Linguistic Observations on the Hebrew Prayer of Manasseh from the Cairo Genizah

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1 Introduction

Among the so-called magical texts from the Cairo Genizah edited by Peter Schäfer and Shaul Shaked, the Cambridge fragments T.-S. K 1.144, T.-S. K 21.95, and T.-S. K 21.95P constitute a manuscript containing various prayers, most of which have "a mystico-magical character." Among these prayers we find a Hebrew version of the Prayer of Manasseh previously known in Greek and Syriac. There is no relationship with Manasseh’s prayer found at Qumran (4Q381 33 8–11) edited by Eileen Schuller and investigated by William M. Schniedewind. One of the very few studies on the Genizah text is an article by

1 Abbreviations: BH = Biblical Hebrew; CH = Classical Hebrew (including BH and QH); MH = Mishnaic Hebrew; RH = Rabbinic Hebrew; QH = Qumran Hebrew; PrMan = Prayer of Manasseh; PrMan-Heb = The Hebrew text of the Prayer of Manasseh from the Cairo Genizah; DCH = D. J. A. Clines, ed., Dictionary of Classical Hebrew; HALOT = Koehler, Baumgartner, Stamm, eds., The Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament. We use “MH” if the distinction between the Tannaitic Hebrew and Amoraic Hebrew is applicable, and “RH” if that distinction does not apply.

2 Peter Schäfer and Shaul Shaked, eds., Magische Texte aus der Kairoer Geniza (3 vols.; TSAJ 42,64,72; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1994–1997), 227–78, PrMan on pp. 32 (text) and 53 (translation).

3 Also in other languages, but the other versions depend either on the Greek or on the Syriac text.

4 Eileen M. Schuller, Non-Canonical Psalms from Qumran: A Pseudepigraphic Collection (HSS 28; Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1986), PrMan on pp. 146 (Hebrew text), 151 (translation), 155–58 (comment); Schuller also published this text in the DJD series in 1998; for PrMan (text, translation and notes) see DJD 11:122–26.

5 W. M. Schniedewind, “A Qumran Fragment of the Ancient Prayer of Manasseh?” ZAW 108 (1996): 105–7, argued that the Qumran prayer represents an early extra-biblical tradition, which predates the Chronicler’s history, and was perhaps even part of the source to which the Chronicler refers. For a rather positive assessment of this view see Louis Jonker, “Tradition through Reading—Reading the Tradition: Reflections on Eep Talstra’s Exegetical Methodology,” in Tradition and Innovation in Biblical Interpretation: Studies Presented to Professor Eep Talstra on the Occasion of his Sixty-Fifth Birthday (ed. W. Th. van Peursen and J. W. Dyk; SSN 57; Leiden: Brill, 2011), 133–51, esp. 146–47; for a more critical assessment see
Reimund Leicht, in which he argues that this Hebrew text of PrMan is a tenth-century translation from a Greek text close to the text of the Codex Turicensis, but reflects also unequivocal influence from the Syriac versions.

The picture that emerges from Leicht’s hypothesis is reminiscent of the model that various scholars in the late-19th and early-20th centuries advocated regarding the Hebrew text of Ben Sira from the Cairo Genizah, namely, that of a document written in the Second Temple Period, that survived in Greek and Syriac, and that in the Middle Ages, presumably the tenth century, was retranslated into Hebrew. For the Hebrew text of Ben Sira the retroversion theory could not stand the test of time, and after the discovery of the Masada text and the Qumran fragments, at most the partial retroversion theory could be maintained; that is, the view that the Genizah manuscripts of Ben Sira are basically the result of inner-Hebrew development, and that only some passages such as Sir 51:13–30 contain traces of a retroversion from Syriac (or Greek).

For other books the scholarly discussion moved in the opposite direction. Thus M. Gaster considered the small Hebrew version of the story of Judith that he published in 1894 to be standing at the beginning of the literary and


7 Note, however, that the date of origin of PrMan is not so easy to establish as some scholars have suggested and that a later date of origin cannot be ruled out; cf. Gutman and van Peursen, The Two Syriac Versions of the Prayer of Manasseh, 41–52.

8 Whether we should call PrMan-Heb a “retranslation” (back into Hebrew) or just a “translation” depends on the source of the Greek and Syriac versions. Only if we assume that these versions go back to a Hebrew original—which is far from certain (cf. Gutman and van Peursen, The Two Syriac Versions of the Prayer of Manasseh, 8–9 n. 11)—is it justified to speak of a re-translation.