Scribal Innovation and the Book of Tobit: A Long Overdue Discussion

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Redaction, it might be said, lies in the eye of the beholder, especially with regard to the Book of Tobit. At present there is no consensus as to whether the tale, first attested among the Dead Sea Scrolls, is the work of as many as four authors/editors or as few as one. Furthermore, there do not seem to be any agreed-upon guidelines for the presence in Tobit of any kind of modification of a preexistent text, the process that we term “scribal innovation.” This paper identifies and applies methods that are particularly suited to the task of determining the presence of such innovation in the Book of Tobit. It concludes that positing multiple authors is the best explanation for certain characteristics observable in the narrative. This paper’s analysis focuses upon the Tobit texts attested by the GII text type and its related Scroll material (discussed below).

This approach is to be distinguished in two respects from past attempts to demonstrate multiple authorship in Tobit. First, it does not divide the entire story into precise layers with specific dates and provenances but instead considers what aspects of a given passage seem to encourage the growth of scribal innovation. Second, it does not use the presence or absence of narrative flow as a primary indication of scribal innovation. Issues of discontinuity are considered only after first applying one of the primary methods. If successful, this study may be of relevance to the study of documents both for which the question of scribal innovation is live and for which scribal innovation is established but the extent of which is still debated.

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1 With great pleasure I dedicate this paper to my teacher and mentor, John J. Collins, academic rock star and mensch extraordinaire. John is a living example of William Butler Yeats’s dictum that “education is not the filling of a pail, but the lighting of a fire.” Fad saol agat!

2 Charlotte Hempel, “Sources and Redaction in the Dead Sea Scrolls,” in Rediscovering the Dead Sea Scrolls: An Assessment of Old and New Approaches and Methods (ed. M. L. Grossman; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2010), 162–81 at 164–65, contrasts “those are sensitive to unevenness and differences between and within texts—the ‘splitters’” with those “who have a profound dislike of cutting up a perfectly good text—the clumpers.”
1  Tobit as a Likely Candidate for Scribal Innovation

The idea that a text should have a single author, or in many instances, a single form, does not appear to have been universally held by the ancients. We see this clearly in the epics of Mesopotamia, Greece, South Asia and Ireland, to name but a few examples, but the phenomenon is limited neither to these civilizations nor to a single genre. Certainly, scribal innovation has been detected throughout the documents now found in the Hebrew Bible and in other sacred writings circulating in the Second Temple period. Among the Dead Sea Scrolls we find multiple versions of both “biblical writings” and rulebooks such as the Serekh ha-Yahad. Jeremiah is perhaps the most famous case of multiple editions, but there is also clear evidence of expansion in some manuscripts of Exodus, Numbers, Samuel, Kings, Isaiah and Daniel, and in 4QReworked Pentateuch. Some expansions are primarily harmonizations from elsewhere in the Torah (e.g., 4QpaleoExodm and 4QNumb), but others include apparently new material, such as 4Q364. It is of particular interest to the question of Tobit that works such as Jubilees and the Genesis Apocryphon may also be the products of more than one author. All three writings draw on the book of Genesis for inspiration; Jubilees shares parabiblical traditions with Tobit;