Medieval Hebrew Tellings of Tobit: “Versions” of the Book of Tobit or New Texts?

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It is with great pleasure that I offer this study in honour of my teacher, doctoral supervisor, and mentor George Brooke. My contribution to the theme of textuality is to address the wider question of “what is a text”? More specifically, “when is a text as testified in a particular manuscript or printed book still a ‘version’ or ‘telling’ of a known text, and when is it better to be considered as a ‘new’ or ‘different’ text?” There is some overlap between this issue and the question explored by George and applied to the scriptural scrolls from Qumran: “what degree or type of variation in a text permits one to speak of it being a new edition?” My questions for this essay are less concerned with textual criticism and scribal activity, but more with the life of a story in different traditions throughout its history of transmission.

The story in question is that of Tobit. The focus is on the often neglected Medieval Hebrew texts, particularly the two “versions” published by Moses Gaster in 1896. He opened his study of Tobit with the following

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1 The term “telling” is preferred in the context of the present study, as, unlike “version” it does not imply that there is an “original” text that all the known witnesses are “versions” of. See for example A.K. Ramanujan “Three hundred Ramayanas: Five Examples and Three Thoughts on Translation,” in Many Ramayanas: The Diversity of a Narrative Tradition in South Asia, ed. Paula Richman (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991), 22–48, 24–25.


statement: “Of all the Apocrypha of the Old Testament the legend of Tobit alone may be said to have come down to us in the greatest variety of texts and translations.”4 Recent scholarship still agrees with his assessment: “the manuscript tradition of the story of Tobit is unusually complicated.”5 Its textual variation and complexity make the book of Tobit an appropriate work to be studied for a Festschrift with the title Is there a Text in this Cave? The title echoes that of Stanley Fish’s collection of essays, Is there a Text in this Class? In his preface, Fish answers: “there is and there isn’t.”6 The same answer can be given to the question “is there a text of Tobit in this Cave?” There is, due to the 70 fragments found in Cave 4 which make up 4Q196–200, six “Tobit texts,” five in Aramaic and one in Hebrew.7 And there is not, for several reasons.

First, it can hardly be said that the book of Tobit is available via the fragments from Qumran. It has been estimated that the manuscripts published in DJD 19 only preserve 20% of the Aramaic and 6% of the Hebrew text.8 Second, the manuscripts from Qumran have little in common with the medieval Hebrew tellings which are the focus of this study. In other words, those “texts” of Tobit are not “in this cave.” Third, it may be argued that the book of

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4 Gaster, “Two Unknown Hebrew Versions,” 1.
5 Joseph A. Fitzmyer, Tobit, CEJL (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2003), 3.
6 Stanley Fish, Is there a Text in This Class? The Authority of Interpretive Communities (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1980), vii.
7 The five manuscripts (in 69 fragments) known at the time of the editio princeps, plus one more Aramaic fragment which has been discovered to attest to a sixth Tobit manuscript. Joseph A. Fitzmyer, “196–200 4QpapTobit* ar, 4QTobitb–d ar, and 4QTobite,” in Qumran Cave 4.XIV: Parabiblical Texts, Part 2, ed. Magen Broshi et al., DJD 19 (Oxford: Clarendon, 1995), 1.

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Nicklas and Wagner state that far under 20% of the total text is covered by the five Qumran manuscripts. Tobias Nicklas and Christian Wagner, “Thesen zur textlichen Vielfalt im Tobitbuch,” JSF 34 (2003): 141–59, 152.