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Panel: Egyptology and Ancient Israel, open session

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Title: When Storytelling Becomes Canonical: Changing Fortunes of the Novella in Hellenistic and Roman Judea and Egypt

Abstract:

Within a growing age of universalism under the Achaemenid and Hellenistic empires, scholars and priests in Judea and Egypt worked assiduously to preserve older traditions that survived from eras of national independence. Yet, at the same time, we also witness a new kind of literary creativity. A noteworthy example is the novella: short works of prose narrative fiction narrated in the third person. They share many common features, such as a preference for historical fiction, complex and entertaining plots, protagonists that are experiencers more than doers, and themes that play with cherished cultural topoi from the Iron Age and before. Five Judean examples have survived intact: Jonah, Ruth, Esther, Tobit, and Judith. In Egypt, dozens of novellas written in Demotic, starting in the early Ptolemaic period, have survived, although fewer are intact enough today to allow close study. The popularity of the novella in both Judea and Egypt points to a unique, shared social form: the ability of a scholarly and priestly class to devote energy to a literature of diversion and entertainment. Most of the ancient manuscripts of these novellas, however, survive from generations, in some cases 20 or more, removed from their original composition. By the first few centuries CE, the authorship and enjoyment of novellas was no longer adjunct to scholarship, but part of it: the novellas themselves had long before begun to be collected, edited, and transmitted as exempla of a traditional culture. A tension developed between what I consider to be the defining feature of the novella in its original context, that of pure storytelling, and the changing circumstances in which the novella found itself. In this paper, I will argue that we can best characterize this development as a process of both classicization and de-secularization, two distinct aspects of a process of canonization. For Judean novellas in particular, this will help bring into focus diverse issues such as the inclusion of Jonah among the Twelve, the placement of Ruth after Judges in ancient witnesses, and the unclear status of Esther as a biblical scroll. Related also are issues of editing and supplementation in the novellas, such as the pious re-orientation of Esther and, possibly, Tobit. The Egyptian evidence provides us with Roman period temple libraries in situ that can help us model the ways that a literate class transmitted and read popular literature amid linguistic changes and, at times, social upheaval. Thus, the novella occupies a unique place in the literary history of antiquity, attesting to an evolving niche that took its place amidst older national traditions, contemporary vernacular culture, and the cosmopolitan sphere of Hellenism.

