

A Qumranic Polemic Against a Divergent Reading of Exodus 6:20?

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The received text of Exodus 6:20b reads: “ושני חיי עמרם שבע ושלשים ומאת שנה” “The years of Amram’s life were 137 years.” The Greek tradition is not uniform. Ambrosianus, Coislinianus and most of the minuscule evidence, like the Masoretic Text, have 137 years.¹ The testimony of Demetrius, however, gives 136 years.² Alexandrinus and five minuscules also give 136 years, as does the Samaritan text. Vaticanus, which is followed by both Swete and Rahlfs, plus three minuscules read 132 years. To this conflicting evidence, the testimony of the recently discovered 4Q^cAmram should be added.³ What is especially noteworthy of 4Q^cAmram is its seemingly polemical tone, for not only does this text assign a date to the length of Amram’s life, but appears to insist that its date is the correct one.

2. . . . ודי פקר אנון ביום מונתה] בשנת
3. מאה ותלתין ושח היא שנתא די מותה [ב]שנת מאה
4. וחמשין ותרתין לגל[ו]ת [י]שראל למצרים

2 . . . and that he commanded them on the day of [his de]ath, in the
3 one hundred thirty-sixth year, which was the year of his death, [in] the one hundred and
4 fifty-second year of the ex[il]e of [I]srael to Egypt.⁴

Kobelski’s rendition, following that of Milik,⁵ lacks precision, since it probably obscures the author’s intent. P. Grelot recognizes the redundant nature of the expression and converts it into a clarifying note: “c’est-à-dire l’année de sa mort.”⁶ Yet Grelot does not specify whether the emphasis is to be laid upon the *fact* of death or the *time* of

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1 A. E. Brook and N. Mclean, *The Old Testament in Greek* (Cambridge: University Press, 1917), 1:172.

2 *F.Gr.H.* 722; Eusebius, *Praeparatio Evangelica* 9, 21, 19.

3 J. T. Milik, “4Q visions de Amram et une citation d’Origine,” *RB* 79 (1972), 77–97. The text of 4Q^cAmram is found on p. 77. See *TB Bab. Bat.* 121b and Rashi’s commentary for another discussion concerning Amram’s lifespan.

4 P. J. Kobelski, *Melchizedek and Melchireš*^c (Washington: Catholic Biblical Association, 1981), 24.

5 Milik translates this phrase as a subordinate clause: “en l’an cent trente six qui était l’année de sa mort. . . .”

6 P. Grelot, “Quatre cents trente ans (Ex 12, 40),” in *Homenaje a Juan Prado: Miscelanea de Estudios Biblicos y Hebraicos*, ed. by L. Alvarez Verdes and E. J. Alonso Hernandez (Madrid, 1975), 561.

death. K. Beyer has separated the phrase typographically with dashes: “—das ist das Jahr seines Todes—,”⁷ thus giving the impression that he has understood this clause as a type of parenthetical note. The recent Fitzmyer-Harrington rendition departs from the tradition of translation that appears in the aforementioned examples by understanding the pleonastic clause to emphasize the synchronism between the death of Amram and Egyptian exilic dating.⁸ This is a possible interpretation, but it seems unlikely given the nature of the clause. These translations (save Fitzmyer-Harrington) fail to take note of the emphatic **היא** in line 3, leaving the impression that the repetition of “the year of his death” was merely a redundancy. A better paraphrase of his apparent intent is as follows: “on the day of his death, in the one hundred and thirty-sixth year; *that was* the year of his death.” The **היא** seems polemical, evidently criticizing other reading(s) that gave a divergent date for Amram’s death. This is re-emphasized by the synchronism of the 152nd year of the exile.

In order to facilitate a clear discussion of the problem, we have juxtaposed a portion of the Aramaic Testament of Levi which contains an analogous chronological indication:

Aram. Test. Levi Cambridge e⁹
 וּבְשָׁנָה מֵאָה וְחֲמִנְיָה עֶשְׂרֵה לַחַיִּי
הָיָא שְׁתַּא דִּי מִית בֵּה יוֹסֵף אַחִי
 קִרְיִיתִי לְבָנִי וְלִבְנֵיהֶן

4Q ʿAmram
 בְּיוֹם מוֹתָהּ בְּשָׁנָה מֵאָה
 וְתַלְחִין וְשֵׁת הָיָא שְׁתַּא דִּי
מוֹתָהּ [ב] שְׁנָתָה מֵאָה וְחֲמִשִּׁין
 וְתַרְחִין לְגַלְיָתָהּ [י] שְׂרָאֵל
 לְמִצְרַיִם

What emerges from this comparison of phraseology is instructive. The underscored note in the Levi passage is a true synchronism: two previously independent events are temporally correlated. The one hundred and eighteenth year of Levi’s life is *also* the year of Joseph’s expiration. In the Amram fragment, however, no new fact is learned. Instead, what was previously uttered is simply repeated without the addition of any further data. The repetition of the word **מוֹתָהּ** gives rise to a suspicion that the actual point at issue is the year of Amram’s death. Had the intention of the author only been to establish a synchronism between the death of Amram and the one hundred and fifty-second year of the Egyptian exile (Fitzmyer), he would not have inserted this pointed note.

The era of the entry into Egypt could be interpreted in one of two ways; either as an added synchronism or, as seems more likely, an attempt to strengthen the author’s datum. In either case, 4Q ʿAmram’s reckonings appear to be part of a tradition that attempted to fix a detailed chronology of the Exodus.¹⁰ We have the evidence of

7 Klaus Beyer, *Die aramäischen Texte vom Toten Meer* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1984), 211.

8 Joseph A. Fitzmyer and Daniel J. Harrington, *A Manual of Palestinian Aramaic Texts* (Rome: Biblical Institute Press, 1978), 95.

9 R. H. Charles and A. Cowley, “An Early Source of the Testaments of the Patriarchs,” *JQR* 19 (1906-7), 576.

10 P. Grelot also deals with this text in the context of the chronology of the Exodus, but fails to note its polemical nature: “Quatre cents trente ans (Exodus 12, 34): A propos de la Chronologie sacerdotale du Pentateuque,” *Studien um Pentateuch: Walter Kornfeld zum 60. Geburtstag*, ed. G. Braulik (Vienna/Freiburg/Basel: Herder, 1977), 91-98.

Demetrius and the Testament of Levi attesting to the existence of similar chronographic interests.¹¹ To this we may add Jubilees which, though not detailed on this point, does give the date of Amram's return following his sojourn in Canaan.¹²

What is striking, then, about 4Q ^cAmram is not so much its notice of Amram's lifetime as is its apparent polemic against other conflicting chronologies and its use of the synchronism of the era of the entry into Egypt as part of its polemic. Moreover, since the remaining fragments of 4Q ^cAmram deal with matters other than chronology, we may assume that the detailed entry about Amram's length of life draws on other chronographic works which not only gave their own dates, but also challenged conflicting opinions. Since the Samaritan version, Demetrius, and Alexandrinus contain the same number as 4Q ^cAmram, we must assume that these witnesses go back to a particular chronographic school, whereas the Masoretic Text and many Septuagint witnesses, on the one hand, and Codex Vaticanus and some LXX witnesses, on the other, reflect the opinion of divergent chronologies of the Exodus. We know that Qumranic writings in general seem to cohere with works such as Jubilees and the Testaments of the Twelve Patriarchs. It is also possible that the biblical texts preserved at Qumran represent an independent scribal tradition from those of the Masoretic, Septuagint and Samaritan schools.¹³ Up to this point, however, there was no indication that the various scribal and/or chronographic schools paid attention to divergent chronological systems. 4Q ^cAmram does seem to indicate that the scribes criticized rival views: "that was the year of his death."

The question remains whether the polemic of 4Q ^cAmram is directed against one or both rival readings. A survey of the total evidence suggests that there probably existed in antiquity only two readings, 137 years as attested in the Masoretic tradition and many Septuagint witnesses; and 136 years, in the Samaritan, Codex Alexandrinus, Demetrius, and some other LXX testimony. Though found in Vaticanus, the reading of 132 years seems to reflect a subsequent introduction.¹⁴ The difference of a year may seem unimportant to us, but was evidently of considerable significance for the chronographers of Qumran.

The existence of scribal schools with an interest in chronography evident in the writings of Demetrius, rabbinic compositions such as *Seder Olam*, the Testaments of the Twelve Patriarchs and now in 4Q ^cAmram, would seem to raise questions about conclusions reached by Larsson in a recent essay.¹⁵ His article deals with the chronology of the Masoretic Text and the LXX as a whole concluding "that the Pentateuch was translated at the end of the third or the beginning of the second century B.C.E." The

11 The controversy over the chronology of the Exodus is discussed in B. Z. Wacholder, "How Long did Abraham Stay in Egypt," *HUCA* 35 (1964), 43–56, or *Essays on Jewish Chronology and Chronography* (New York: Ktav, 1976), 45–58.

12 Jub. 47:1.

13 Cf. E. Tov, "A Modern Textual Outlook Based on the Qumran Scrolls," *HUCA* 53 (1982), 11–27; "The 'Temple Scroll' and Old Testament Textual Criticism," *Eretz-Israel* 16 (1982), 100–111 [Hebrew].

14 Such a conclusion differs from that of G. Larsson, "The Chronology of the Pentateuch: A Comparison of the MT and LXX," *JBL* 102 (1983), 406, who says concerning Exod. 6:20: "This is well suited to the tendency of LXX to have a more regular chronology. By the alteration, LXX got a descending series of ages, Isaac (180), Jacob (147), Levi (137), Kohath (133), Amram (132), Aaron (123), and Moses (120)."

15 Ibid., 401–9.

evidence assembled so far in the case of Amram indicates that there existed chronographic schools other than those represented in the Septuagint. Moreover, the chronology presented in Demetrius, who flourished during the reign of Ptolemy IV Philopator (222-205 B.C.E.), is generally anchored in the Septuagint, which indicates the existence of a Greek translation before 220 B.C.E. Certainly 4Q^cAmram attests to the existence of a deep interest in determining the "true" chronology of the patriarchs. It follows that about 200 B.C.E. the chronology of the patriarchs remained a debatable issue.¹⁶ 4Q^cAmram would seem to be the oldest attested inter-recensional dispute.

¹⁶ Note that the chronology of Qumran literature is generally considered somewhat later than is assumed in this article. See B. Z. Wacholder, *The Dawn of Qumran: The Sectarian Torah and the Teacher of Righteousness* (Cincinnati: HUC Press, 1983), 171-229.