Judaism. This ancient work bears many similarities to contemporary fan fiction, and in this article, I will explore how fan studies can therefore help elucidate this ancient text—specifically how it negotiates its authority in relation to the biblical canon common to both Judaism and Christianity.

[1.2] Like fan fiction authors, the Christian writer of *Testaments* to some degree assumes the voice of and authority over Jewish characters and narratives. At stake here is the legitimization of Christianity's adoption of Jewish scripture, heritage, and history. This process should primarily be seen not as a religious effort but more as one of identity, nationality, and culture. Admittedly, in the second century and possibly for much longer, the distinction between Christian/Christianity and Jewish/Judaism is a complex and contested issue (Becker and Reed [2003] 2007; Nicklas 2014). While there was, in all probability, a lack of "actual social, theological, and liturgical boundaries" between Jews and Christians at this time (Otto 2018, 9), there were nonetheless several writers following Christ who argued for at least some theological difference and/or separation between Christianity and Judaism (e.g., Ignatius, Marcion, Justin; see Fredriksen [2003] 2007). Tobias Nicklas (2014) problematizes the issue from the point of view of Ignatius's late first/early second-century writings, arguing that perhaps contrary to the church more generally, "Ignatius' letter [to the Magnesians]...shows us that at least for him something had happened which we could call a 'Parting of the Ways': for him Jews and Christians had begun to be two different groups going separate ways" (10). Thus, though many communities may well have consisted of both Jewish followers of Christ and Jews who did not follow Christ, for some authors, a distinction was beginning to be made. Some writers in these communities were beginning to argue that, to use Ignatius's terms, there may be or should be a difference between Christianity (*Christianismos*) and Judaism (*Ioudaismos*) (Nicklas 2014).

[1.3] Fundamentally, any discussion of Christianity in this period must bear in mind that Christianity and Judaism are fluid identities, that the terms "Christian" and "Jewish" fall woefully short of nuanced reality, and that these texts are not indicative of a general reality but rather indicate only the writer's theological agenda or local situation. Yet simultaneously, there are many texts that do assume or argue for a difference between what I will call for simplicity's sake Christianity and Judaism. *Testaments* is one of these texts as it differentiates between Jews and

Christians (Hollander and de Jonge 1985). *Testaments* portrays Christianity not as a continuation or a branch of Judaism but as what Judaism has always been. Thus, *Testaments* deals with the theological issue of Judaism by subverting the narratives of Jewish scriptures. In *Testaments*, canonical narratives are expanded and adapted. This act of (re)writing the narratives of characters foundational to the Jewish nation and religion is thus also a Christian claiming of authority for a Christian revision of these narratives and characters. This claiming legitimizes the Christian context as the true locus of God's communication with and relationship to humanity while concomitantly delegitimizing non-Christocentric readings of Jewish scripture.

[1.4] From a contemporary perspective, we could argue that *Testaments* is a work of fan fiction. Although fan fiction is difficult to define (Klink 2017), Fanlore, a semiauthoritative, multiauthored fan site, defines fan fiction as "a work of fiction written by fans for other fans, taking a source text or a famous person as a point of departure" ("Fanfiction" 2017). Insofar as we can refer to Christians as fans of the Bible, this definition easily applies to *Testaments*. Furthermore, *Testaments* "frequently build[s] upon ideas and narratives present in" the canon, that is, Jewish scripture (Charlesworth 1983, xxv). While it would be anachronistic to term such writings fan fiction, the similarities between a contemporary corpus of "derivative...writing—that is, texts written based on another text" (Hellekson and Busse 2014, 5)—and this ancient work are not inconsequential. Naturally, there is a significant difference between fan fiction, which is overtly framed as secondary to a source text or famous person, and *Testaments*, which claims to be primary; more, as will be discussed below, differences in the understanding of authorship need to be taken into account. Yet much of what Paul Booth (2015) calls "fan play" (1) is also present in this ancient work. In this article, I will demonstrate how the Christian writer of *Testaments* "play[s] with the borders and frames of narratives through [their] own imagination" (1), for example, by recreating the Jewish patriarchs as followers of Christ predating Christ himself.

[1.5] A number of forces are at work in the creation of fan fiction. The most immediate may be the fan's attraction to a narrative, curiosity about the world or characters depicted, or disappointment that a beloved narrative has ended. Pugh (2005, 47) writes,

[1.6] Whenever a canon closes, someone somewhere will mourn it enough to reopen it. The wish to find out "what happened next"—or invent it if it didn't—is familiar to most of us...If we liked the story we may still not be ready for it to end, for the characters and milieu that have become real to us to be folded up and put back in the puppeteer's box.

[1.7] This leads to what Booth (2015) calls a continuum "between nostalgia and novelty" (6). On the one side there is "a desire for fresh material, new takes on old

genres, and changing paradigms of meaning"; on the other, "an inherently nostalgic practice" (6). This interplay between nostalgia and novelty undergirds the fannish production of texts. Nostalgia hearkens back to the canonical texts and thus implicitly carries the original text's authority with it. Novelty, on the other hand, by definition creates something new, which does not share nostalgia's implicit authority. As we examine these two forces in *Testaments*, we will see how they both come into play and are used equally to subvert canonical readings and to authorize a Christianizing both of the Jewish patriarchs and forefathers and of salvation.

[1.8] In this paper, I will be looking at three parts of *Testaments* that are indicative of the whole. These three parts are all related to the issue of authorship and authority, and the ways in which *Testaments* alternatively perpetuates and subverts the authority of the canonical material. First, I will examine the so-called paratext and the narrative frames of each testament. There, the text engages in a dialectic on authority with the readers. Next, building on the nostalgia/novelty continuum expressed by Booth (2015), I will examine the *Testament of Levi* 5–6, a nostalgic reading in *Testaments*, and the *Testament of Simeon* 6.2–7, a novel reading. I will demonstrate how *Testament's* nostalgic retelling "fixes" perceived issues in the canonical material. I will then demonstrate how the novel reading subverts Jewish scripture. In this reading, the patriarchs—characters who were originally Jewish icons—are distanced from their Jewish heritage and claimed as part of Christianity.

2. Author's notes: Paratextual engagement in authority

[2.1] Fan fiction by necessity engages in a dialectic of authority. Fans, as they create derivative works, need to establish their agency, authorial voice, and claim to authority (Herzog 2012, ¶ 1.3). Like all texts, fan texts are accompanied by paratext, defined by Genette as "a certain number of verbal or other productions, such as an author's name, a title, a preface, illustrations," which accompany the main text (1997, 1) ([note 2](#)). These paratexts are the locus of "a discursive negotiation of the concepts of authorship and ownership" (Fathallah 2016, 86). Perhaps the most obvious paratext to accompany fan fiction is the author's notes (A/N), where a "fannish negotiation of ownership and agency" ultimately about "authority" often takes place (Herzog ¶ 1.5). A good example of this is given by Alexandra Herzog. She begins her article on A/Ns and authority with a quote from a fan named Caazie, who declares, "This is *my* story and this is how *I* wanted to write it" (¶ 1.1, emphasis mine). Here the fan claims their own agency by using first-person pronouns in relation to the narrative and their ownership of it. A/Ns are most important to my discussion as they provide a place for authors to enter a negotiation of meaning with their readers, where they appropriate the authority found in the original text and repackage it for the readers (¶ 3.1). By doing this, fan

authors attempt to enforce authorial control on meaning, "trying to dictate to the readers how '*the text is read properly*'" (§ 2.4, original emphasis).

[2.2] *Testaments*, like all texts, is accompanied by paratexts. Each individual testament has been given a title and a subtitle, which may or may not have been included in the first written versions of the texts; additionally, each testament begins with a narrative frame. The titles are all in the same vein: "Testament of Reuben," "Testament of Judah," "Testament of Benjamin," and so forth. As such they define the work as a testament, the authoritative last words of a famous patriarch of the Jewish nation. The subtitles also share a structure: they consist of the preposition "concerning" followed by one or more substantives, such as "Envy," "Compassion and Mercy," or "Natural Goodness." In many cases, the subtitle self-evidently follows from the contents of the testament. In some cases, the link is harder to make (*Test. Reu.*; *Test. Jud.*). These subtitles guide readers in their reading of the text. Thus, the subtitles function in a manner similar to that of A/Ns; the readers are shown how to read the text properly. Admittedly, the subtitles are most likely later additions (de Bruin 2015). They therefore functioned as guides for the reader only at a later stage in their history. The second part of the paratext—the narrative frame—however, is not a later addition ([note 3](#)).

[2.3] The narrative frame functions to give the text itself authority. Without fail, each testament begins with the phrase "a copy of the words of [a patriarch]." By portraying each of these works as the authentic last words of the twelve patriarchs, the texts are given great authority. Indeed, because the patriarchs themselves appear to be given agency over their own biographies, the narratives presented could be seen to supersede the third-person narratives of the canon. In other words, readers are invited to see this text as the last words of the patriarchs rather than as what someone else wrote about the patriarchs. Fan fiction similarly interacts with a canon, which almost becomes "a reference work that one *might* consult for character names and general ideas instead of being considered a bible that needs to be treated with reverence and awe and would conventionally represent the only valid text" (Herzog 2012, § 3.2, emphasis mine).

[2.4] An interesting dichotomy is thus created in fan studies, which does not hold for early Christianity. Fan fiction interacts with a canon, but this canon is not entirely authoritative, not definitive, and not sacred. However, while Herzog (2012) highlights the differences between how fan fiction depicts its canons and how contemporary culture views the relationship between religious groups and their canon(s), it does not appear that this contemporary difference is true for many first- and second-century Jews and Christians. Lee McDonald (2017), using an example of how the first-century Jewish Qumran community "did not hesitate to change the text," argues that, for Christians, only "in later centuries, would [textual transformation] have been most unusual and almost unthinkable, given the perceived holiness of the text" (316). Many Jews and Christians from the first centuries, then, had a very similar view of the canon to contemporary fan fiction

authors. Canon is thus not a definitive text "to be treated with reverence and awe," but something with which one can take "many liberties" (331); only much later did the canon become sacrosanct. Therefore, while *Testaments* is part of a corpus of works derivative of Jewish scripture and, in the eyes of contemporary readers, seen as less authoritative than canonical works, this is unlikely to have been the case for ancient readers (Borchardt 2015, 196).

[2.5] *Testaments* assumes a large amount of authority regarding the canon. Though the canon is viewed as authoritative, this does not preclude an extracanonical book's having authority. While this may seem strange to contemporary sensibilities, ancient and current ideas of authorship do not fully overlap, especially in the realm of ancient Jewish and Christian texts. One could argue that in the context of contemporary authorship, "the purpose of literature is seen as being to express the self, and to that extent literature is seen to embody the self" (Middleton 2016, ¶ 2.9). Texts are strongly related to authors' sense of self (Fathallah 2016). For ancient religious texts, there is a different relationship. Ancient Jewish texts "appeal to [their authors], not as authors with authority rooted in their own wisdom or virtue, but primarily as conduits for the transmission of divine knowledge to humankind...[The] writer is not so much creator or author as tradent and guarantor" (Reed 2008, 477). Thus, in ancient Judaism, authorship and authority are less related to the writer's self and are instead much more related to the writer's access to divine revelation. Later, Greco-Roman influences led to a renewed interest in writers themselves and to a "reinterpretation of biblical history as a series of ancient heroes" (Reed 2008, 478). *Testaments* shows both sides of this sensibility, emphasizing both the heroic nature of the twelve sons of Jacob (e.g., Philonenko 1970) and their unfettered access to additional divine revelation (e.g., Hollander and de Jonge 1985; Kugler 2001). There is a large difference between how authority and derivative works are understood and interpreted in ancient Jewish-Christian circles and contemporary fan communities. Because for ancient readers the canon was seen as less sacred and the actual writer of the text was less important than the implied author/narrator, the authority of *Testaments* could readily supersede that of the canonical narratives.

[2.6] In its paratexts, then, *Testaments* attempts to assume authority over the canon. As we consider the text itself, we see marked differences between the canon and *Testaments*. The biographical sections repeat and consolidate common canonical material, but they also adapt, extend, and change this material. In this way, they replace third-person, canonical Jewish readings with new, authoritative, first-person readings. In the next section I will analyze an example of how the canonical details of biblical characters' lives are altered in *Testaments*. In creating a fannish reading of the canonical framework and other associated traditions, the characters, ethics, and beliefs of the patriarchs are adapted to meet the needs of the religious community as perceived by the writer. However, this reading remains on the nostalgic side of Booth's (2015) continuum; there is little impulse to create completely novel readings.

3. Fix-it fic: Changing the narrative to fit the universe

[3.1] Ancient noncanonical Jewish and Christian writings currently tend to be examined as witnesses to thoughts that are not represented in the canon. This is, from the outset, a somewhat anachronistic endeavor, as there is little reason to assume that Jewish and Christian communities at the time were concerned with the idea of a canon; they were "not canon conscious" (McDonald 2006, 191). Yet at the same time, most communities would have seen some books as "core" and others as "fringe" (190–92). Allow me to introduce a couple of examples before giving some more critical notes.

[3.2] In his introduction to noncanonical writings, David deSilva (2010) explains that these texts "are of immense value as windows into the development of *biblical interpretation*, theology, ethics, and liturgy in Early Judaism and Christianity, as well as into the sociocultural and historical contexts within which these developments occurred" (emphasis mine). Most applicable to this discussion is specifically how these writings function as witnesses to ancient interpretative practices. As such, they give us insight into how ancient people, or ancient fans, engaged with their canonical narratives and figures. A major theme we can note in ancient interpretation is the solving of perceived flaws in the narrative. As James Kugel (2007, 12) explains,

[3.3] Ancient interpreters...set out to give the text the most favorable reading they could and, in some cases, to try to get it to say what they thought it really meant to say, or at least ought to say. They did this by combining an extremely meticulous examination of its words with an interpretative freedom that sometimes bordered on the wildly inventive.

[3.4] This inventive freedom led to the creation of derivative works with widely diverging narratives. Kugel's (2007) and deSilva's (2010, 2013) work is indicative of a major theme in the way that canonical and noncanonical texts are often studied. Terming these texts "rewritten Bible" implicitly places them as secondary to a canon, although that canon most likely did not exist at the time these texts were written. Mroczek (2016) has critiqued these assumptions because a canonical focus obscures important facets of ancient literary practices. She argues for fostering an appreciation of the way writers react to already existing traditions and texts without invoking a hierarchy of texts. By their very natures, these texts react to and interact with (earlier) versions of the same narratives that have come to be preserved in the canon.

[3.5] The creation of these works seems similar to the genre of fan fic called fix-it fic. This genre stems from fans' dissatisfaction or anger with aspects of the canon (Goodman 2015, 663). Henry Jenkins (2000) writes, "Fans relate to favorite texts

with a mixture of fascination and frustration, attracted to them because they offer the best resources for exploring certain issues, frustrated because these fictions never fully conform to audience desires" (175). Frustrated yet fascinated, readers set out to solve this divide between their expectations and the text by creating narratives that solve or address these tensions. Fans are nostalgic for how the text originally affected them and attempt to keep the whole of the text in line with an "imagined ideal text" (Booth 2015, 19). Novelty does not play a large role here.

[3.6] A prime example of this practice can be seen in the *Testament of Levi* 5–6. In this passage, the writer retells a narrative often called the "rape of Dinah." In the second-century context of *Testaments*, it is more than likely that the account of this narrative in Genesis 34:1–31 would have been considered canonical or at least authoritative. The Genesis narrative is as follows: Dinah, the sister of the twelve patriarchs, is sexually assaulted by a prince named Shechem. He then falls in love with her and wishes to marry her. Her twelve brothers (the patriarchs), hearing of this assault, are outraged. But Shechem's father intercedes and begs for marriage. He promises anything they desire. The brothers deceive him and ask that they and all the men in their city be circumcised. While the men are recovering from this surgery, Simeon and Levi, two of the twelve brothers, enter the city and kill them. The other ten brothers plunder everything: flocks, wealth, children, women. Their father is upset by this as he fears retaliation.

[3.7] For many ancient and contemporary readers (e.g., Bader 2008), the ethics of the patriarchs in this narrative are highly ambiguous: Simeon and Levi deceive and kill all the men; their brothers take all the women, children, and livestock as their own; and their father, Jacob, upon hearing this, is worried about his "reputation and security," not about the terrible deeds of his sons (Fisk 2000, 233). Accordingly, the *Testament of Levi* tells a different and unique story (Bader 2008). Levi receives a vision in which he is ordained as a priest (5.1–3). An angel gives him a sword and a shield, saying, "Retaliate against Shechem on account of Dinah, I will be with you because the Lord has sent me" (5.3) ([note 4](#)). Levi is furious about the rape of his sister and urges his father and elder brother to tell the Shechemites to become circumcised (6.3). Levi kills Shechem, and Simeon kills Shechem's father, Hamor (6.4). The other brothers then kill the rest of the town (6.5). Upon hearing this, Jacob is angry and irritated, but not because of his reputation and security. He is upset because "they had been circumcised and after this had been killed... We [the brothers] had sinned by doing this against his judgement" (6.6–7). But Levi is of another mind; he understood that the sexual assault of Dinah was simply the latest of a long series of violent acts against Jewish women (6.8) ([note 5](#)). This fictional narrative saves Levi and Jacob from many ethical accusations. Levi is no longer an angry brother out for revenge; he is a warrior of the Lord sent to bring righteous judgment, and he is even accompanied by an angel. In the same vein, Jacob's worries are now about having killed fresh converts to Judaism rather than the selfish exclamations of the account in Genesis.

[3.8] In the context of contemporary fan fiction, such fixing of texts is also a common occurrence. Lesley Goodman (2015) quotes a fan who writes, "Fan fiction is 60 percent fun, 30 percent porn and 120,000,000 percent fixing canon because canon is WRONG and needs to go sit in the corner and think about what it's done" (664). The fiction in the *Testament of Levi* may not contain the 30 percent porn of fan fiction (for that, we should probably turn to the *Testament of Reuben*), but it does fix canon. A useful way to understand the tensions between writer, canon, and collected fan writings is to make distinctions between three authoritative objects or discourses. Goodman defines these as (1) the universe, (2) the canon, and (3) fandom. In the original work, the author creates a universe, which we could call fictional or constructed. At this point, that single work is both the entire canon and the fictional universe. Subsequent works by the author add to the canon and are situated in that same universe and expand it. With the introduction of a second canonical text, "there is now room for contradiction and inaccuracy, room for other differences between one of the texts and the fictional universe" (665). In fact, even inside one text, there is room for these inaccuracies and differences. Thus, fans see the need to fix canon to match their perception of the fictional universe.

[3.9] In the case of the *Testament of Levi*, the process could be comparable. Ancient readers would have imagined that the more common, canonical narrative portrayed the real world, not a fictional universe ([note 6](#)). Yet they could easily have seen a contradiction between the way the characters, or actual people, would or should have acted and the way canon portrays them. Here is the same "contradiction and inaccuracy" between the expectation of the patriarchs' behavior and the canon that Goodman (2015) discusses. This entails the same perceived need and right to fix canon based on nostalgia for a certain perception of the universe. Booth (2015) writes that "fan nostalgia, however, is not just about a historic memory but also about the affective connection between an imagined ideal fan text and the initial experiences of the fan" (19). Thus the fan becomes nostalgic for an ideal text and frustrated with the canonical text. In other words, there is a tension between the narrative and the reader's (ethical) expectations: the patriarchs, who should be the epitome of ethical perfection, act dishonorably, selfishly, and violently. This combination of nostalgia for the patriarchs' (imagined) noble characters and frustration at the canon's portrayal of them serves as the impetus for creating these derivative works.

[3.10] However, there are also marked differences between contemporary fix-it fiction and ancient derivative works when it comes to nostalgia. Fan fiction in general, and fix-it fic in particular, is apologetic and seemingly accepts its secondary status. Judith Fathallah (2017), examining *Game of Thrones* (2011–19) fan fiction, notes the verb choices of the authors, noting that they often use verbs portraying nonauthoritative readings. Fathallah concludes that "though fix-it fic is appreciated, it is not author-ized at the level of canon" (148). At the same time, the authority of the canon "is obviously deconstructed via fanfic," and Fathallah points to other fandoms that are decidedly less apologetic (155).

[3.11] The *Testament of Levi*, on the other hand, does all that it can to raise its authority to that of the level of canon. Besides the steps taken in its paratexts, the work attributes its unique knowledge to many authoritative, revelatory sources: "a spirit of knowledge from the Lord" (2.3); a meeting with the Lord (5.1); the writings of Enoch, who was famous for having an exceptionally close relationship to God (14.1); heavenly tablets (5.4); and Levi's forefathers (10). The narrator is presented as a conduit of divine knowledge, the basis of ancient Christian and Jewish authority (Reed 2008). Additionally, by putting historical events into the mouth of an ancient person in the form of prophecies—that is, by letting Levi prophesy about events that are sure to happen, because they have already happened and the author is writing retrospectively—the trustworthiness of the revelations of Levi is further strengthened. The writer does everything possible to make this text authoritative. *Testaments* is not meant to be seen as secondary at all—in fact, the writer attempts to portray this writing as superior to canon itself. This authoritative step is easier to make in the ancient world, where canon is not so strictly and unequivocally defined, nor seen as the sole authoritative text.

[3.12] In this section, I focused on how the writer of *Testaments* could be seen to be writing fix-it fan fiction. There are many similarities between fix-it fic and the way the *Testament of Levi* retells the narrative of the rape of Dinah. Both fix-it fic and the *Testament of Levi* function as though they are attempting to reconcile differences between the universe and the texts of the canon. As the *Testament of Levi* reconciles these differences and attempts to make its reading of Jewish scripture authoritative, it both perpetuates and subverts the canonical material. On the one hand, in retelling the narrative in a way that removes certain difficulties, it reinforces the normativity of the canon. Any critique of or questions about the canon that a reader might have had are resolved. While the fan's nostalgia for the canonical narratives leads to the production of fiction, it is the authority claimed by the derivative work (through, e.g., the genre, the spirit of the Lord, a meeting with the Lord, the writings of Enoch) that perpetuates the canonical material. The text presumes the inherent authority of the narrator as a recipient of divine revelation, and thus the canonical material is perpetuated by the derivative work. On the other hand, as the text adjusts fundamental parts of the canonical narrative, it subverts the canon as well. The act of fixing the narrative to fit the writer's conceptions of the patriarchs shows that there is a cognitive dissonance between those conceptions and the canon. The canonical narrative must thus be seen as in some way erroneous, and the writer subverts canonical authority, creating an additional authoritative reading.

4. Novel fan fic: Stealing Israel

[4.1] The example from the *Testament of Levi* leans toward the nostalgic side of Booth's (2015) nostalgia-novelty continuum. It attempts to adapt, solve, and fix difficulties that the writer sees in a canonical narrative. Little about the canonical

narrative is revised in the above example, but elsewhere in *Testaments*, we find much more novel revisions. In the passages about the future, we can often find particularly good examples of what Booth calls "a desire for fresh material" (6). These passages are generally either prophecies about Jewish history and the life of Jesus Christ or predictions about the end of times (de Bruin 2015, 44). Predictions of the future have a number of roles in the text: they demonstrate the future consequences of the descendants' behavior and they function to establish the authority of the patriarch in question (74–80). I have discussed authority above; however, two methods *Testaments* employs to augment its authority through prophecy need further exploration. First, the patriarchs claim access to hidden knowledge. As "the patriarchs themselves can have no knowledge of events that occur...at a later date" (73), they need sources that "provide them with the information" (Kugler 2001, 14), often referring to esoteric teachings received from their forefathers or heavenly documents. The patriarchs therefore have access to secret sources of authoritative information unavailable to readers. This strengthens the words of the patriarchs in the minds of the readers. Second, the writer "could...put events that he knew would occur into the mouths of the patriarchs as predictions. These...function to establish prophetic authority" (De Bruin 2015, 75). Because the narratives *Testaments* were written retroactively, the patriarchs are able to predict future events, showing that they must have supernatural knowledge.

[4.2] As one might expect, in these sections, which are more novel than nostalgic, the more subversive aspects of *Testaments* come into focus. The *Testament of Simeon* contains an excellent example, when it gives a prophecy in "hymnic form" (Hollander and de Jonge 1985, 121; see also Kugler 2001, 46). It states (*T. Sim.* 6.2–7),

[4.3] If you remove all jealousy and stubbornness from yourselves,
my bones will blossom like a rose in Israel,
and my flesh will blossom like a lily,
and my fragrance will be like the fragrance of frankincense,
and holy people will be multiplied from me like cedars forever,
and their branches will stretch far.

[4.4] Then, the seed of Canaan will perish,
and nothing will remain for Amalek,
and all the Cappadocians will pass away,
and all the Hittites will be utterly destroyed.

[4.5] Then, the land of Ham will fail,
and all the people will perish.
Then, all the earth will take a break from upheaval,
and everything under the sky will rest from war.

[4.6] Then, Shem will be glorified,
because the great God of Israel is Lord,
he will appear on earth like a person,
and will save Adam through him.

[4.7] Then, all the spirits of deceit will be trampled,
and humans will rule over the evil spirits.

[4.8] Then, in joy I will arise,
and I will praise the Most High on account of his marvelous deeds:
because God has saved humanity,
by taking on a body and eating with humans.

[4.9] This hymn contains a prediction that spans many centuries (though not necessarily in chronological order). The prediction references both the history of the Jewish people and the life of Christ. A poetic description of the "glory of all Simeonites" (Kugler 2001, 46) is quickly followed with a description of the fall of Israel's enemies. This is followed by end-time predictions that occur chronologically after the history contained in the Jewish scriptures: there will be peace on earth, and God will appear on earth as a human saving all humankind; this is a clear reference to Jesus Christ, the messiah for Christ followers (6.5). The forces of evil will be conquered, and then Simeon will rise from the dead (6.6–7). Simeon will praise God, because God became a human, ate with humans, and saved humanity, another clear reference to Christ (6.8). A number of these statements thus discuss the place of Christianity vis-à-vis Judaism.

[4.10] According to the *Testament of Simeon*, Simeon—one of the foundational figures of Judaism—was actually a Christ follower all along. He believed in Jesus Christ and praised God for Christ's sacrifice to save humanity. These are core Christian beliefs that can be seen to significantly differentiate Judaism and Christianity. This rewriting must be seen as a hostile and exclusionary act, a common occurrence in early Christian writings (Nicklas 2014): non-Christ followers, who identify with these patriarchs, are excluded from a narrative that did not previously exclude them. This text implies that Simeon was already aware of the salvific nature of Jesus Christ and appreciated his ministry and sacrifice. It also suggests he was aware of the Christian theology that God has a plan to save humanity through Jesus Christ and his incarnation. Christian beliefs are thus recast back into the time of the patriarchs. The *Testament of Simeon* argues that Christianity is the true faith even according to the founding fathers of the Jewish nation. In this way, the text subverts these Jewish characters and narratives, rechristening them as Christian millennia after the fact.

[4.11] The *Testament of Simeon* is not the only testament to subvert Israelite history and Jewish heritage like this. The *Testament of Dan* explains that the Lord will depart from the Jews and move to the Gentiles, that is, the non-Jews (6.6), and

if the Jews are righteous, "the Saviour of the Gentiles" *may* accept them (6.9). In the *Testament of Reuben*, Jesus Christ is called the fulfilment of time and is predicted to invalidate the Jewish priesthood (6.8). Thus, another foundational aspect of ancient Judaism has been disowned or removed. There is no doubt that Jewish believers can be saved if they follow Christ, but *Testaments* deals with their "final salvation as a more or less fixed item in a purely Christian discussion" (Hollander 1995, 101). Christianity has displaced Judaism, the patriarchs have become Christ followers, Jewish writings and characters have been Christianized, and Jews are not allowed to take part in the discussion of their own salvation. Additionally, the Torah, the collection of laws that are foundational to Judaism, has been replaced with the Christian double commandment to love God and love one's neighbor (103). This is significant, as this subversive strategy is fairly unique to *Testaments* in the Christian writings of the late second century. Helen Rhee (2005, 68) explains how late second-century theologians, defending Christianity against others, argued that "Christians are in possession of the history of the whole world. This claim to antiquity enables them to assert that whatever truth has been discovered and said among all people, including the Greeks and the Jews, belongs to Christians. This view of history legitimizes the 'Christian' interpretation and appropriation of the Jewish Scripture." The difference between this approach and that of *Testaments* is that there is no interpretation or appropriation of Jewish scripture but rather a reimagining of the Jewish Bible as Christian all along.

[4.12] *Testaments* therefore performs a fannish reading of Jewish heritage similar to what Jenkins (1992) describes as "resistive reading" (64):

[4.13] The reader is drawn not into the preconstituted world of the fiction but rather into a world she has created from the textual materials. Here, the reader's pre-established values are at least as important as those preferred by the narrative system... The raw materials of the original story play a crucial role in this process, providing instructions for a preferred reading, but they do not necessarily overpower and subdue the reader... Some groups' pleasure comes not in celebrating the values of their chosen works but rather in "reading them against the grain," in expressing their opposition to rather than acceptance of textual ideology.

[4.14] Analogically, the Christian writer of *Testaments* is interested in the textual world of Jewish heritage but is more readily drawn to his own contextual Christian worldview, established based on the canonical narratives. The patriarchs and their lives suggest a Jewish reading, but the writer instead reads them as Christian. They "read against the grain," subverting the inherent Israelite ideology of the narratives. Therefore, this work also falls neatly into Nickolas Pappas's (1989) definition of subversive readings: "A subversive reading will release the reader from the power of the author... [which is experienced] as limitations upon the creation of meanings" (328). Though Pappas speaks of an author, contextualizing this for the ancient world, we may want to replace the word "author" with "text" or "context." The original context of the canonical narratives, and indeed the text itself, is not

permitted to limit their meanings to Jewish ones. Instead, that authority is unseated by

[4.15] carrying on some activity the author has instigated, to a point at which it is no longer relevant to ask about the author's own desires...The authors' desires drop out of the picture—not because they cannot be known, but because the authors' desires or intentions do not determine the outcome of this sort of reading. These readers have gone over the authors' heads. (325, 328)

[4.16] The context of the Jewish writer of the canonical narratives has no authority over readings of the narratives of the progenitors of Judaism. The new Christian composer takes over what authority the Jewish texts had and creates a new, authoritative Christian reading.

[4.17] Subversive readings, or readings against the grain, seem to be a topic of debate in fan fiction. Slash fiction is a good example of a type of fan fiction that is most commonly seen as subversive (e.g., Jenkins 1992). Slash (generally) describes "erotic encounters between television characters...of the same sex" (Jones 2014, 116–17). It is seen as subversive because it deliberately goes against the characters' heterosexuality as implied, stated, or shown in the canon. Sarah Gwenllian Jones argues that this "paradigm rests upon an understanding of the text as an inviolable and discrete semiotic surface" (2014, 118). Jones explores whether slash fiction based on a cult television series can be seen not as resistant readings but rather as an "actualization of latent textual elements" (119). Arguing that maintaining the exotic and adventurous nature of the characters requires "exotic erotics," Jones concludes that it "is the cult television series itself which implicitly 'resists' the conventions of heterosexuality" (127–28). What the fans love about these texts requires the adventurous, antirealist eroticism of slash fiction. These texts are inherently queer, though not explicitly so. A similar argument might be made for how *Testaments* reads Jewish heritage. The Christian fans of Jewish narratives appreciate Jewish texts specifically because they speak to them about Christian truths. Their Christian expectations resist a Jewish reading, and thus they need to actualize what, following Jones, we might call latent Christian elements, that is, elements that are particularly suited for a Christian reading or tie in with specifically Christian concerns. Thus, following Hellekson and Busse's (2014) argument that "slash fan fiction may indeed be more textual and bound to the possibilities presented in the canonical source, and far less subversive than slash theorists have wanted to claim" (79), we could conclude that this reading of the Jewish heritage is bound to the interstices available in the canon.

[4.18] All in all, using the authority of genre, first-person narration, "prophecies," and access to hidden writings, *Testaments* creates an authoritative, Christian reading of the patriarchs, displacing canonical, Jewish traditions. The writer of *Testaments* seems to be creating a subversive reading in which the canonical Jewish writer is unseated by a new Christian writer, who creates a new

authoritative reading to take the place of the canonical narratives. The new writer actualizes latent elements in the text, foregrounding a Christian interpretation of these elements. This Christianizing of the patriarchs is thus no longer a simple fix-it fic necessitated by the unfavorable portrayal of beloved characters; it is a novel, perhaps subversive recasting of canon.

5. Conclusion

[5.1] Early Christ followers wished to understand the role and place of Judaism in salvation history, and the lot of non-Christ-following Jewish people. While many approached this topic from a rational, deductive point of view, the writer of *Testaments* deals with this (and other topics) through narratives. Creating a collection of what we may anachronistically call fan fiction, they adapt the canonical material (and associated traditions) from a position of authority. Displacing the writers of the Jewish scripture by appealing to hidden knowledge and authentic first-person narratives, the writer subverts the authority of the canon by presenting their own readings as authoritative.

[5.2] In some cases, *Testaments* retells narratives, fixing or correcting how the patriarchs are portrayed in the canon. Deriving from a nostalgia for the characters, the writer reinterprets events to fix perceived problems with the patriarchs' ethics. This makes clear the writer's frustration with the dissonance between the canon's portrayals and how the writer of *Testaments* feels the universe and characters should be depicted. New narratives are created that fix these errors in canon. In other cases, *Testaments* creates novel readings that subvert the Jewish scriptures. The Jewish nation and patriarchs are removed from their Jewish background and metaphorically baptized into a Christian one. The Jewish writer is displaced, and the history of Judaism is Christianized, with the patriarchs recast as always already Christian.

[5.3] Fan studies gives us a unified theoretical framework in which to discuss the hermeneutic strategies of nostalgia and novelty. Fan play gives us a model that allows the analysis of these—in the eyes of many—contradictory textual strategies, which traditionally have often been examined separately ([note 7](#)). This allows the introduction of a more nuanced reading of how *Testaments* engages with its source material(s). For example, Robert Kugler (2001, 2012) and James Kugel (1990, 1992, 1995, 1998, 2007) have both discussed *Testaments* as a derivative work. Kugler (2012) has focused on the way that *Testaments* uses new narratives of canonical characters to make "fresh theological arguments" (356), that is, novel readings. Kugel (2007) instead sees these narratives in the context of solving major problems in the text (10–14), that is, nostalgic readings. In some ways, these two readings overlap, yet they are based on wholly contradictory assumptions: Does *Testaments* provide fresh theological arguments that add to canon, or does it

solve contradictions that are inherent to canon? The writer is either exploitative (Kugler 2012, 355) or a clever explainer (Kugel 2007, 14).

[5.4] Clearly, both nostalgia and novelty are present in *Testaments*, and Booth's (2015) continuum of fan play allows for both to exist side by side and build on one another. The writer now has a unified strategy for their derivative works. They are a fan, and "to engage a fan, a text needs to be both familiar and novel at once; it must both surprise and appease" (6). We can expect nothing else from a text copied for thousands of years by fans, and the writer's hermeneutics in both reading and rewriting canon is no longer divided between two poles but is instead unified on a single continuum of negotiation and dialogue with canon(s) and community. We can thus conclude that the fan writer, as a creator of a derivative work, is driven by the desire for new material within the context of the canon.

[5.5] A second way this analysis adds to previous scholarly readings of *Testaments* relates to its presentation of Judaism. Scholars have often ascribed a relatively positive view of Judaism to *Testaments*. For example, de Jonge (1986) has argued that this work was "clearly genuinely concerned with the salvation of the Jews" (211). Hollander (1995), writing nearly ten years later, nuanced this opinion slightly, showing how the Jewish law had been replaced by a Christian one. Steps, therefore, have been taken to read *Testaments* as subversive or hostile to Judaism. Yet Hollander nonetheless argues, based on the way the patriarchs discuss the future (i.e., the same passages discussed above), that God's plan of salvation "includes the people of Israel" (99). The analysis above instead suggests that this is not the case: *Testaments* usurps a Jewish reading of Jewish scripture and requires the following of Christ. God will save Christ followers only, which includes people, like the patriarchs, who may have appeared to be Jewish but are in actual fact Christ followers; however, it does not include Jews.

[5.6] All in all, *Testaments* plays a nuanced, fannish game of simultaneously perpetuating and subverting canonical authority. Picking and choosing topics, themes, and narratives, the writers, editors, readers, and transmitters enter into a negotiation of power, changing, adapting, and enforcing readings that suit the personal and communal needs of their religious and sociocultural context.

6. Notes

1. I will use the word "writer" throughout to refer to the person(s) who produced this text. This is to avoid importing contemporary ideas of authorship into the discussion. It is not entirely clear if we should talk of a writer or of a writer/editor when it comes to this work. However, I will nonetheless use the term "writer," bearing in mind that the writer made use of sources and traditions. As will be discussed below, authorship in ancient Judaism and early Christianity was viewed significantly differently to how it is seen today.

2. Genette (1997) focused only on the text as manifested in printed media. Georg Stanitzek (2005) extended the theory to other media, including film and television.

3. For more on the form of *The Testaments*, see the discussion and notes in de Bruin (2015, 42–47).

4. All translations are my own, based on the Greek text of de Jonge et al. (1978). English translations can be found in Hollander and de Jonge (1985), de Jonge (1984), and Kee (1983).

5. This reading is not immediately obvious from the text, which seems to imply the sexual assault of the long-dead Sarah, great-grandmother of the twelve brothers. Fisk (2000) has discussed how the author links this narrative from Genesis 34 with an earlier narrative in Genesis 20. There the married Sarah, the mother of Judaism, is inducted into the foreign king Abimelech's harem. This sexual assault thus becomes indicative of the overall treatment of Jewish women (234–35).

6. The distinction between the real world and fictional universes is admittedly hard to define in religious studies, where fiction and reality easily mix; see, for example, Davidsen (2013).

7. As regards *Testaments*, numerous works discuss the nostalgic elements in, for example, the retelling of the Dinah episode (Baarda 1992; Bader 2008; Fisk 2000; Kee 1978; Kugel 1992, 1998; Slingerland 1986), though these generally focus on how these readings are novel, not nostalgic. There are, similarly, several analyses of the rereadings of Jewish history (de Jonge 1985, 1986; Hollander 1995; Stone 1987). Very little can be found that incorporates both sides of the coin in a single framework.

7. References

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