In Search of Virtue: Ancestral Inheritance in the Testament of Qahat

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During the past four years I have been working on my postdoctoral research project which analyses the formation of a sage, the wise person *par excellence*, in Jewish antiquity, including texts written in both Semitic languages and Greek. In so doing, I have sought to highlight the lived, embodied, and practised aspects of early Jewish wisdom tradition. Recently, I have started a new three-year research project on early Jewish conceptions of virtue (i.e. behaviour regarded as morally valuable and thus desirable). This paper marks a transition from my previous project to the current on. On the one hand, it continues my discussion on early Jewish ideas regarding exemplarity. Meanwhile, this paper offers a new methodological perspective to the study of the formative role of ancient Jewish texts by introducing the theoretical framework of comparative or descriptive ethics. It enables the integration of Semitic sources into the study of ancient Mediterranean ethics, in spite of the fact that "virtue" is not a native category for them.

More specifically, the present case study focuses on the so-called Testament of Qahat (4Q542), which is a fragmentarily preserved Aramaic text from Qumran. I shall proceed to ask: how is virtue—i.e. human activity regarded as morally valuable and thus desirable—discussed in this text? Analysing the intersection between the transmission of biblical tradition and the display of exemplarity in the Testament of Qahat, I shall argue that the text partakes in the variety of eastern Mediterranean discourses on how to practise a good, ethically sustainable life. However, 4Q542 challenges the modern idea of virtue as a characteristic of an autonomous individual and spells out the relevance of divine-human relations in the formation of a virtuous person. The text invites scholars to integrate Jewish sources into the study of virtue ethics in the Mediterranean antiquity and, in the context of second temple studies, it offers a priestly perspective to the continuing conversation on ethical traditions in Jewish antiquity.