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Scribal Habits and Scholarly Texts

Codicology at Oxyrhynchus and Qumran

My interest in a comparative codicological approach to ancient Jewish manuscripts was preempted by a disjuncture that I had begun to notice between scholarship on two different genres written in Aramaic and recovered from among the literary finds from the Dead Sea. On the one hand, there is an increasing body of scholarship that has related the Aramaic apocalyptic, astronomical and physiognomic material to the direct knowledge of the scribes behind these texts with the Babylonian scholarly tradition.¹ On the other, scholars have been reticent to associate the Aramaic court tales with a Mesopotamian horizon—despite the diaspora setting of much of this material—precisely because this literature has been deemed to stand outside of the scholarly tradition, and hence the scribes who produced these texts unable to access Babylonian literature.² These sort of assumptions have also governed scholarly approaches to biblical texts, with the generic division found in the book of Daniel related to the differing social groups at which the material was apparently aimed: so the high-register Hebrew apocalyptic visions aimed at a scholarly audience; and the low-register Aramaic tales at a lower-class readership.³ Underlying this supposition is the idea that

1 On the connections between the Mesopotamian traditions and the Enochic material see Neugebauer 1981; Kuanvig 1988; Albani 1994; VanderKam 1984, 76–109; Drawnel 2011. On physiognomy see Popović 2007. On the connection between Babylonian and Jewish scientific texts more generally see Ben-Dov 2008; Sanders 2017.

2 A case in point is the recent study of all this material by Matthew Neujahr. Neujahr has attempted to distinguish between the modes of influence between the stream of Mesopotamian ideas to Jewish literature in the Second Temple period, determining between which alleged similarities can be accounted for in terms of general cultural knowledge, and which require the hypothesis of formal Babylonian scribal training. Though he is primarily concerned with apocalyptic literature, he also considers related Jewish texts and thus treats Daniel 4, a text that arguably recalls native traditions about the Babylonian king, Nabonidus. But Neujahr considers this tale to have the feeling of a “folk tradition,” thus it did not “originate in a narrow scribal circle,” but rather “grew outside a scribal context.” Accordingly, he argues that the connections between Daniel 4 and the Mesopotamian literary tradition do “not bring us into the realm of Babylonian scribal training.” See Neujahr 2016. See also Popović 2014, 178: “Those who composed the Prayer of Nabonidus (4Q242) or Daniel 4 may have gotten their knowledge about the Babylonian king Nabonidus through a chain of transmission that originated in the public reading of Nabonidus’ inscription [...] there is no need to suppose direct access to Babylonian centres of higher learning.”

3 Chapter 7, then, written in Aramaic but containing an apocalyptic vision, is seen to act as something of a “bridge” linking the two sections of text. See Collins 1984.

I would like to thank Susan A. Stephens for her help with the Greek papyrus materials. Any errors in the following are entirely my own.

apocalyptic is particularly “scribal,” a rhetorical strategy which is the Second Temple period analogue to early forays into the biblical wisdom tradition, and which have been unpacked by scholars such as Stuart Weeks.⁴ But all texts in the ancient world were the product of scribes. I can find no real reason for the division of these Aramaic texts into scholarly and non-scholarly settings, save for assumptions concerning modern reading practices and the status of fiction writing versus the non-fiction literature that tends to be the focus of academic outputs. Despite the characterization of the court tale as a non-elite form of writing, the reality of a large literate reading class for whom such “novels” were designed has yet to be seen. Our knowledge of the social realia behind reading and writing practices in the Persian and Hellenistic periods is decidedly slim. How are we to assess these assumptions concerning the existence of elite and non-elite literature and correlated reading and writing communities?

One answer can be found from the field of codicology, the study of the visual language of a codex through its physical, material and aesthetic aspects. Codicologists have shown that this visual language varies widely depending upon the contexts for which a text was produced. With the Qumran finds, we have a tangible manifestation of the tradition of the Jewish court tale. Comparing these fragmentary and poorly attested manuscripts with the better-attested Greek novel tradition preserved at Oxyrhynchus, an ancient Greco-Roman rubbish dump from which many ancient manuscripts have been recovered, provides a set of controls for how these texts from Qumran should be understood and hence through which the function of the manuscripts can be reconsidered. Scholars of the Oxyrhynchus Papyri and other ancient manuscript collections have shown how a scribe may use a particular type of script or style depending on the genre and intended social context of the text that he is copying. For example, material meant for self-consumption is demonstrably different to that intended for a public audience. Certain *de luxe* manuscripts were written with considerable care and attention, used and read only on special occasions. Material meant for an elite reader, willing to spend richly on these scribal products, could expect to receive much care and attention in its production. Scribal habits encompassing choices of script and style are thus important indicators of the genre and intended social context of a text. Beyond its origin, the various corrections, glossing and annotations within a text are vital clues to the uses of the documentary tradition. Though scholars have extensively studied the Aramaic texts from Qumran, the *para*-textual elements of these manuscripts have rarely been taken into consideration.

I will begin by considering the cogency of treating the Aramaic court tales from Qumran as a coherent genre dating to the early Second Temple period. Noting the similarity between scholarly treatments of the Greek and Jewish “novels,” with both genres related to non-elite contexts, a study of the Greek data from the Oxyrhynchus Papyri and the Jewish texts from Qumran will show that this distinction between elite

⁴ See Weeks 1994.

and non-elite materials does not hold true in either case. Ultimately, the implications of this for our understanding of the Aramaic court tales and the Mesopotamian connections that they seem to evince will be drawn out, suggesting that scholars take seriously the Mesopotamian background of the court narratives; while the reconstruction of non-elite genres of writing in antiquity will be shown to be an essentially anachronistic endeavor.

1 The Jewish Novel, the Court Tale, and the Idea of Non-Elite Literary Genres

The *Story and Proverbs of Ahiqar* is usually related to a genre of texts known as the “court tale,” along with the story of Joseph (Genesis 39–41), Daniel 2–6,⁵ and the book of Esther constituting the primary examples from the Hebrew Bible. From the inter-testamental literature, *Tobit* and *Judith* provide further depictions of a Gentile monarch. A number of similar material has also been found among the Dead Sea Scrolls,⁶ while the Aramaic text in Demotic script, Papyrus Amherst 63, features a similar narrative.⁷ These are “edifying tales not situated in or explicitly attached to biblical contexts and themes [...] [set in] the royal court of a great Gentile monarch.”⁸ All this material is suggestive that a rich tradition of court tales, particularly expressed in the Aramaic language, existed in the Second Temple period.

5 I have not included Daniel 1 in this survey since I believe that the view, originally forwarded in Nickelsburg 1981, 20, 38, that Daniel 1 was written significantly later than the originally independent stories that make up chapters 2–6 as an introduction written by the collector of that material, still has much to be said for it. All the characters of the subsequent five tales are introduced in this chapter, with a description of how they came to be in Babylon and at the court of Nebuchadnezzar. This also accounts for why this chapter was written in Hebrew as opposed to the Aramaic of Daniel 2–6.

6 *Prayer of Nabonidus* (4Q242); *Four Kingdoms* (4Q552, 4Q553, 4Q552a); *Pseudo-Daniel* (4Q243, 4Q244, 4Q245); *Jews at the Persian Court* (4Q550); *Daniel-Suzanna* (4Q551). Precisely because this latter text makes use of the genre of the court tale, earlier scholars related it along with some of the other previously unknown court tales from Qumran to the biblical corpus. For example, Milik reported the discovery of fragments of the story of Susanna at Qumran (Milik 1981, 337–350); while also referring to the existence of a cluster of six fragments of “proto-Esther” (Milik 1992, 321–406). On the other hand, Eugene Ulrich’s careful analysis of the Daniel manuscripts found among the scrolls has finally put to bed the possibility of the existence of Danielic additions at Qumran (Ulrich 1987, 17–27). Similarly, Shemarayahu Talmon argues that the “Esther” fragments are related to the book of Esther only in so far as they too partake in the genre of the court tale (Talmon 1995, 249–267). Instead of trying to refer such compositions to biblical precedents, we must instead recognize the existence of an important substratum of Aramaic literature, the court tale, to which all these examples correspond.

7 On Papyrus Amherst 63 as a court tale, see Quick 2017, 175.

8 Dimant 2014b, 192.

The genre of the court tale is often subsumed under the larger substratum of the “Jewish novel,” and accordingly read in analogue to the better known Greco-Roman examples of that specific literary form. The primary proponent of this strategy is Lawrence M. Wills, who across several publications has built up a picture of the ancient Jewish novel, to which he compares the genre known by Classicists as the Greek novel.⁹ The Greek novel is represented by some five fully extant texts: Chariton’s *Chaereas and Callirhoe*; Xenophon’s *An Ephesian Tale*; Achilles Tatius’s *Leucippe and Clitephus*; Longus’s *Daphnis and Chloe*; and Heliodorus’s *An Ethiopian Story*.¹⁰ More recently, a number of papyrus finds from Greco-Roman Egypt have illuminated the development of this genre,¹¹ by providing a fragment of *Ninus and Semiramis* from the first century CE.¹² The range in date for the production of this material takes us from *Ninus* in the first century, to *Sesonchiosus*, a fragment from the fourth century CE.¹³ Wills characterizes these novels as telling the story

of the overpowering love of two surpassingly beautiful young people who are separated and overtaken by any number of threats and torments, dragged all around the Mediterranean, and finally reunited to find perfect marital bliss.¹⁴

Even from this brief summary, it should be obvious that the Greek novels do not provide particularly robust associations with the material I have labelled as “court tales,” and therefore it is worth considering the genre of the Jewish novel in detail.

According to Wills, the books of Daniel and Esther from the Hebrew Bible; and *Judith*, *Tobit*, *Joseph and Aseneth*,¹⁵ along with the Greek additions to Daniel and Esther from the inter-testamental literature, form the corpus of the Jewish novel.¹⁶ These

⁹ See Wills 1995, 2002, 2011. Earlier studies in this regard include Humphreys 1985; Campbell 1974.

¹⁰ See Rheadon 1989.

¹¹ See Stephens/Winckler (eds.) 1995. At least seven other ancient Greek novels beside the five fully extant texts have been recovered: *Ninus and Semiramis*, *Chione*, *Sesonchosis*, and Lollianos’s *Phoinikika*; two to four fragments of Antonius Diogenes; and fragments of another twelve texts that look very much like novels. See *ibid.*, 6.

¹² Rheadon 1989, 1–5; Stephens/Winckler (eds.) 1995, 23–24.

¹³ Stephens/Winckler (eds.) 1995, 6.

¹⁴ Wills 1995, 16. On the other hand, it is worth recalling the caveat of Susan A. Stephens and John J. Winkler, who argue that the so-called “ideal romance” of the Greek novel is no more than a subclass of a larger genre reflecting the tastes of subsequent late antique and Byzantine readers more so than any contemporary readers. See Stephens/Winckler (eds.) 1995, 4–5.

¹⁵ Indeed, the modern title “Joseph and Aseneth” was generated by analogy to the titles of the ancient Greek novels; see Standhartinger 2017, 69 n. 1. Of the so-called “Jewish novels,” it is *Joseph and Aseneth* that conforms to the genre of the Greek novel most closely. For a comparison of *Joseph and Aseneth* to the ancient Greek novel see Standhartinger 1995, 20–26.

¹⁶ An additional corpus of “historical” novels demonstrated by the *Tobiad Romance* and the *Royal Family from Adiabene* from Josephus’ *Antiquities*, as well as *Third Maccabees*, may also be incorporated into this corpus. See the selection in Wills 2002.

he considers an “early version of the larger Greek novel.”¹⁷ These popular prose narratives, Wills argues, were all likely written or edited after the Maccabean Revolt in 167–164 BCE.¹⁸ But is this temporal locus really appropriate for the biblical examples of the Jewish novel? Though surely edited in the furor of the persecution of Antiochus that led up to the Maccabean Revolt, the original independence of the stories of Daniel 2–6 is confirmed by the existence of diverse Danielic traditions from Qumran;¹⁹ many scholars would affirm the Persian period as the original date for the origins of these traditions.²⁰ Esther too is not normally dated so late, but to the Persian period instead²¹—unless, of course, one wishes to contextually relate it to the genre of the Greek novel, which only arose in the first century of the common era. Arguably what is governing Wills’ decision here is the possibility to relate these texts to a well-established genre from the classical world, and which, as we have seen, did not arise until after the turn of the century. Accordingly, Wills does not include the story of Joseph from Genesis 39–41, despite obvious parallels in content. For Wills, Genesis 39–41 can be divided between the J and E sources, according to the tenets of the Documentary Hypothesis.²² Dating the text to the earliest period of the monarchy in Israel,²³ he therefore feels uncomfortable in comparing it to the genre of the Jewish novel, which as we have seen is contextualized in his account to the second century BCE and thereafter. On the other hand, Donald Redford has noted significant parallels between the language of the Joseph story with Persian period biblical texts.²⁴ Accordingly, and

¹⁷ Wills 1995, 7.

¹⁸ Wills 1995, 10.

¹⁹ E. g. *Four Kingdoms* (4Q552; 4Q553; 4Q552a); *Pseudo-Daniel* (4Q243; 4Q244; 4Q245); and the *Aramaic Elect of God* text (4Q534; 4Q535; 4Q536). While 4Q246 does not actually mention the name “Daniel,” 4Q246 I, 1–3 suggest that someone is interpreting the dream of a king in the manner familiar from the canonical book of Daniel, and hence the appellation *Apocryphon of Daniel* is usually given to this text.

²⁰ So e. g., Koch 1980, 61–66; Collins 1993, 35–38. Carol Newsom would push the dating of these stories earlier still, on the basis that though no longer associated with that particular monarch, originally the stories in Daniel 2–4 likely had Nabonidus as their protagonist. Arguing that Nabonidus was only of particular interest to Jews during his reign (556–539 BCE) and in the generation following this, she therefore suggests a late Neo-Babylonian and early Persian period dating for these traditions. See Newsom 2013, 270–282.

²¹ Indeed, the Hebrew of Esther contains more Akkadian and Aramaic loanwords in proportion to its length than any other book in the Hebrew Bible (and no loanwords from Greek). See Mankowski 2000, 174; Dalley 2007, 165–184.

²² This is a reconstruction largely in accordance to that of von Rad 1966, 292–300, and his reconstruction of a “Solomonic enlightenment” and correlated period of great literary activity in the tenth century BCE—an account in contrast to the majority of modern scholarship on the beginnings of literary in ancient Israel and Judah, who prefer to situate the origins of a writing culture in the ancient Levant in the late ninth and eighth centuries BCE. For a review of scholarship in this regard, see Quick 2014.

²³ See Wills 1995, 158–162.

²⁴ Redford 1970. Indeed, the Joseph story can be omitted from the history of Israel’s patriarchs without seriously impairing the narrative, suggesting the material to be of a later origin than the rest of the patriarchal saga. See Redford 1992, 424.

in recognition of the generic parallels between the Joseph story with the other court tales under discussion, I similarly would like to suggest a Persian period date for this text. If such a dating for the court tales is affirmed, then the connections to the later Greek novel must be regarded as anachronistic. To be fair, Wills does not argue that the Jewish novels themselves are either the direct forerunners or inheritors of the Greek novel, instead arguing for a parallel development.²⁵ Thus the development of the Aramaic court tales is unrelated to the development of the later Greek novel in a generic sense; nevertheless, there are interesting analogies which exist between the two genres that suggest a reading in light of the other may indeed be fruitful. Both are works of fiction that emerge in a literary landscape previously dominated by historiographic and liturgical literature. This is especially interesting because the ways in which the two genres have themselves been approached in the scholarship is comparable. For Wills, the novel is a non-elite form of writing, and its development related to an increase in the literate classes which apparently occurred in the Hellenistic period. This is a statement similar to scholarly forays into the Greek novel, a textual tradition which has also at times been relegated to a non-elite sphere, associated with women²⁶ and lower-classes,²⁷ while the upper-classes of the Hellenistic world continued to patronize the scholarly traditions of classical authors.²⁸ In the case of Wills, he develops his argument explicitly from the codicological evidence of the Qumran manuscripts, noting the small-page format on which some of the court tales were recorded as evidence of a less scholastic social setting for these narratives.²⁹ Indeed, for Józef Milik this is evidence that these texts functioned as a kind of ancient paperback novel (“Ils méritent bien l’appellation d’ ‘éditions de poche’ de l’antiquité”³⁰). Yet the use of the small-page format at Qumran was not limited to the court tales, and in fact multiple genres of texts exist in short-form exerted copies, in particular legal and liturgical texts. In order to test these assumptions, the material evidence from both the Greek novel and the Qumranic court tales must be considered in detail.

²⁵ Thus, he argues for a history of the Jewish novel that is “roughly parallel, but lies partially prior to the Greek novel” (Wills 2002, 213).

²⁶ See already Rohde 1914, 64; followed by Perry 1967; Hägg 1983, 96; 1994; Holzberg 1995, 35.

²⁷ Thus, it is common to relate the rise of the novel to a rapid spreading of literacy to the middle and even lower classes which apparently began in the Hellenistic period, see e. g. Perry 1964, 84, 174. This is in spite of the caution many scholars have felt in reconstructing a period of widespread literacy for this period (or indeed, in any period prior to the development of the printing press). For a study on ancient literacies, see Harris 1989; Harris cautions against relating the rise of the novel to an apparent increase in literacy at *ibid.*, 227–228.

²⁸ This is programmatically the case in the writing of Niklas Holzberg, whose association of the ancient Greek novel with women readers stems in part from the similarity which he senses “between the surviving novels of antiquity and *modern popular literature*” (Holzberg 1995, 33; my italics).

²⁹ See Wills 1995, 27, n. 51.

³⁰ Milik 1992, 363–365.

2 The Greek Novel: Evidence from Oxyrhynchus

Two strategies are usually utilized by scholars looking to determine the social background of the Greek novel. On the one hand, it is often noted that antiquity never created a special terminological categorization for the genre “novel.” This is then developed to indicate that the novel was not considered to be “true literature” by contemporary literary theorists and critics—it stood apart from other, more scholarly genres.³¹ Yet this is not unique among the history of ancient poetics. As Berber Wesseling has noted, Aristotle provides another example by omitting lyric poetry from his *Poetica*.³² Neither did the prose hymns of Aristides, nor the satirical dialogue developed by Lucian, receive a special generic term. Instead, it is probably due to the origins of the novel in the Hellenistic period, long after the development of classical literary criticism of the fifth- and fourth-century canons and genres of epic, lyric, tragedy, history, and philosophical discourse, that saw it ignored by contemporary theorists. A second strategy sees some scholars relate the readership of the novel to the characters described in the texts themselves, the young, beautiful men and women whose love story precipitates the narrative.³³ It is this approach that has seen the novel associated with a particularly female audience, as noted above. But one might then suppose that all such ancient novel readers were blessed with otherworldly beauty, or were preternaturally chaste, too. On the other hand, based on the intertextual connections between the novels with precisely the scholarly canons of the classical age,³⁴ alongside the quality of the Atticising Greek in which many of the novels and novel fragments are couched,³⁵ other scholars have concluded that the primary readership of these tales was the intelligentsia, the social and intellectual elite who had always dominated literary culture.³⁶ How to move beyond these polar positions? Tomas Hägg was among the first to make the argument that the physical remains of the ancient novel could be crucial in this regard.³⁷ Hägg made two observations in particular, based on the fragmentary finds from Greco-Roman Egypt.³⁸ Though noting the fine script and costly material used in many of these productions, Hägg argued that the writing of many exemplars, running without spaces, made silent reading less easy and favored reading aloud instead—hence the novel could

³¹ See e. g. Hägg 1983, 3–4; cf. Ruiz-Montero 1996, 82.

³² Wesseling 1988, 69.

³³ Rohde 1914, 67; Perry 1967, 89–90, 98–99; Hägg 1983, 96.

³⁴ Fusillo 1990; Bowie 1994, 438, 451–453. What is at issue here is both the ability of the readers to pick up the novelists’ literary allusions, as well as the educational background of the novelists themselves.

³⁵ E. g. Bowie 1996, 92.

³⁶ The primary proponents of this view are Bowie 1985, 1994, 1996; Stephens 1994.

³⁷ At Hägg 1983, 93; and repeated in Hägg 1994, 56.

³⁸ It should be noted that these finds belong primarily to the Roman imperial period, and therefore tell us about the reading and reception of the first generation of novels, rather than the first generation of novel readers. See Hägg 1983, 94.

expect a wider dissemination among non-literate folk too.³⁹ Moreover, Hägg suggests that some of the ancient novels may have been illustrated, in aid of helping juvenile readers to comprehend the text.⁴⁰

There are problems with both of these interpretations. Almost all writing in antiquity was written without spaces; while commentators have often noted the preference for reading aloud among ancient readers, even when alone.⁴¹ The lack of word breaks and punctuation in ancient texts surely places greater demands on a reader's skills, suggesting a narrow scholarly readership—the social context for the dissemination of the material by such a reader to his less-educated contemporaries goes beyond what is reconstructable. The fragment utilized by Hägg to argue for the technique of illustration as a readerly aid has not been identified—it is not necessarily the case that it provides the text of an ancient novel after all. Moreover, Susan A. Stephens has countered with examples of illustrated scholarly texts, for example the illustrated fragment of Homer of the fourth century CE, a tradition which arguably also goes back to the Hellenistic period.⁴² Instead, Stephens' cogent analysis of the Oxyrhynchus Papyri suggests a different interpretation of the evidence. Around 75 % of the novel fragments whose provenance is known stem from Oxyrhynchus, while multiple other literary genres were found there. Stephens categorizes this latter material into three groups: (1) standard works of high culture, such as tragedy, history, and their commentaries; (2) writings that can be identified as Christian; and (3) works of the “not-quite-literate,” encompassing carelessly copied texts full of spelling or other errors and most probably copied in a pedagogical context. The latter is of course noticeably idiosyncratic in style and format, and not of interest here. On the other hand, there is a conspicuous difference between (1) works of high culture, and (2) the early Christian materials, which seem in large part to be unskilled productions, adopting a documentary style and featuring larger lettering suggestive of either public reading or a less skilled private reader. The works of high culture, in the main, utilize “elegant and carefully executed calligraphy to competent but not necessarily attractive writing.”⁴³ Crucial here is Stephens' comparative analysis of this material to the novel fragments, finding that, while differing from the semi-documentary (or indeed, semi-literate style) of the Christian texts and school-boy exercises, the novels are indistinguishable from rolls or codices of classical authors of high culture, concluding that these are “competent, professionally copied books,” and as such would have been costly technological productions that would have remained exclusively in an elite domain.⁴⁴

³⁹ Hägg 1983, 92. The truism that *scriptio continua* favors reading aloud is unpacked by Jan Heilman (in this volume).

⁴⁰ Hägg 1983, 94.

⁴¹ For a review of the evidence on this phenomenon, see Johnson 2000, 2010, 4–9.

⁴² Stephens 1994, 440; cf. Weitzman 1959, 32ff.

⁴³ Stephens 1994, 412–413.

⁴⁴ Stephens 1994, 406, 413–414. Cf. also Stephens/Winckler (eds.) 1995, 10.



Fig. 2: P. Oxy. XXXVI 2751. A fragment of Plato, *Republic* III. Late second century CE.

We may develop some of these observations further. Fig. 1 provides images containing books 2 and 3 of Achilles Tatius respectively. William A. Johnson identifies the fragments as stemming from the same scribal hand.⁴⁵ What is particularly interesting here are observations concerning column width, and intercolumn and column height. In his treatment of column dimensions, Johnson notes that these tend to fall within strict ranges. The Tatius fragments belong to a larger group of literary texts which all fall within a column range measuring between 6.4–7.1 cm wide, 8.4–9.0 from column to column, and 17–19 cm high.⁴⁶

Additional texts that share these dimensions include works which are otherwise associated with the scholastic tradition (see Fig. 2, a fragment of Plato's *Republic* dating to the same temporal period in the late second century CE as our Tatius novel fragments, and conforming to the same conventions in column dimension).

⁴⁵ Johnson 2004, 145.

⁴⁶ See the tabulation in Johnson 2004, 126.

What to make of this striking consistency? Johnson argues that the scribal tool of measure in such instances must have been the same, inherited and shared across a given group of scribes: we have here evidence of a scribal group or school.⁴⁷ And this group was producing both scholarly works of philosophy, and the novels that scholars have otherwise argued were popular in character—and they were producing these texts by the same standards, too. With Stephens, we must conclude that the social milieu of the owners of the ancient novels were the very same intellectual elite who made up the readership of standard works of high culture.

3 Aramaic Court Tales from Qumran and Beyond

Turning to the Aramaic material from Qumran, as we have already noted, scholars such as Wills and Milik have utilized the small-page format of some of this material to locate these texts within a non-elite context, as the ancient equivalents to the modern paperback novel. What of the other codicological features of these texts? Starting with the *Prayer of Nabonidus* (4Q242), certainly there are some interesting features to this manuscript.

The text is unruled (although clearly care had been taken to align the right margin, while the spacing is nevertheless fairly consistent). Should this be taken to indicate a less than professional preparation method for the text? Yet there are multiple unruled literary texts from Qumran, encompassing both Hebrew and Aramaic examples, and including biblical and pseudo-biblical texts, as well as this court tale.⁴⁸ On the other hand, the text has a wide, straight initial margin of some 2.5 cm. While this is relatively large, it is also a feature shared across multiple Judaeen desert finds.⁴⁹ Indeed, given the cost and time of preparing parchment, the conspicuous consumption inherent to this feature might suggest that the manuscript in fact stems from an elite context. Larger margins are commonly a sign of a *de luxe* format.⁵⁰ Written texts were costly, and hence a sign of the high status of their ancient owners.

Turning to *Jews at the Foreign Court* (4Q550), this manuscript largely conforms to the technical conventions shared between many of the scrolls, with a top margin of 0.9–1.1 cm versus a slightly larger bottom margin of 1.1–1.4 cm—consistent with

⁴⁷ Johnson 2004, 127.

⁴⁸ See 4QJer^c; 4QCant^b; 4QFlo (4Q174); 4QLevi^a ar (4Q213); 4QLevi^b ar (4Q213a); 4QJub^e (4Q220), 4QM^c (4Q493); 4QapocLam B (4Q501); 4QDibHam^a (4Q504); 4QTQahat ar (4Q542); 5QDeut; 5QLam^a; 5QLam^b. See Tov 2004, 59.

⁴⁹ 1QM; 1QSa; 4QGen^b; 4QPs^h; 4QPs^l; 4QAgos of Creation B (4Q181); 4QCommGen A (4Q252); 4Qpaps^a (4Q255); 4QInstr^b (4Q416); 4QVisions of Amram^c ar (4Q545); 4QExorcism ar (4Q560); 5QKgs; 6QCant; MurIsa; XHev/SeEschat Hymn (XHev/Se 6); XJosh. See Tov 2004, 113.

⁵⁰ Tov 2004, 99.

standard margin format, usually 1.0–2.0 cm for the top margin, and 1.5–2.0 cm for the bottom.⁵¹

What is surprising is the small writing block of the fragments, with seven lines per column, and a leather height of only 6.5 cm, placing it within the category of the scrolls with the smallest dimensions (between 5–13 lines).⁵² Nevertheless, once again these dimensions are shared across multiple texts in multiple genres.⁵³ Indeed, while Milik has tried to understand the short-length of certain scrolls in light of their literary character, since his analysis is based on less than half of the scrolls of small size, Emanuel Tov has countered by emphasizing the variety of the evidence for the small format.⁵⁴ Multiple genres are found with small writing block. Indeed, the small, neat stance of the letters of 4Q550 suggests time and care was put into the production of this text.

Let us take *Pseudo-Daniel* (4Q243) as a final example from the court tales of Qumran. What makes this text particularly interesting is the use of paleo-Hebrew characters to render the divine name (here אֱלֹהִים; all letters except the *kaph* are written in paleo-Hebrew⁵⁵). The representation of divine names (both the tetragrammaton and otherwise) in certain Qumran texts has been a feature noted ever since the original publication of the cave one material.⁵⁶ Some twenty-eight (possibly twenty-nine) manuscripts feature this phenomenon, and it is shared between both biblical and non-biblical texts.⁵⁷ 4Q243 is, however, the only example of this feature in an Aramaic text: all other examples come from texts written in Hebrew. The use of paleo-Hebrew for these letters implies that the characters—and the texts that contain them—require special treatment, and possibly even reflect a higher degree of sanctity. This is evident from examples of manuscripts with spaces presumably left for the divine name in paleo-Hebrew to be filled in later—not all scribes were entitled to write the divine

⁵¹ The measurements are tabulated in Tov 2004, 99–103.

⁵² Tov 2004, 84. That scribes in this period were utilizing leather for these small form texts is particularly interesting in light of Menahem Haran's arguments concerning the shift from papyrus to skins at the beginning of the Second Temple Period: in part, this shift was connected to the considerable size of some of the canonical compositions, with the production of Deuteronomy at the end of the pre-exilic period an important turning point in this regard; see Haran 1982a, 1982b, 1983, 1984. By the time we get to the late Second Temple period, leather had become the normative medium for Jewish writ, and hence even the tiny 4Q550 is written on skin (although by no means did papyrus scrolls cease to be used entirely, and Qumran preserves a number of papyrus texts, both non-canonical and canonical).

⁵³ See the lengthy table in Tov 2004, 84–86.

⁵⁴ Tov 2004, 90.

⁵⁵ Divine names in Qumran texts often do not utilize the letter *kaph* when writing in Palaeo-Hebrew script. Presumably, because the *kaph* was written less frequently, the scribe behind this particular example was not familiar with the Paleo-Hebrew letter for *kaph*, and hence used the square-script form in this instance. My thanks to Antony Perrot for this observation.

⁵⁶ On this phenomenon see Siegel 1972, 29–45.

⁵⁷ See Tov 2004, 242–243 for a tabulation of the evidence.



Fig. 3: Papyrus Amherst 63. Aramaic written in Demotic script. Fourth or third century BCE.

name in the paleo-Hebrew script.⁵⁸ That this phenomenon is found in one of our Aramaic court tales reflects both the care that went into the production of this particular text, as well as the status of the text itself, as a sacred object.

This brief review of some of the Qumran court tales has shown that in the main, the features of these manuscripts correspond with those of other documents from the Judean desert. When we do find unusual features, such as the large margin of 4Q242, or the paleo-Hebrew characters in 4Q243, these tend to underscore the *de luxe* or sacred nature of the material. Despite the attestations of Milik and Wills concerning the relation between the format of the Aramaic court tales and their literary character as essentially light reading for a popular audience, the evidence does not bear these assumptions out. This is in common with the codicological evidence that may be gleaned from the novel fragments from Oxyrhynchus: both the Greek novel and the Jewish court tale are just as scribal in their characters as are their contemporary “scholarly” counterparts. Underlying so many of the assumptions made about this material is that the court tales, along with the Greek novels, would have functioned in ancient society in precisely the same ways as do modern novels today. But our final example cautions against this easy analogy. Fig. 3 presents a fragment from Papyrus Amherst 63, a text which defies conventional expectations of both literary genre and format. The papyrus largely comprises liturgical material, providing the liturgy of an Aramaic-speaking community from Upper Egypt, and most likely dating to the early third century BCE.⁵⁹ What has particularly interested biblical scholars is the nature of the liturgy, which provides parallels to biblical material, in particular to Ps. 20:2–6.⁶⁰

⁵⁸ Tov 2004, 240.

⁵⁹ See Steiner 1995 for a review of the various scholarly positions concerning the dating of the text.

⁶⁰ Steiner/Nims 1983; Weinfeld 1985.

Less often noted is the narrative portion of the text, taking up roughly one quarter of the papyrus, and detailing a tale of courtly conflict: we have here another example of an Aramaic court tale.

What complicates our understanding of the function of the court tale in its ancient context is the compounding of one such example within a text that is otherwise largely liturgical in character. The same might also be said for the book of Daniel, in which court tales are countered by apocalyptic visions (precisely the sort of texts best felt to evidence a Mesopotamian horizon!), or of the canonical context of the biblical court tales within the Hebrew Bible in general. Clearly, this material was felt to have a function beyond mere enjoyment or light relief. This recalls scholarship on the Joseph narrative which has read the text in light of the wisdom tradition,⁶¹ suggesting that the text had an edifying function. Indeed, Papyrus Amherst 63 is a particularly pertinent example to draw to a close our codicological observations on the Aramaic court tale. Far from being short in stature, this particular papyrus runs some twelve feet long! Moreover, the use of Demotic script to render the Aramaic language is unusual, and the text is especially difficult to decipher. Clearly this particular court tale was no ancient paperback.

If we return to the questions that precipitated this analysis, the distinction between scholarly and non-scholarly Aramaic texts and the scribes that produced them can no longer be maintained. Though these observations have been built upon codicological considerations, this also recalls Devorah Dimant, who has argued that all the Aramaic texts from Qumran should be considered a distinct group within the Qumran library, with shared patterns of language, style and content.⁶² Interactions with the Aramaic traditions of scholarly apocalyptic and the apparently non-scholarly court tales have treated this material as if two bodies of scribal currency were in existence in ancient Judaism. But though they do not transmit scientific knowledge, the court tales are just as much a scholarly, scribal production as the visionary-apocalyptic texts. All this suggests that we reevaluate the origins of these traditions of Eastern kings, by a reconsideration of the Eastern backgrounds which may have informed them, and which takes seriously their connections to the larger literary traditions of the ancient Near East. Ultimately, and given that our evidence bore out the elite context of both the Greek novels and the Jewish court tales, scholars should feel cautious to attribute a popular or widespread audience for written media in the ancient world.

⁶¹ The classic proponent of this thesis was von Rad 1966; see also Talmon 1963 on the book of Esther.

⁶² Dimant 2014b, 186. On the “family resemblance” shared between the Aramaic texts from Qumran, see also Perrin 2015a, 2015b; Machiela/Perrin 2014. See also Dimant 2017b, who utilizes the term “cluster” to describe the literary relationship between the Aramaic corpus of texts from the Second Temple period.

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Fig. 1a–b, 2: Egyptian Exploration Society and the University of Oxford Imaging Papyri Project.

Fig. 3: The Morgan Library & Museum, New York.