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## **Conflicted Boundaries: Ben Sira, Sage and Seer\***

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The Wisdom of Ben Sira occupies a pivotal space in the history of ancient Judaism. As a scribe/sage who inherited the wisdom tradition of ancient Israel, Joshua ben Sira stands in the same stream as the sages who produced the book of Proverbs, but in significant ways he differs dramatically from them. By the second century BCE, the sages had to incorporate into their teaching a Torah that had become authoritative for them. In that sense the days of traditional wisdom in the ways that Proverbs constructed it were gone. Of course, Ben Sira is not the only sage for whom these changes mattered. The same infusion of Torah-piety characterizes other sapiential works, such as 4QInstruction from Qumran. The significance of an authoritative Torah also emerges in apocalyptic texts. As George Nickelsburg has shown, “a revealed interpretation of Torah” is central to works such as *I Enoch* and *Jubilees*.<sup>1</sup> These and other developments in Second Temple Judaism have problematized the dividing lines that have been drawn in modern scholarship between wisdom and apocalyptic literature. Although I do not want to argue that the differences between wisdom and apocalyptic can be collapsed altogether, the boundaries between them are much more “conflicted” than might be apparent at first glance.<sup>2</sup> As I have thought about these categories with respect to Sirach, I have found that it blurs the boundaries between them, even though at first blush Ben Sira might not seem so unconventional.

We confront these conflicted boundaries perhaps most directly in the strategies that the authors of texts like Sirach or *I Enoch* deploy to confer authority on them—that is, how do they legitimate their claims and what mechanisms do they use to convince their audiences of them. My paper has two main parts: (1) Ben Sira’s relationship to Wisdom and prophecy/inspiration and (2) interpretation and authority; with a short addendum on Ben Sira’s social milieu. These

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\* This paper is a thorough revision of the paper I gave in the Wisdom and Apocalypticism section at the SBL Annual Meetings in Boston in 2008 entitled, “The Role of the Sage: Ben Sira at the Boundary.” I am grateful to David Carr and Matthew Goff for their nuanced responses to my paper. I have made a number of revisions here based on their perceptive comments.

<sup>1</sup> Nickelsburg 1999, 110.

<sup>2</sup> Larry Wills and I use the term “conflicted” in Wright and Wills 2005.

issues become linked together in Sirach as Ben Sira constructs both the sage's place in the world and the authority on which his teaching is based. We find him traversing, or more properly erasing, the boundary between sage and seer—at one time portraying himself as a traditional wise teacher who conveys accumulated traditional wisdom and at another claiming access to divine Wisdom through prophetic inspiration or revelation.

Ben Sira has often been portrayed as a conservative reproducer of the tradition he has inherited,<sup>3</sup> but his bold and explicit appeals to the authority and inspiration of prophecy are anything but conservative. As I have tried to show in my previous work on this text, Ben Sira labors to construct the identities of the young students whom he is training, presumably to take their places as scribal retainers in the centers of power, and how he frames his teaching has a significant impact on his ability to accomplish this objective.<sup>4</sup> But in the process Ben Sira makes a strong case for seeing sages like him as recipients of heavenly revelation.

## **PART 1: Ben Sira's Relationship to Wisdom and Prophecy/Inspiration**

Ben Sira draws on three basic sources of wisdom: the tradition of the sages; observation of the created order; and the Israelite literary heritage.

**The Sages.** Ben Sira often exhorts his charges to seek out and to heed the sage, who bears and transmits the tradition of wisdom. Sir 8.8 is typical: "Do not forsake the discourse of the sages, but busy yourself with their maxims; because from them you will learn discipline to stand before princes" (Ms A). Of course, since time immemorial, teachers have had to convince their students of the value of their instruction. Ben Sira, who has mastered sapiential tradition, seeks to capture his students' attention by employing the common wisdom technique of addressing them as their parent, as in 6.32: "If you are willing, my child, you can become wise, and if you apply yourself, you will become clever" (Ms A). In ancient Israel, and probably still at the time of Ben Sira, the home was a primary locus of instruction. Ben Sira refers to this traditional way of passing down wisdom in 8:9: "Do not reject the tradition of the aged, which

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<sup>3</sup> See, for example, Schechter and Taylor 1899, 12–13, who damn Ben Sira with faint praise when they say that he was "not entirely devoid of original ideas" because he was "a conscious imitator both as to form and as to matter, his chief model being the Book of Proverbs."

<sup>4</sup> See the articles on Ben Sira in Wright 2008a. The idea of Ben Sira as a scribe/sage who works as a retainer for the powerful priests, see Horsley 2007, chap. 3.

they learned from their fathers” (Ms A). But Ben Sira is training future scribes for public careers. By adopting the role of his students’ father, he invokes a relationship in which the student is constructed as his son and is thus compelled to listen to his teaching and to accept his values. This appeal is especially persuasive when read in the light of 3.1–16, where he argues for a child’s unqualified respect of and support for parents. In a brilliant rhetorical move, he begins 3.17 with “My child,” thus, not so subtly reinforcing his own pedagogical authority. In this way Ben Sira the teacher gets to shape the allegiances and identities of his students, who are granted no room for disagreement, thereby maximizing the chances that they will adopt his values.<sup>5</sup>

**The Created Order.** In many places, Ben Sira appeals to nature and how it works. In the poem on the wonders of creation in 42.15–43.33, for example, he extols God’s greatness and majesty, which are evident in nature. In 43.28 Ben Sira scripts the expected human response: Humans can only praise God, “for he is greater than all his works” (Ms B). In good wisdom fashion, Ben Sira takes illustrations from nature to explain how and why the human realm works as it does. So, commenting on associations in chapter 13, he explains the differences between humble and proud and rich and poor this way: “All living beings associate with their own kind and people stick close to those like themselves. What does a wolf have in common with a lamb?... What peace is there between a hyena and a dog?... Wild asses in the desert are the prey of lions...” (13.16–19, Ms A). One only has to look at the world around to derive important lessons about the nature of God and of human existence.

**Israel’s Literary Heritage.** Scholars have long disputed the exact nature of Ben Sira’s canon, but I will not take up that topic here. Whatever Ben Sira thought of the works he inherited, no one questions that he possessed and used texts as sources. Exactly how he received these texts—orally or in writing, for example—is not always clear.<sup>6</sup> Ben Sira certainly knows texts and traditions that now reside in the Hebrew Bible, and he probably had access to others that never got into the canon.<sup>7</sup> The most unambiguous evidence for Ben Sira’s use of specific texts is in the Praise of the Ancestors (chaps. 44–50), where in his treatments of Noah or Moses

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<sup>5</sup> See my article “From Generation to Generation: The Sage as Father in Early Jewish Literature” in Wright 2008a, 25–47 for more detailed argument.

<sup>6</sup> This is a topic that I think requires a bit more precision, since I am not convinced that in every case Ben Sira is using written texts that had some kind of fixed form and stable transmission. To pursue this issue here, however, would take me beyond the topic of this paper.

<sup>7</sup> See Wright 2008b and Wright Forthcoming. See also the treatment of various passages in Argall 1995; on Ben Sira’s use of some Enochic lore, see p. 230.

or Aaron, for example, he employs words and phrases that come from what we now recognize as Bible.

Moreover, Ben Sira appeals on several occasions to the “Law of the Most High,” a designation that indicates some repository of law, rather than isolated, individual laws or unspecified teaching. Ben Sira does not make the exact nature of this “Law” explicit, but I think that he has in view some collection/compilation/tradition with which his students would be familiar. In the famous verse, 24.23—“All these things are the book of the covenant of the Most High God, the law that Moses commanded us as an inheritance for the congregations of Jacob”—the reference to a book connected to the phrase “law that Moses commanded us” further points to a specific collection of Mosaic material.<sup>8</sup> Whether we think that the categories Law, Prophets and the other books that Ben Sira’s grandson and translator lists in the prologue apply to Ben Sira as well is immaterial. Our Jerusalemite sage knows a collection of Mosaic Law in which, he argues, Wisdom resides.<sup>9</sup>

Additionally, we might ask whether Ben Sira’s references to the Torah or Law intend content other than strictly legal material. Even outside of the Praise of the Ancestors, Ben Sira knows stories that we now find in the Pentateuch, such as Korah’s rebellion (16.6) or the creation story (16.24–17.7) or the episode of the Israelites at Marah (38.5). Although I think that his deployment of these stories sometimes masks the exact form of his immediate source(s), his use of material from throughout the Pentateuch attests to his possession of texts of these works—by which I mean that the material comes to him in some packaged form that we could identify. Of course, the scrolls at Qumran—at a roughly contemporary time to Ben Sira—confirm, if nothing else, the general *availability* of these texts in written form.

So much for Ben Sira’s source *material*. The more critical issue for me is what he thinks about the *nature* of these sources. In a nutshell, Ben Sira understands all of his sources, including, and perhaps most especially, the “book of the covenant,” as the loci of Wisdom, with

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<sup>8</sup> Although some scholars think that the phrase “book of the covenant of the Most High God” is a gloss, there are good arguments for its originality. For different views, see, for example, Gilbert 1974 and Skehan 1979.

<sup>9</sup> On the Law in Ben Sira, see Rogers, 2004a, 71–4 and 2004b, 118–9. She notes that much of what Ben Sira says about the requirements of the law are consistent with the ethical tradition of a work like Proverbs. But, she says (2004a, 73), “One must not underestimate the importance of the Mosaic Law in Sirach.” I think, however, that the comparison to the ethical requirements of the wisdom tradition, especially to Proverbs, has only limited value. Ben Sira is certainly living in a period that knows a collection of Mosaic Law and regards it as authoritative, and thus he had to take account of it. Some scholars understand the entire Pentateuch as being in view and others restrict this “collection” to a work like Deuteronomy. Horsley 2007 does not see any reason to conclude that the Pentateuch is in view here. I disagree with this conclusion.

a capital “W.” In 1.9–10, he begins by establishing the connection between Wisdom and God and her accessibility to human beings: “It is he [i.e., God] who created her; he saw her and took her measure; he poured her out upon all his works, upon all living things according to his gift; he lavished her upon those who love him.” Ben Sira reprises the idea of God lavishing Wisdom on humans in a significant rhetorical conjunction of wisdom, law and fear of the Lord in 1.26–27: “If you desire Wisdom, keep the commandments, and the Lord will lavish her upon you. For the fear of the Lord is wisdom and discipline; fidelity and humility are his delight” (Gk). God provides Wisdom to human beings, but where and how do they find her? Beyond exhorting his students to pursue Wisdom passionately, Ben Sira answers these questions by arguing that she is contained or embodied *within* the sages’ teaching, nature, and the textual tradition, and that one acquires her through disciplined study.

The most personal encounter with Wisdom comes in the teaching of the sages. Ben Sira speaks frequently of discipline/education (Heb: מוסר; Gk: παιδεία), and in 6.18, introducing a poem on acquiring wisdom, he says, “My child, from your youth choose discipline/education, and when you have gray hair you will still gain wisdom” (Ms C). Verses 34–37 make an explicit connection, “Stand in the company of elders. Who is wise? Attach yourself to such a one...If you see an intelligent person, let your feet wear out his doorstep...It is he [i.e., the Lord] who will give insight to your mind, and your desire for wisdom will be granted” (Gk, Ms A). For Ben Sira, the search for Wisdom depends on a proper association with a teacher—“Attach yourself to such a one.”

In all his remarks *about* nature, Ben Sira understands the created order as reflecting the glory and majesty of God—and Wisdom as the first of God’s creations (1.4). The natural world displays an orderliness that testifies to the nature of God. In the poem in 42.15–43.33, Ben Sira invokes wisdom on two occasions. In 42.21, God has “set in order the splendors of his wisdom,” effectively implying that Wisdom lies behind the created order. The last verse in the poem conjoins creation and wisdom: “For the Lord has made all things, and to the godly he has given wisdom” (Gk). At the outset of the poem, Ben Sira speaks of his own insight into creation—and thus Wisdom—when he says, “I will declare what I have seen.” Yet, this insight transcends mere description, since he often focuses on the *purpose* of different elements of creation—the moon (43.6–8), the stars (43.9–10), and lightning (43.13)—which are not evident through simple

observation. His recounting of creation's splendor culminates in 43.26 where he emphasizes the communicative aspect of nature's elements, calling them God's "messengers."<sup>10</sup>

With respect to his textual sources, Ben Sira could not be clearer when he claims in 24.23: "All these things are book of the covenant of the Most High God."<sup>11</sup> The initial phrase of the verse, "all these things," can only refer to what he has said already in chapter 24 about Wisdom. His subsequent comparison of the law to overflowing rivers expands the thought—Wisdom is embodied in Torah, which overflows with that wisdom and with understanding.<sup>12</sup> Based on the revelatory vocabulary of 42.19 and 48.25, James Aitken argues that for Ben Sira the study of creation and history would unveil God's secrets, since God reveals past and future as well as "hidden things."<sup>13</sup> In this respect Ben Sira compares with 4QInstruction. For both authors, "creation and history are the sources of revelation and the understanding of God's plan."<sup>14</sup> As we saw, contemplation of creation is a key source for Ben Sira's teaching, but in the light of what Ben Sira says about Wisdom and Torah, I would subsume history under the larger umbrella of Israel's literary heritage, which would include narratives of Israel's past.

Thus, Ben Sira's three main sources all contain the Wisdom whose possession is the ultimate goal of the sage's journey. But things get very interesting when Ben Sira writes about the *mechanism* for gaining access to Wisdom. In short, he claims that he apprehends Wisdom through revelatory inspiration. In 24.25–33 Ben Sira explicitly invokes prophecy as the model for his teaching, and he plays out an extended metaphor for the Law that revolves around water.<sup>15</sup> So, the law *fills* with wisdom (v. 25), it *supplies* understanding (v. 26), and it *pours forth* instruction (v. 27). Moving to Wisdom, her thoughts were "filled up from the sea, and her counsel from the great abyss" (v. 29). At verse 30, the discourse shifts to the authorial "I":

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<sup>10</sup> On wisdom and creation in this poem, see Perdue 2007, 253–56 and Perdue 1994, 248–51; 278–84.

<sup>11</sup> Unfortunately, chapter 24 is not extant in Hebrew, and so my translations are made from the Greek.

<sup>12</sup> There are many discussions of the relationship of Torah and Wisdom in the scholarly literature on Ben Sira. For some of the more recent ones, see Rogers 2004a, b; Boccaccini 1991; Perdue 1994, 242–48; Wright 2009.

<sup>13</sup> Aitken 1999, 190.

<sup>14</sup> Aitken 1999, 190.

<sup>15</sup> See Perdue 2005, Nissinen 2009, and Beentjes 2006 who make several similar points to the ones I make here. It is always gratifying to see several scholars converge on a similar perspective on a text. On this passage, see also Wright 2009 and my article "Ben Sira on the Sage as Exemplar" in Wright 2008b, 165–82.

- 30 And as for me, I was like a canal from a river  
like a water channel, into a garden.
- 31 I said, "I will water my garden,  
and drench my flower beds."  
And lo, my canal became a river,  
and my river a sea.
- 32 I will again make instruction shine forth like dawn,  
and I will make it clear from far away.
- 33 I will again pour out teaching like prophecy (διδασκαλίαν ὥς προφητείαν ἐκχεῶ),  
and leave it to all future generations.
- 34 Observe that I have not labored for myself alone  
but for all who seek wisdom.

By continuing the water metaphor in verses 30–31, Ben Sira cements the continuity between *his* teaching and Wisdom. As his small canal *becomes* a river, then *becomes* a sea, the metaphor finally links “the sea” of heavenly Wisdom in verse 29 directly with the wisdom of the sage, who *has become* a channel for Wisdom. Although verse 32 briefly shifts the metaphor from water to light, Ben Sira reprises the fluvial language in verse 33, only this time prophecy gets drawn into the mix—“I will again *pour out* teaching like prophecy and leave it to all future generations.” Verse 34 concludes with the claim that the sage’s labors are “for all who seek wisdom.”

Two main points are relevant for my argument. First, the “I” of 24.30–34 claims to have tapped into primordial, heavenly Wisdom, which authorizes the sage’s teaching.<sup>16</sup> Second, although Ben Sira stops short of stating outright that his teaching is the product of revelatory activity, the comparison “like prophecy” comes about as close as one can. The conjunction ὥς presents an interpretive difficulty, however. Should we interpret it as meaning that Ben Sira will pour out teaching *as* prophecy or *like* prophecy? Given the overall metaphorical cast of this passage, the latter meaning makes the most sense. But then, what does the metaphor communicate about Ben Sira’s teaching? He does not present himself as an Isaiah, who “declared what was to occur to the end of time” (48.25, Ms B).<sup>17</sup> Nor do I think that he is referring to miracles like those he attributes to Elijah and Elisha (48.1–16). As I interpret Ben Sira, he understands his teaching to be the result of his reception of divine Wisdom in the way

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<sup>16</sup> The authorial “I” here might not be purely autobiographical. That is, Ben Sira is constructing an ideal sage, and he embodies that ideal. For further argument on this point, see Wright 2008b, 165–82.

<sup>17</sup> In contrast to this argument and others that I have made, Aitken 1999, 190 thinks that Ben Sira’s “prophetic wisdom furnished him with similar faculties.” I see no evidence in the book, however, that Ben Sira thought this way.

that the prophets received the word of the Lord—as divine speech. In fact, in 24.2–3, Wisdom speaks in the divine assembly, and she proceeds “from the mouth of the Most High.” Thus, at the same time, she is divine speech, and she conveys the divine word.<sup>18</sup>

Moreover, if we take into consideration the wisdom poem in 4.11–19 and the meditation on the sage in 38.34c–39.11, we see that Ben Sira conceives of his instruction as a product of revelatory inspiration. In 4:17–18, he notes the tortuous discipline that Wisdom exacts on those who follow her. The results of perseverance, however, are revelatory insight. As Wisdom herself puts it, “I will reveal (גליתי) to him my secrets (מסתרי)” (Ms A).<sup>19</sup> In these passages, together with those where he writes in the first-person, Ben Sira is fashioning the image of the ideal sage, and the language of revelation of secrets is significant for that picture, especially since the same vocabulary that in 4.18 characterizes Wisdom’s unveiling, in 42.19 refers to God’s revelation. There God “reveals (גלה) the traces of hidden things (נסתרות)” (Mas, Ms B).<sup>20</sup> As Aitken remarks, “As he [i.e., Ben Sira] presumably saw himself as a true disciple of Wisdom, he would expect Wisdom to reveal her ‘secrets’ to him (cf. 4:18).”<sup>21</sup>

In the meditation on the sage, Ben Sira writes in the third-person about the sage as a type, and what he says comports with the first person sections where he is usually thought to be referring to himself. Ben Sira emphasizes that the traditional sources that the sage inherits require his interpretive intervention. So, in 38.34d the sage “devotes himself to the study of the law of the Most High” (on “study” see below).<sup>22</sup> He also “seeks out the wisdom of the ancients,” “is concerned with prophecies,” “preserves the sayings of the famous,” “penetrates the subtleties of parables,” “seeks out the hidden meanings of proverbs” and “is at home with the obscurities of parables” (39.1–3). All of the verbs in these phrases denote the sage’s interaction with their objects. Furthermore, at least three of these sources—prophecies, parables and proverbs—have

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<sup>18</sup> I am grateful to Matthew Goff for this point. Goff goes on to suggest that perhaps the Hebrew in 24.33 used the verb נבע, pour out, which would make a nice word play with נבא. This is indeed an attractive suggestion. Elsewhere in the book, however, Ben Sira’s grandson, who translated the Hebrew, distinguishes between נבע and שפך by using either ἐξομβρέω (10.13) or ἀνομβρέω (50.27) for the former and ἐκχέω (20.18; 30.13; 32.4; 36.8; 39.28) for the latter. The Greek in 24.33, where no Hebrew is extant, has ἐκχέω suggesting, if anything, that שפך was in the Hebrew here.

<sup>19</sup> The Greek translation uses the third person here, but the Hebrew has Wisdom speak in the first person. On the importance of this passage, see Aitken 1999, 189.

<sup>20</sup> For more detail, see Aitken 1999, 189–90.

<sup>21</sup> Aitken 1999, 190.

<sup>22</sup> No Hebrew survives for 38.34–39.11 so all translations are made on the basis of the Greek.



an enigmatic character. The sage has to figure them out; he does not receive knowledge passively.<sup>23</sup>

Additionally, we discover in 39.5–6 that the sage must approach his task with prayer and petition. Then “if the Lord is willing, he will be filled with the spirit of understanding; he will pour forth words of wisdom of his own.” The two parallel clauses ground the sage’s activity in revelation. First, God gives the “spirit of understanding” with which the sage is filled. It is not available to everyone, but it only comes “if the Lord is willing” and as a result of prayer.<sup>24</sup> Second, already in 24.33 Ben Sira has employed a verb for pouring out to describe his prophet-like teaching.<sup>25</sup> The combination of words of wisdom being “poured out” with the sage being filled by a “spirit of understanding” reinforces the conclusion that the sage views his activity as undergirded by his own efforts guided by divinely prompted revelatory insight. The effect is that Ben Sira’s framing of his teaching as divinely inspired places him, if not in the line of prophets, at least as the recipient of heavenly revelation very close to that of the prophets.<sup>26</sup>

This portrait of the sage and his activity highlights even more dramatically Ben Sira’s calls for his students to listen to him—after all, the source and authority of his teaching is Wisdom herself, who has revealed things to him, and it has the status of prophecy! In certain respects, this construction is analogous to similar ones in apocalyptic literature, where the reception of esoteric revelation is perhaps *the* primary mechanism for legitimating the content and authority of these texts. So, for instance, in the book of *Jubilees*, a work in most respects quite different from Sirach, the halachic prescriptions that the author advocates exist primordially on the heavenly tablets, and the revelation to Moses links heavenly authority with

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<sup>23</sup> Grabbe 2003, 198 writes about this text, “Apparently the sage at a minimum would be interested in interpreting the corpus of prophetic literature.” In his conclusions (212), he notes that inspired interpretation of prophetic writings is emerging in the Second Temple period “coming about when some writings had become authoritative.”

<sup>24</sup> See Perdue 2005, 138ff and Wright 2008b, 165–82.

<sup>25</sup> In this case it is ἀνομβρέω rather than ἐκχέω. Although the words seem to be functionally synonyms in the book, the grandson does reserve them for separate Hebrew verbs. See above, n. 18.

<sup>26</sup> Perdue 2005, 137 draws the conclusion from 24.30–33 that “Ben Sira sought to restore prophecy to a legitimate place in religious history (although not his contemporary present), not only by claiming that its inspiration had passed to the sage, but also by asserting that some of their unfulfilled statements awaited divine enactment, known only to the inspired sages.” Beentjes 2006, 224–5 thinks that verse 33 refers to the sage as “a kind of inspired mediator,” whose interpretations of Torah are “like prophecy.” See also Nissinen 2009 on the sage as having an “intermediation” function.

earthly instruction. In a comparable manner, primordial Wisdom in Sirach connects heaven and earth, authorizes Ben Sira's teaching, and serves as the vehicle of revelation to the sage.<sup>27</sup>

But at the same time that Ben Sira can make the appeal to revelatory inspiration, he does not present himself as a seer like Enoch in *1 Enoch* or Levi in *Aramaic Levi*. That is, his inspiration/revelation is achieved through *study*—of texts, nature, history, the wisdom tradition—not through some kind of epiphany, either of God or of an angelic figure.<sup>28</sup> Ben Sira the sage actually has much more work to do. In 3.21–24, he rejects these epiphanic experiences, and he contrasts claims of special, revelatory insight into the secrets of the future and the created order with reflection “upon what has been commanded” (3.22) and what his students have already before them—“for more than you can understand has been shown to you” (3.23).<sup>29</sup> We see similar concerns in 4QInstruction, where pedagogy, study and contemplation are critical mechanisms for understanding the mystery that is to come.<sup>30</sup> In a similar vein, Aitken concludes, “If Ben Sira is taken as the first traces of apocalyptic thinking in Wisdom literature, it has arisen as the result of special learning that a follower of Wisdom acquires and from meditation on the acts of God in creation and history.”<sup>31</sup> I am not sure if I agree that Sirach can be characterized as “the first traces of apocalyptic thinking in Wisdom literature,” but I absolutely agree that revelation plays a critical role in Ben Sira's legitimation of his authority and his insight into the wisdom tradition, the created order, and Israel's literary heritage. In fact, his appeal to prophetic inspiration comprises one of the most significant aspects of how he envisions his own authority, an approach that is analogous to what we see in 4QInstruction and some apocalyptic texts.<sup>32</sup> In

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<sup>27</sup> For more detailed argumentation, see Wright 2009.

<sup>28</sup> This observation is consistent with recent work on the Dead Sea Scrolls that argues for the “sapientializing” of prophecy. So, for example, Martii Nissinen (2008, 516) has written, “The increasing superiority of the written to the spoken word led to an intellectualization, or sapientialization, of prophecy, both as a concept and a practice. This gave prophecy a new divinatory context, virtually merging it together with the ideas and practices of scribal, intellectual divination.” See also Brooke 2006. VanderKam 1986 argues that mantic wisdom and prophecy are not that far separated and arguments over locating the origins of apocalyptic in prophecy or wisdom are misguided.

<sup>29</sup> For more detailed discussion of this and related passages, see my article “Putting the Puzzle Together: Some Suggestions Concerning the Social Location of the Wisdom of Ben Sira” in Wright and Wills 2005, 89–112 (here 96–102).

<sup>30</sup> On 4QInstruction, see Goff 2007, especially 27–28. He concludes, “Because the mystery that is to be disclosed knowledge about history and the created order, in principle the *mebin* can learn about any topic by studying this mystery.”

<sup>31</sup> Aitken 1999, 193.

<sup>32</sup> For how 4QInstruction understands the idea of “revealed wisdom,” see Goff, “Wisdom, Apocalypticism, and the Pedagogical Ethos of 4QInstruction,” in Wright and Wills 2005 57–67; Goff 2003, chap. 2; Goff 2007, chap. 1.

his attempts to frame his teaching in the language of revelation, Ben Sira exemplifies the erasure of sharp distinctions, of those conflicted boundaries, between wisdom and apocalyptic.

## **PART 2: Interpretation and Authority**

When we turn to Ben Sira's interpretation of his textual sources, we encounter a complicated situation that is associated with problems of orality and textuality. Without doubt, many passages in Sirach testify to the primarily oral context of Ben Sira's teaching. Yet on several occasions Ben Sira appeals to writing and to written texts. Indeed, his own book survives in writing, and since his grandson translates it within a few decades of its composition, it must have been committed to writing very early on, perhaps even by Ben Sira himself. However we might characterize the situation, Sirach offers scholars an excellent opportunity to examine the oral-textual relationship in one ancient Jewish text. Here, I want to look at two specific issues: the relationship of textuality and orality in Ben Sira and how Ben Sira treats his textual sources. On these issues, I offer a few thoughts that have been shaped by the work of David Carr and Richard Horsley.<sup>33</sup>

Carr has argued for a complex interplay between orality and textuality in ancient scribal education and practice. He summarizes the situation this way:

The fundamental idea is the following: as we look at how key texts like the Bible and other classic literature functioned in ancient cultures, what was primary was not how such texts were inscribed on clay, parchment, or papyri. Rather what was truly crucial was how those written media were part of a cultural project of incising key cultural-religious traditions—word for word—*on people's minds* [italics original]...Scribal recollection of early traditions was assured partly through teaching students to read and reproduce written copies of the key traditions. Nevertheless the aim of the educational process was ultimately the scribe's memorization of the cultural tradition and cultivation of his (or occasionally her) ability to perform it.<sup>34</sup>

Carr rejects simplistic notions of orality versus textuality, since societies "with writing often have an intricate interplay of orality and textuality, where written texts are intensely oral, while

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<sup>33</sup> Carr 2005; Horsley 2007.

<sup>34</sup> Carr 2005, 8–9.

even exclusively oral texts are deeply affected by written culture.”<sup>35</sup> Horsley takes a similar, although not identical, tack. Recognizing that the oral-textual relationship is not straightforward and simple, he nonetheless argues about ancient Judaism, “[V]irtually any example of or reference to writing in ancient Judean texts is intricately related to and embedded in oral communication.”<sup>36</sup>

Ben Sira’s pedagogical language revolves around verbs that indicate an oral context. His admonitions to his students require that they *listen*, *hear* or *pay attention* to him (cf. 3.1 or 16.24–25). When he describes the transmission of wisdom teaching from one generation to another, he paints a picture of the student who attends to a teacher’s speech.<sup>37</sup> Sirach 4.24 contains the most succinct description of the sage-student relationship: “For wisdom becomes known through speech, and understanding through the reply of the tongue” (Ms A).<sup>38</sup> For Ben Sira, the teacher serves as the locus and mediator of wisdom, and he has acquired Wisdom through inspiration and study. He then passes to his students both the content of Wisdom *and* the knowledge of how to possess her, that is, *how* to become a sage.

A more difficult matter is the place of textuality or writing in Ben Sira. Horsley is suspicious of any claims to the primacy of written texts for Ben Sira. Carr argues, however, that Ben Sira represents a transitional moment that is shifting to a textuality closely identified with the priesthood and centered in a Torah “that is first and foremost the responsibility of priests.”<sup>39</sup> Wise scribes like Ben Sira stand in a middle place between the priesthood, the primary locus of textuality, and those who lack this knowledge. The fact that Ben Sira’s teaching so early becomes a written book, attributed explicitly to him, testifies to the growing significance of writing in this period. But what is that significance?

I think that we get some clues to the answer in Ben Sira’s references to textuality. To begin, we must return to 24.23, where Ben Sira claims that Wisdom is embodied in “the book of the covenant of the Most High God.” By connecting Wisdom and Torah, he makes an argument

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<sup>35</sup> Carr 2005, 7.

<sup>36</sup> Horsley 2007, 93.

<sup>37</sup> For one study of speech in Sirach, see Okoye 1995.

<sup>38</sup> Horsley correctly emphasizes the fundamentally oral nature of Ben Sira’s teaching (and I would say the student-teacher relationship). Carr also concludes that for Ben Sira “orality is a key medium, if not the key medium for teaching.” See, Horsley 2007, 134–144; Carr 2005, 208.

<sup>39</sup> Carr 2005, 210–11.

that Wisdom resides in a specific and identifiable place. In contrast, Ben Sira denigrates other mechanisms that purport to transmit wisdom and knowledge. In 3.21–24 he rejects esoteric speculation, and in 34.1–8 he denies the legitimacy of receiving revelation through dreams and visions. The object of 3.22a and 23b, “On what is authorized, give attention...for that which is too great has been shown to you,” must be the Law, particularly in light of the phrase “what is authorized” (במה שהורשית Ms A; באשר הורשית Ms C; ἡ προσετάρχη σοι, Gk).<sup>40</sup> So, Ben Sira locates real Wisdom in a book and false wisdom, so to speak, in esoteric speculation, dreams and visions. In a sense he “objectifies” Wisdom in Torah, and one thereby gains access to her by study of and meditation on the content of this “bookified” wisdom.<sup>41</sup> Sirach 24.23, then, has a dual and reciprocal function—it identifies where Wisdom can be found and it authorizes the law contained in this “book.” Furthermore, writtenness signals that the contents of the text possess a numinous and monumental character.<sup>42</sup> To play out the image a bit, “the book of the covenant” *reveals* the Wisdom of God who was “created before all things” and who serves as a minister before God in the Temple.<sup>43</sup>

The word “book” only occurs in one other place in Sirach, 50.27:<sup>44</sup> “Instruction in understanding and knowledge I have written in this book, Jesus son of Eleazar son of Sirach of Jerusalem, whose mind poured forth wisdom.”<sup>45</sup> This verse calls to mind the claims of 24.33 to continuity between Ben Sira’s teaching and Wisdom, teaching that he “pours out like prophecy” and that he leaves for future generations. Ben Sira most likely was familiar with the prophets as

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<sup>40</sup> Ms A and Ms C differ somewhat from the Greek. The Greek translation for 3.21–24 indicates, however, that one cannot simply follow one Hebrew manuscript or the other. I prefer Ms A for the verbs, since elsewhere in Sirach ἐκετάζω (Gk. colon b) only translates Hebrew חָקַר (11:7; 13:11), but the adjectives of Ms C seem better, since Greek χαλεπώτερον reflects a *Vorlage* more like Ms C’s רַעִים. On this section, see “Fear the Lord and Honor the Priest: Ben Sira as Defender of the Jerusalem Priesthood” in Wright 2008a, 97–126 (here 114–18) and Wright and Wills 2005, 96–100.

<sup>41</sup> For other ways that this relationship has been characterized, see Rogers 2004a, 74–8.

<sup>42</sup> See Horsley 2007, 94–5, 97–9.

<sup>43</sup> In chapter 24 Ben Sira proceeds from Wisdom at creation to Wisdom in the Temple, the sole purview of priests, to Wisdom revealed in the Torah. I wonder the extent to which this structure authorizes the activity of the scribe/sage, while at the same time moving Wisdom out of the tightly controlled ritual world of the priest. Is Ben Sira hinting at some competitive attitude on the part of a developing scribal elite?

<sup>44</sup> In 24.23 no Hebrew survives and in 50.27 the Hebrew text of Ms B is problematic. The Greek and Syriac, however, use the equivalent word “book” in both verses, which strongly supports the presence of the word in the original Hebrew of both.

<sup>45</sup> The Greek translation reads σοφία here, but the Hebrew seems to have a doublet corresponding to the Greek with one part having בִּפְתוּר, “interpreting” and the other בְּתוֹנוּת. If either of the two clauses represents the *Vorlage* of the Greek, it is probably the latter.

having left their words preserved in writing for those who came later.<sup>46</sup> Because his words are written down, like the prophets' words and like the Wisdom embodied in Torah, Ben Sira implies a similar relationship both between himself and the prophets and between his book and the Wisdom-infused Torah. In this way he implicitly establishes his own inspiration and reception of revelation.

The same attitude to textual authority occurs in several apocalyptic texts. The author of *Jubilees*, for example, claims the status of revelation for his book, which Moses has copied at the dictation of the Angel of the Presence, who reads from the heavenly tablets. That special knowledge is now available in *Jubilees* itself, and Moses' writing activity authorizes the book's halachic prescriptions. Moreover, the act of writing plays a central role as an authorizing strategy throughout the *Jubilees* narrative.<sup>47</sup> Similarly, the writing down of revelatory knowledge lends strong authorizing support to the astronomical knowledge given to Enoch. In *1 Enoch* 82.1–3, Enoch tells Methuselah that he has written books containing what had been revealed to him and that he is giving them to Methuselah to transmit to subsequent generations. In this way, the Enochic author legitimates the calendrical knowledge contained in his own book.

Writing, then for Ben Sira, symbolizes the special status of his teaching, since he gives it an objective form, and the implication is that Wisdom infuses his book in a similar way that she does the “book of the covenant.” As Claudia Camp has observed, “[T]he impetus toward investing authority in writing may be present in the fact of writing itself, at least in certain circumstances.”<sup>48</sup> Not only is this true for the “book of the covenant,” I think it applies also to what Ben Sira says about his own work and its writtenness. Still for Ben Sira, one receives the *revelation* available in these sources through study and meditation, not through epiphanic experience. Thus, although Ben Sira communicates his teaching in an oral context, a complex connection between the oral and the written performance forms the foundation for authorizing that instruction.

Camp also argues that one implication of the relationship between writing and authority is that the written text requires someone to interpret it. She writes, “But if sources can be

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<sup>46</sup> See especially Ben Sira's reference to “the Twelve” in 49.10, which almost certainly indicates a written collection. On the development of the prophecy from oral to written in the context of the Qumran texts, see Nissinen 2008, 516–17.

<sup>47</sup> On this, see Najman 1999 and 2009 and Wright 2009.

<sup>48</sup> Camp 2003.

checked, and are important enough to be, they will also have to be interpreted.”<sup>49</sup> Of course, this would later be true for those reading Ben Sira’s book, but our sage faced the same necessity as he employed written texts that had come down to him. One avenue of investigation of Ben Sira’s authorizing strategies must involve how he interprets these authoritative texts.<sup>50</sup> The following examples illustrate the issue well.

*Sir 17.1–12: On the Origins of Humanity*<sup>51</sup>

1. The Lord created a human being out of earth,  
and he returned him into it again.
2. He gave them days in number and a fixed time,  
and he gave them authority over the things upon it.
3. He clothed them in a strength like himself,<sup>52</sup>  
and in his image he made them.
4. He placed the fear of him upon all flesh,  
even to have dominion over beasts and birds.
6. Deliberation and a tongue and eyes,  
ears and a heart for thinking he gave them.
7. With knowledge of understanding he filled them,  
and good things and bad he showed to them.
8. He put the fear of him upon their hearts,  
to show them the majesty of his works.
10. And they shall praise a name of holiness
9. in order to recount the majesties of his works.
11. He set before them knowledge,  
and a law of life he allotted to them
12. A perpetual covenant he established with them,  
and his judgments he showed to them.<sup>53</sup>

In this passage it is virtually impossible to escape the conclusion that Ben Sira knew some form of the accounts in Genesis 1–2, although he freely intermixes the two stories, and that he shares some interpretive approaches to it with other early Jewish texts. No Hebrew survives, and even though the text has little verbal connection with the biblical text, the passage displays

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<sup>49</sup> Camp 2003.

<sup>50</sup> For discussion of what Ben Sira’s texts looked like, see Horsley 2007 and Wright 2008b and Forthcoming.

<sup>51</sup> This section and the next one on Noah have been adapted from Wright, Forthcoming.

<sup>52</sup> Another possible way to read this last phrase is “a strength that is fitting for them.”

<sup>53</sup> No Hebrew is extant for this section. Verses 5, 8c, 11c all belong to the expanded Greek II version of Sirach and are not part of the original text.

several significant features of the Genesis story: (1) creation “in the image” (v. 3);<sup>54</sup> (2) creation “out of earth” (v. 1); (3) return to the earth (v. 1); and (4) dominion “over the beasts and birds” (vv. 2 and 4). This list demonstrates that Ben Sira was interpreting some form of Genesis and that he knew both creation stories, since themes (1) and (4) belong to Genesis 1 and (2) and (3) come from Genesis 2.

What Ben Sira does with those accounts is fascinating, however. He ignores one prominent feature of the Adam and Eve story, and he provides an explanation for one enigmatic text. Verses 1–2 establish the human condition. Humans originate from and return to earth, and they only live a fixed time. Ben Sira represents this second condition, a limited life span, as what God had always *intended* for human life. Of course, according to Genesis, death was an aberration, a consequence for disobeying God’s order not to eat of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. For Ben Sira, by contrast, God ordained death from the beginning, whether humans obeyed or not.<sup>55</sup>

Two passages elsewhere in the book combine to support this reading. In 14.16, Ben Sira comments that people should enjoy themselves, because no luxuries exist in Hades. In verse 17, he follows with, “All flesh grows old like a garment, and the eternal (עולם MsA/αἰῶνος) decree is, ‘You shall surely die (גוע גוע Ms A/θανάτω ἀποθανῇ).’ ” Possibly in the background is Gen 2.17, but the Hebrew verb in Ben Sira differs from the one in Genesis, although both are in the infinitive absolute. The word עולם governs the entire statement, however. Is Ben Sira harking back to the command *of old* in the garden, which was disobeyed by the first pair, or is he stating that the divine decree has been *eternally* that humans should die? Sir 11.14 and 33.14–15 push us toward the latter interpretation. Both passages have life and death in a pair, and in 33.14–15 Ben Sira comments on the *structure* of the created order. He observes, “Good is the opposite of evil, and life the opposite of death...Look at the works of the Most High; they come in pairs, one the opposite of the other” (Ms E, Gk). Ben Sira argues that everything in the cosmos has its

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<sup>54</sup> The phrase “in his image” of verse 3 reflects the LXX of Gen 1.26 “in our image” with only a difference in the pronoun.

<sup>55</sup> Collins 2004, 296 makes this point, citing James Kugel, *The Traditions of the Bible* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1998) 127. Schökel 1978, 236–38 takes a different tack, arguing that Ben Sira’s idea here does not run against the Genesis narrative. Without rehearsing the details here, suffice it to say that I am not convinced of his position.



complementary opposite and that God created the world this way. The implication is that just as life has been from the beginning, so has death.<sup>56</sup>

Ben Sira also ruminates on how human beings could be created in the image of God. But what is that image? Verses 4, 6–7 contain his answer.<sup>57</sup> First, God endows humans with authority or dominion over the animals, perhaps in an analogous way that God has dominion over humans. This notion brackets the reference to God’s image in verses 2–4: Human authority and strength; then the *image*; then fear of humans and dominion. Second, God gave humans the ability to deliberate and think (v. 6), and God also filled them with “knowledge of understanding,” showing them “good things and bad.”<sup>58</sup> The knowledge of good and evil is a gift from God, perhaps an aspect of the image, not a consequence of human disobedience. James Kugel notes that other Jewish texts, such as 4Q303, 4Q504, the Wisdom of Solomon, and 2 Enoch, construe this same combination as the image of God.<sup>59</sup>

We see exemplified in chapter 17 two aspects of Ben Sira’s approach to his textual sources. Although there is every reason to think that he knew the Genesis creation story, remarkably, he does not appear constrained by any potential authority it might have for interpreting it. He seems to have no difficulty in setting aside a central feature of it in favor of an alternative view. His willingness to do so complicates how we ought to view the nature of the authority of any text that he might have drawn on. It also highlights the consequences of the strategies Ben Sira uses to confer authority on his views. After all, if for whatever reason he did not find palatable the notion that death was a consequence for disobedience and that humanity’s appropriation of the knowledge of good and evil was the result of that transgression, he offers his alternative on his own authority as an inspired sage.

#### *Sirach 44.17–18: Noah*

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<sup>56</sup> Collins 2004, 296 brings Sir 41.4 as evidence of “the view that humanity was always meant to be mortal,” but I am not convinced that this is the point of the passage. Another passage, Sir 25.24, could be construed as blaming Eve for death: “From a woman is the beginning of iniquity, and because of her we all die.” Several considerations might mitigate this interpretation, but the verse is certainly reminiscent of what became the standard view. For the details, see Collins 2004, 297–98 and Levison 1985.

<sup>57</sup> Kugel 2001, on the image of God, see 162–65.

<sup>58</sup> Here probably intending good and evil. The reference to good and evil also indicates that the idea that humans achieved such gifts through disobedience might not be palatable to Ben Sira.

<sup>59</sup> Kugel 2001, 162 and 165.

17. Noah was found perfect and righteous;  
in a time of destruction he was the continuator  
therefore, a remnant was left on the earth,  
and by a covenant the flood ceased.
18. An eternal sign was established with him,  
in order never again to destroy all flesh.<sup>60</sup>

The textual evidence of these verses confirms that Ben Sira also knew the story of Noah from Genesis. The two adjectives, “perfect and righteous” in v. 17a are identical to those in Gen 6.9. Ben Sira’s interpretive summary of the flood story appears in verse 17b. Ben Sira plays with the vocabulary of the Noah story in 17c and achieves a clever interpretation. Genesis 7.23 says that “Only Noah was left (שאר), and those with him on the ark.” Ben Sira deftly recalls that sentence with the phrase היתה שארית, “there was a remnant.” The noun שארית rather than the verb parallels the Hebrew noun רחלל, “continuator” in 17b. Since Noah was the continuator, the one who enabled humanity to survive the flood, he and his family formed a remnant.<sup>61</sup>

Verses 17d and 18 summarize the result of the flood story. In 17d, Ben Sira refers to God making the flood cease via “a covenant.” There are actually two covenants in Genesis, however: in 6.18 God assures Noah that he, his family and the animals will survive the flood, and in 9.8–17 God promises, with the rainbow as a sign, never again to destroy the earth via a deluge. Ben Sira probably intends the latter covenant, and the rainbow of v. 18 is the “eternal sign” that God “establishes” with Noah. Interestingly, Genesis calls the *covenant*, not the sign of the rainbow, “eternal.” If the covenant in 44.17d refers to the rainbow, Ben Sira has just the reverse of Genesis. He also uses the verb נכרת, the technical term for making a covenant, in conjunction with the rainbow, thereby reinforcing the *rainbow’s* covenantal nature. Thus, Ben Sira makes the flood cease through a covenant, which God assures by establishing an eternal sign with Noah—a slight rearrangement of the Genesis narrative. Finally, verse 18b practically reproduces the end of Gen 9.15: “and the waters shall never again become a flood to destroy all flesh (לשחת כל) (בשר).” Ben Sira writes, “in order never again to destroy all flesh (לבלתי השחית כל בשר).”

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<sup>60</sup> The text is from Mas and Ms B.

<sup>61</sup> It is hard to know for sure, but since Noah was faithful in the midst of a lawless generation, prophetic notions that a remnant that continues to be faithful to God will be preserved in the midst of Israel might also have influenced Ben Sira. For more on Noah in Ben Sira, see Weigold, 2008.

So, in a scant two verses, Ben Sira summarizes the major elements of the biblical story. Yet he alerts his reader to the exact elements that interest him most by employing important vocabulary drawn from Genesis. Even the one place that offers us Ben Sira's major interpretive understanding of the story, 17b in which Noah is credited with continuing the human race, gets qualified immediately in 17c with phraseology drawn from the biblical account. Noah as remnant constitutes Noah as continuator. Ben Sira both summarizes *and* interprets the biblical story while maintaining literary contact with it.

I have selected for this paper two examples where one could argue confidently that Ben Sira employed material that he knew in a form very close to biblical texts. In other places, such as the short historical review in 16.6–10, such a conclusion would not be warranted, and I am not sure what the nature of Ben Sira's sources was for these verses. The point is that when it comes to the interpretation of these sources within his teaching, Ben Sira, like many others of his contemporaries, does not operate with the assumption that authoritative texts are inviolable in the way that many moderns view their scriptural collections. I also think that an important factor in Ben Sira's approach to these texts is that, since two critical bases of the authority of his own instruction are prophetic inspiration and its writtenness, he presents his own teaching as being able to stand alongside of the texts he has inherited and as possessing an authority comparable to theirs. The sage employs his sources as raw material in order to make his own inspired contributions to the growing body of sapiential tradition, but he does so in the mode of prophecy, as one receptive to divine speech.<sup>62</sup> In this way, Ben Sira also complicates clear distinctions between texts and their interpretations.

### **Addendum: Ben Sira's Social Milieu:**

Traditional wisdom instruction was taught, on the one hand, in the home but also, on the other, in professional contexts of pedagogy. In Ben Sira's case, there seems little doubt that he addressed his instruction to students whom he expected to assume their places as professional scribes like himself. Several pieces of evidence point in this direction. In 51.23, Ben Sira refers

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<sup>62</sup> See Carr 2005, 3–14 who argues that scribes were expected to take their source materials, which they had “written on their hearts” and perform them and shape them. In Ben Sira, this scribal activity is set in the language of prophecy and revelation, which elevates claims for its authoritative status.

explicitly to his בֵּית מִדְרָשׁ: “Draw near to me you uneducated, and lodge in my house of instruction” (Ms B). Later in verse 28, he exhorts his students to “Hear but a little of my instruction, and through me you will acquire silver and gold” (Ms B). While I cannot enter into a discussion of what an ancient “school” would look like, I only note here that, as I have discussed elsewhere, in Sirach we have more than family instruction. Even if the verb “lodge” (Hebrew לָוַן; Greek αὐλιζομαι) in 50.23 implies that Ben Sira’s “house of instruction” was located in a domestic setting, we are dealing with an environment of formal pedagogy in which the objective was the education of a class of professional scribes.<sup>63</sup>

In other passages as well, the social situations that Ben Sira presumes point to the same milieu. One goal of his instruction is that students “will stand before princes” (8.8). Several warnings concern the potential trouble that his charges might run into while performing their professions. So, he says in 7.6, “Do not seek to become a ruler, since you might not have the strength to limit your pride; lest you are fearful before nobles and give over your integrity to unjust gain” (Ms A).<sup>64</sup> Ben Sira warns his disciples about their relationships with the rich and powerful, who have control over their lives and careers.<sup>65</sup> These professional scribe/sages worked as retainers, serving the aristocratic elite, the majority of whom were likely priests. As such they were dependent on this elite for their wellbeing and success. Yet, they also had some independent authority as the primary guardians and interpreters of the Law. These scribe/sages were trained in and cultivated what Horsley has called the “Judean cultural repertoire,” which encompassed in general the accumulated tradition of Israelite wisdom and the Israelite literary heritage. Horsley writes, “[I]n second-temple times, certainly by the Hellenistic period, scribes were not simply and perhaps not primarily ‘wisdom teachers,’ but were intellectual ‘retainers’ who served, sometimes at the highest level, in the administration of the temple-state.”<sup>66</sup>

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<sup>63</sup> See my article, “Wisdom, Instruction, and Social Location in Ben Sira and *I Enoch*,” in Wright 2008a, 147–63. For the designation scribe/sage and its social environment, see Horsley 2007, chap. 3 and Horsley and Tiller 2002.

<sup>64</sup> The Greek has a bit of a different slant, “Do not seek to become a judge, or you may be unable to root out injustice; you may be partial to the powerful and so mar your integrity.”

<sup>65</sup> See my article, coauthored with Claudia V. Camp, “‘Who Has Been Tested by Gold and Found Perfect?’: Ben Sira’s Discourse of Riches and Poverty,” in Wright 2008b, 71–96.

<sup>66</sup> For much more detail on scribes and the Judean cultural repertoire, see Horsley 2007. The quote here is from p. 87.

This observation makes good sense for Ben Sira. Even though the ruling priestly aristocracy, which had its scribal supporters like Ben Sira, might have been in power in Jerusalem, other groups, probably composed of out-of-power priests and their scribal supporters, contested the legitimacy of their rivals' control of the cult in Jerusalem. They also cultivated a largely shared cultural repertoire and produced literatures, some of which have been labeled "apocalyptic."<sup>67</sup> Moreover, these scribes also drew on their independent authority as guardians and interpreters of the Israelite heritage. So, even though the form of the literature might be different, works like the *Book of the Watchers*, the *Astronomical Book of Enoch* or the *Aramaic Levi Document* are also the products of wise scribes, who confronted similar issues to those we see occupying Ben Sira.

This all-too-brief set of observations suffices to make the point that Ben Sira's teaching reveals much about the social location of professional scribal training in the second-temple period. His ultimate goal was to educate the next generation of scribal retainers so that they might serve their patrons successfully, but, as I have argued in my work, he also desires to elevate the position of the scribe, who is, in his view, the one best positioned to pursue and apprehend Wisdom.<sup>68</sup> The strategies that authorize his instruction also function to authorize the position and work of the scribe/sage, the one whose name "will live for generations of generations" (39.9, Gk).

Finally I want to return for just a moment to the idea of "conflicted boundaries." Certainly Ben Sira demonstrates a kind of conservatism, if by that we mean that he is happy with the status quo, that he supports those at the center of power who presumably retain him. Indeed he is often portrayed as the quintessential wisdom teacher. Yet, when we look more closely, he shares with those who are usually viewed as not so conservative—those who produced apocalyptic works like *I Enoch* or *Jubilees*—similar approaches to solving what appears to be the common conundrum of how to legitimate their work as having authority. From this angle he has a lot more in common with the seers of these apocalyptic works, scribes who combine sapiential

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<sup>67</sup> On this assessment of some apocalyptic works, see Wright 2008b, 97–126 and "Wisdom, Instruction and Social Location in Ben Sira and *I Enoch*" in Wright 2008a, 147–64. The relationship between works labeled "wisdom" and those identified as "apocalyptic" has been discussed a great deal in scholarly literature. For some studies and extensive bibliography, see Wright and Wills 2005.

<sup>68</sup> See, for example, Wright 2008a, 94–6 and Wright 2007, 88–90.

learning with appeals to prophecy and revelation. Indeed, he looks a lot less conservative. In the years that I have thought about these issues with respect to Ben Sira and roughly contemporary apocalyptic works, the boundary between wisdom and apocalyptic, between Ben Sira and the sages/seers behind those apocalypses, has become decidedly “conflicted” as Larry Wills and I expressed it. Now that we can envision sages like Ben Sira traversing that boundary, perhaps it is time to revisit exactly what and where that boundary (or perhaps those boundaries) might be.

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