"All This is the Book of the Covenant of the Most High God":
Orality, Literacy and Textual Authority in the Work of Ben Sira

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Ben Sira stands, if not at a crossroad, then at hard bend in the road to a biblical canon. While he has no singularly causal role in the process, his book, I believe, provides a denser coding of important developments in it than we have heretofore recognized. Preceding him we speak of an increasingly written, increasingly authoritative, increasingly closed set of religious traditions. With and after him we speak, if only in hindsight, of more or less open-ended interpretive traditions—whether the Dead Sea Scrolls, the Oral cum Written-Oral Torah, the Pseudepigrapha, the New Testament.[1] These traditions have or had their own various forms of authority, but mainly, and sometimes only, insofar as they extend or comment on that consolidated and finally fully closed body of written work we now call Tanak, to which we ascribe the designation "canon."[2] The question I am interested in is how we got to "canon." My question is not so much a literary-historical one—in the sense of hypothesizing developments regarding oral traditions, early writings, and redactions—as it is a socio-cultural one. What I would like to understand better is how written texts gain authoritative status and, in particular, how they do this in a largely oral culture. Thus, while part of my agenda involves attention to processes of canon-formation as such, a wider purview in studies of orality and literacy is also necessary.

In the course of this research I came, hardly by chance, given the quantity and quality of his contributions, to Jack Goody. Reading his most recent book, *The Power of Written Tradition* (2000), I was repeatedly struck by the resonance of his broad observations about orality and literacy with what I encounter in Ben Sira's book, especially when considered in light of his cultural context. Goody 's work reinforces certain emerging scholarly views on these issues in the second century BCE while furthering the discussion on other questions. In this essay I shall try simply to set out these connections on a point-by-point basis. All page references are from this book, unless otherwise noted.

1.   Literacy, power, and the scribes

Writing endows with power those who have it, whether the power that literate cultures have historically achieved over nonliterate ones or, more to the point here, the power that literate

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[1] David Carr (2001) cites the fact that Ben Sira, while promoting a variety of writings, "talks exclusively of the Torah as holy Scripture" as one piece of evidence that "a broad canon had not yet achieved enduring recognition by this point.

[2] I realize that my use of the term "canon" already presupposes a commonly understood definition of the term, whereas there is in fact currently much debate on the matter, especially in regards to how "closed" a body of literature must be in order to qualify for the designation (see Chapman). I shall refer to elements of that debate below, but for will for the most part in this paper use the term for a body of authoritative literature that, while not necessarily fully closed, is moving in that direction, though perhaps more so for some groups (like the Jerusalem priesthood) than for others (like the denizens of Qumran; cf. Vanderkam 1998: 401).

groups within a society have over nonliterates. But "the dominated, too, may make use of this way of grappling with their social environment" (1). Needing historical specification are the exact ways this intersection of literacy and power operated in the social world of Ben Sira. There are two aspects to the dynamics at work here.

One lies in the always religiously coded world of politics. Jewish religious literature of the second century bears witness to a series of conflicts over legitimate priesthood related to claims of proper lineage, choice of the proper cultic site, choice of the proper calendar, and, of course, alliances with (or rejections thereof, or even war against) the foreign colonizers. Underlying and exacerbating specific points of political tension was the broader, on-going problem of assimilation and resistance to Hellenistic culture and language that came with the increasing and increasingly literate class of "landowners, traders, and investors" (Davies 1998: 65) in this period.[3] Religious writing could serve at times a political purpose, whether Ben Sira's ideological support of the Jerusalem priesthood in his hymn to the fathers or Qumran's possibly oppositional elevation of the Teacher of Righteousness (REF?; cf. Vanderkam 1998: 387). But political writing requires an audience to make a difference. From the proliferation of writing at Qumran we might infer the high degree of literacy, and thus the upper class demographics, of those who went there. (George Brooke has suggested that copies of Scripture, for example, were often brought to the desert enclave rather than written there; it was, in other words, literate, book-owning people who came [Cambridge ISBL, 2003].) To the question of who read or heard Ben Sira's hymn we shall return below.

The second aspect of the dynamics of power and literacy has to do with social roles, especially that of the scribes in relation to priests. There has been important work done now on scribes and priests in the Second Temple period, by Horsley, Tiller, and Wright, among others. Focus on scribes is crucial because, in this context, if writing is happening, scribes are, for the most part, doing it. And scribes (at least those who are producing significant bodies of literature) have a particular relation to power. On the one hand they are closely associated with the ruling classes who need, and pay for, their talents. On the other, they are beholden to, and dependent upon, those in power for precisely this reason. The scribe, as Ben Sira notes, requires leisure (38:24), and for this someone must pay. His self-presentation does not fit exactly with the activities of the scribe in Hellenistic Alexandria, as described by Philip Davies (1998:29), but moves in that direction. They were "students of literature and science. As well as studying, they apparently taught; but most of all they wrote: they were the heirs of the ancient Near Eastern scribes, but without the administrative responsibilities." Ben Sira did not stand apart from interaction with the mighty, and speaks as though he has had diplomatic and administrative experience (37:16-26; 38:32-39:4), as well as teaching. Yet it is opportunity for study, resulting in the "pouring forth" of the scribe's own wisdom, that he sees as the culmination of his role. And the expectation that this wisdom will endure for eternity suggests the importance of its materialization in writing. More than this, even, such endurance presumes some degree of canonization, if we take that term in the sense proposed by Jon Berquist (2001) of the sustained *re-*production of a work.

As Tiller, Horsley, and Davies have all pointed out, while the scribes owe some degree of allegiance to the powerful, perhaps even producing for them justifying ideologies (in Ben Sira's case support for the Jerusalem priesthood embodied in Simeon), they can also develop a certain

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[3] Horsley and Tiller ("Sociology") resist the common assumption of frenetic and pervasive secular mercantile activity in Judah in the Hellenistic period as inconsistent with Ben Sira's depiction of a monolithic temple state. While this cautionary note is well taken, I think that the limited and likely politically idealized (so Tiller, "Politics") sociological window provided by this book does not preclude new economic developments as a result of 150 years of Hellenistic rule, and the possible concomitant increase in at least a functional literacy in that still small part of the population involved with such developments. What seems to be an explosion of Jewish literature in the latter part of the Hellenistic period suggests at the very least that books have become important.

sense of professional independence, generating an ideological *self*-justification to which Sirach also bears witness. In this case the justification comes in part from the scribe's relationship to an already (at least to some, and to some degree) authoritative written tradition--"the study of the law of the Most High" (38:34)—but not only from this. Ben Sira is concerned with traditions of all kinds (the wisdom of the ancients, prophecies, the sayings of the famous, subtle and obscure parables, proverbs with hidden meanings, 39:1-3). One imagines that these traditions are received and taught in both written and oral forms, as his own work is. Materially speaking, Goody observes that manuscript cultures "encouraged the continuing importance of the spoken version of the written word, of reading aloud and recitation" (104-05). Thus, essential means and modes of the scribe's authority lie in his ability both to read and write and to play the proper role in the interface of what is written and what is spoken. Among other things, then, the scribe mediates orality and literacy.

2.   Restricted literacy

Goody and Watt (1957 REF; summarized in Goody 2000: 4) introduce the notion of "restricted literacy," which is relevant to Ben Sira in several ways. It may imply the use of literacy in restricted rather than general contexts (for example, in religious settings) and/or its restriction "to specific social groups or individuals." Although neither of these restrictions is absolute in Ben Sira's case, our understanding of the relationship of literacy and power can be elaborated by consideration of the various constraints on the use of literacy.

a.   Literacy and social class

Horsley and Tiller detail the textual evidence for the claim that Ben Sira's role as an educator was devoted to "scribes in training" and argue that his teachings on wealth preclude the possibility that the audience for his instruction would have included members of the aristocratic elite. On the other hand, Maier (1995), for example, argues in the case of Proverbs that its scribal tradents also taught the sons of the aristocracy, whose fathers had an interest in instilling status quo values in their heirs. For all his harsh words against the meanspirited wealthy, Ben Sira certainly represents a stable society in which a man who is both rich and good could maximize his material well-being and find spiritual satisfaction as well. In particular, Ben Sira's concern for honor and shame, with its basis in the patriarchal family household, has a potentially wider audience than student scribes. Horsley and Tiller make strong argument that Ben Sira advocates a monolithic temple state, with the production of wealth ultimately under the control of the high priest and all social offices held by members of the priesthood. And surely this is Ben Sira's ideal. But does it represent the social actuality? I'm inclined to leave a bit more open the question of the political-economic-religious relationship at this time and, with it, the possibility of a wider audience for Ben Sira's instruction.

But "wider" remains, of course a relative term, with class issues still dramatically at stake. While few in the agricultural peasant population would have learned at most anything more than rudimentary reading and or writing skills, one wonders what the demographic pool for the scribes themselves might have been. Might a scribe who is dependent on others for his income, as Ben Sira seems to have been, have come from something less than privilege, or been a younger son with minimal inheritance? It is possible that by this time the scribal profession in Judah was typically passed on from father to son; on the other hand, matters of class may have been at work for scribes not simply as a condition of their profession but also of their birth.

b.   Literacy and the temple

Writing was obviously used for more than religious purposes. Contracts, political communications, annals, economic records, as well as public monumental writing (which often has, to be sure, a religious character) are all in evidence in the ancient Near East. On the other hand, ancient Jewish literature has come down having been at least contextualized as religious. This is not to say it all started out that way (as, e.g., David Gunn's proposal regarding certain

biblical narratives as "serious entertainment" and Philip Davies discussion of "classics" and canon indicate [REF]). Yet the important narratives were ultimately preserved for the ages embedded in a religious framework. Davies argues that canons begin with the classification and storage of scrolls, usually either in temples or palaces, although, with increasing literacy, sometimes also in private homes. Literature that is read and re-copied over the years becomes de facto classic and, when grouped with literature of like sorts (e.g., collections of psalms or proverbs onto a single scroll or narratives on several related scrolls), these scrolls become "canons" in the general sense of that term (thus, in Davies' formulation, the Hebrew Bible represents a collection of once smaller canons). But these literary bits and pieces—even the more "religious" of them, and not all are—do not in themselves constitute the literature of national identity that the "Scriptures" would become. They required the addition of "more ambitious, complex structures" that are mostly narrative in character (Davies 2002: 45). Who, then, provided these structures and how did these writers come to have enough clout to get *their* scrolls prominently stored, read, and copied? The answer, at least in the post-exilic period, must be scribes closely associated with the temple.

This line of thought complicates, though it does not entirely contradict, an argument that has recently become common in Second Temple studies, namely, that the Torah, or some document like it, was one of the means by which the Persian empire exercised colonial control.[4] The assumption here is that a law book (Ezra's?) was introduced into colonized Yehud that both authorized the local control of a certain priestly faction amenable to Persian domination and provided a means of social order because of popular acceptance of the book's origin with God or, at least, hoary tradition. I would hardly discount the connection of this written tradition with political considerations, but I suspect it is more complicated than this. For a book that would authorize the temple leadership must needs first get to the temple. Particularly in an oral culture (but perhaps not only there) a book has no inherent authority, but requires some source of legitimation before it can do any legitimating.

Again we face the question not only of authorship, which is no doubt scribal, but also of audience, for different groups may demand different forms of legitimation. From the perspective of a wider lay audience with a large indigenous component, this may mean that what gets narratized as Ezra's law book brought from Persia would have had to represent (or be perceived to represent) older and local traditions (Knoppers). Alternatively, Horsley ("Origins") proposes that presentation of the document in the tradition of "found books" (like the "original" revelation of the law to Moses or its "re-discovery" in the temple under Josiah) would have served an authorizing function. But such a legend would seem to work best in retrospect rather than in the immediate circumstance. Davies assumes that the notion of a written canon (as opposed to an oral one) had little relevance for the illiterate (1998:38). Yet "illiterate" would mean almost everyone in Judah in the Persian period, except for the scribes. The depiction in Nehemiah of words being declaimed authoritatively from a written text would seem to be a fantasy of the scribes, likely retrojected from a later time. Yet it is a fantasy of general rather than restricted appropriation of the authority of the book. It is not difficult, in other words, to locate the source of the fantasy, but to whom is it addressed? At any rate, considerations of orality and literacy need to be added to the colonialist analysis of the story of Ezra and the law book. As has now been widely recognized, this biblical account is not historically transparent; likewise, our reconstruction of its connection of writing to power needs to take account of the fact that the presence of a book, in and of itself, even apart from ambiguities in its content, can mean different things to different people.

c.   *Literacy, languages, synagogues, and schools*
Goody discusses the connection of restricted literacy, the preservation of "dead" (that is to say, only written) languages, and religion in contexts where

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[4] See already the several essays in Watts, ed., that question this view.

[l]earners have to acquire another language (often a dead one) before they can add the skills of reading and writing, which obviously requires more time and effort than learning to read in the vernacular. Such demands often result from the close connection between literacy and religion, the aim of educators being to make accessible sacred texts written in the classical language . . . (2000:4)

There is, then, an intellectual specialization required to work with such texts, which are themselves marked out as special. This specialness of the text in turn adds authority—not to mention new job opportunities—to those who tend it.

Hierarchical or scholarly divergences of language usage are not unknown in oral societies, but writing adds a new dimension by creating whole "dead" languages that refuse to die (in oral societies they are truly dead) and giving rise to a new axis of hierarchical (class) differentiation based on knowledge of texts. Moreover, with the accumulation of texts over time, the discrepancy between the language of ancient texts and current written practice grows, bringing with it the need for "scholarship" if these earlier texts are still to remain part of the contemporary repertoire (20-21).

Such considerations become important for our present purposes to the degree that the reading and production of literature in Hebrew was becoming a specialist's art in the context of an Aramaic vernacular. The shift in oral usage from Hebrew to Aramaic was certainly well underway by Ben Sira's day, but it is not clear whether Hebrew was yet approaching the status of "dead language." Fitzmyer (1970 REF), for example, argues that, by the first century CE, Aramaic had become the most common spoken language in Palestine, but that pockets of Hebrew usage remained, as indicated, e.g., by some later Qumran texts. Others suggest that so-called Mishnaic Hebrew inscribes an oral dialect but that Hebrew finally reached "dead language" status by around 200 CE (Alexander 1999: 75; DJBP 280). But the linguistic reality 400 years earlier was surely complex, with both written and spoken forms of both Hebrew and Aramaic (not to mention Greek) to take into account (see Schaper 1999 on Hebrew in the Persian period and Campbell 1999 on Hebrew at Qumran). The returned exiles, generally members of the upper classes already familiar with Aramaic as a diplomatic language, had brought back with them from Babylon its use for day-to-day affairs as well (Schaper 1999:16). For the lower classes, however, who had remained in Judah "the situation was utterly different." "The vernacular of the Judaean people in the Persian period . . . had some Aramaic admixtures but was essentially Hebrew. . . . Whereas Aramaic was used both in speaking and in writing, contemporary Hebrew [that is, "an older form of Mishnaic Hebrew"] seems to have existed only as the spoken vernacular of the lower classes" (17).

Now well into the Hellenistic period, Ben Sira writes in Late Biblical Hebrew. With the temporary nationalistic resurgence of spoken Hebrew under the Hasmoneans yet to come, however (see van Henten 1999 on the patriotic-political implications of the references to an ancestral language in 2 Maccabees), this may not have been his preferred spoken language (or it may have been the specialized language of instruction [Davies, private communication]). While it may not be the case that the language of the Bible was incomprehensible to the majority of people at this time (like Latin to the medieval serf), classical Hebrew was not the dialect of the uneducated common person. To the extent that Aramaic had filtered down from the elite, even "Late Biblical" Hebrew may have become "foreign" to many. Even "literacy" would not necessarily have entailed deep familiarity with classical Hebrew, as Aramaic would have been the most useful language to learn to read and write for the elite, who likely by that time also spoke it as their public if not exclusive language. In sum, while the language situation is not entirely clear for the second century BCE, and undoubtedly mixed, classical Hebrew belonged to the religious specialists and perhaps also, though secondarily, to the sons of the elite whom they may have taught.

This general question about the relationship of the vernacular to the language of Ben Sira's texts plays out in more institutionally specific terms if one considers the circumstances in which people would have encountered such authoritative writings. We confront here the questions of the synagogue and the school. When did the synagogue emerge, and what practices did it house? Was it a site of worship in Ben Sira's day, and did that worship include the reading of scripture, that is, an oral encounter with the text? If so, did listeners understand what they heard? Was the synagogue at this time a place of scripture study involving, that is, an encounter in reading? If so, who learned to read—first, of course, spending the time to learn another dialect or language—and in what contexts? Whatever degree of formality we imagine for Ben Sira's *bet midrash*, he is clearly a teacher with strong pedagogical and ideological concerns that center around the production and reproduction of books. He works at a time when the classical language, and thus the classics themselves, are in danger of falling into disuse, under the influence not only of Aramaic but also of Greek. One does not have to see this sage as an enemy of Greek culture (as DiLella long ago proposed) to imagine his concern for the potential loss of the ancestral heritage. A question lingers, however, as to his own interests in sharing access to this written heritage relatively narrowly (thus reserving its authority-granting potential to his scribal coterie) or relatively widely (thus expanding scribal influence over a conservative upper class audience who might also foot the bills).

> d.   *Oral culture and iconic text*

There is another way provided by orality/literacy theories for understanding the authority of a written text in a largely oral culture that is also related to restricted literacy. Susan Niditch (1996; also Horsley; Smith 1998:298) discusses the iconic nature of public monumental writing whose function was as "symbolic memorials" rather than historical records as such. Jon Berquist (SBL 2001) offers as an example the Behistun inscription which, despite being written in three languages, was not located where it could be read. Its symbolic communication of power was as effective for people who could not read as for those who could. But the same seems true in certain cases at least of writing done on scrolls. Niditch also discusses the biblical evidence for belief in the magical effects of written texts, while Horsley makes the larger claim that the scrolls as such were regarded as magical objects, at least early in the Second Temple period, as the sense of "holy scripture" was just emerging. Indeed Berquist proposes that "canonical writing is best understood as a form of monumental writing." While I think Horsley overstates his case for a development from text-as-icon to text-as-object-of-study during this period, the reverence shown to "the word [notably singular] of God" even in highly literate culture today suggests he is not wrong to imagine its iconic function in the ancient world (see also Goodman, JTS 41).

3.   Cognition, calendars, and canons

One of the hotly debated questions within orality and literacy studies is the degree to which literacy effects cognitive changes in persons who acquire it (see Street REF and Goody). It is hard to gainsay, however, that writing at least increases certain capacities of the human mind, especially in terms of organization of larger quantities of data and memory storage. Literacy provides a cognitive tool, a technology, of the intellect (Goody; Ong REF).

> So when I use the phrase "technology of the intellect" about writing, I am thinking mainly not about the primary level of physical instrumentation but about the way that writing affects the cognitive or intellectual operations, which I take in a wide sense as relating to the understanding of the world in which we live, especially the general methods we use for this (144).

Goody envisions three levels of technology: the script and writing materials themselves; the material products of these scripts and the storage and retrieval facilities to keep and use them; and "the product of the interaction between the human mind and the written word, which is

external to the actor in a way spoken language is not. Once again the difference is a matter of degree, but with writing the modus operandi of the human intellect is changed by this internal-external interaction" (145). "The existence of new cognitive tools enables people to undertake new cognitive tasks" (82).

Now writing itself is hardly a *new* cognitive tool in Ben Sira's context, yet culturally he lives in a liminal zone, a writer in an oral culture. While the instructions that comprise the first part of his book are classic examples of oral forms become written (see Niditch REF), I would like to propose that his poem in praise of the ancestors shows evidence of a new development, the constituting and thus the deployment of writing in a different mode. Here we find a canon-consciousness and, with it, the possibility of a new technology subsidiary to writing itself. With George Aichele, but with somewhat different emphases (REF explain), I would like to consider the idea of canon, as a technology.

In the first instance, canon utilizes directly the tendencies inherent in writing toward list making. "Lists and tables of a less semantically complex kind were the currency of many early written civilizations" (2000, 84; cf. *The Domestication of the Savage* Mind, 1977). They may be used for the solely practical purpose of recording economic transactions. But conceptual development also occurs as writing abets the organization of time and thought through the making of lists and tables. Lists of laws are become understood as codes and objectified as Law (see Bernard Jackson, *Studies in the Semiotics of Biblical Law*; BS 1199.L3/J35).   Lists of Proverbs produce reflection on and eventually the personification of Wisdom. Importantly for our purposes, lists of books come to be perceived as having a self-evident stature.

Goody also points to the connection of literacy with the use of calendars (78-80). The Hebrew Bible shows the use of the lunar cycle to mark ritual time (xx:xx), a form of temporal reckoning that Ben Sira also advocates (43:6-8). Benjamin Wright (1997: 204-208; 2002) argues that this reference in Sirach is not innocent, but expresses conflict with the circle that produced the Enoch literature and which advocated a solar calendar. This conflict over time-keeping corresponds to one over canon: the Enoch people asserted their possession of law that was given through a direct heavenly revelation from God to Enoch and that therefore was not mediated by Moses (Nickelsberg). Again on analogy with Goody's observations about new cognitive tools producing new cognitive tasks, we might wonder whether a new cognitive form, namely written canon, is producing new political conflicts. The connection of canon and calendar in this ideological struggle points to a developing technology of organization associated with writing, calendar marking out one sort of time, narrative another. Written lists and tables, as well as narratives, allow more to be mentally held and organized at one time, thus changing and managing the nature of time itself. No wonder the symbolic representation of time itself—in the form of calendars, with all their implications of cosmic control and their effects of ritual control—becomes an ideological battleground just as the question of canon also emerges.

4. Writing and the fixity of tradition

Important for understanding the development of a written canon in an oral culture is the kind of fixity that writing creates. "Fixity," especially as it is related to "closure," has been an important issue in the scholarly discussion about the formation of the biblical canon. Debates about how "early" or "late" one is willing to date the presence of a Hebrew canon often ride implicitly on the degree to which one's definition of canon assumes closure (Chapman). If we back up for a minute from the canon question as such and consider writing more generally, we find that there is from the outset a relative immutability to written texts that does not exist for oral traditions, no matter how sacred the latter are taken to be.

Goody's story of part of his own on-the-job training as an anthropologist is instructive in this regard. He relates his early efforts to record "the" Bagre myth of the Lo Dagaa of northern Ghana and his surprise at the differences from one recitation to another—even of what he thought to be its key elements and major structural features—and in spite of the unanimous insistence by his informants that all recitations are "one" (116-18, 125-27). Goody attributes his

error, however, not only to indigenous belief, but also to "then-current ideas about traditional societies" which made it "difficult not to think the recitation was passed down in a relatively unchanged form from generation to generation" (125). Biblical scholars might note that "then-current" to this anthropologist means the 1950s. I'm not sure that we yet have given up this notion when it comes to the Bible. We do not have the advantage, of course, that anthropologists had with the advent of the portable tape recorder and modern transport, which finally allowed them to obtain many exact recordings of the myth, as opposed to the earlier constraint of transcription by hand of individual performances.[5] The epilogue to Goody's story is also informative with respect to writing and fixity in relation to the development of canons.

> Looked at in a long-range perspective, the definitive shift to literate forms puts an end to the creative development of particular long oral recitations (though it opens up other possibilities). Even in mixed situations, problems arise. The Bagre that I first recorded and published has for at least some of the schooled population become the authorized version; the text, as opposed to the utterance, is orthodox. And it is authoritative not only because it was written but because it was written earlier and taken down from ancestral figures now departed. As such, it has become a standard version in a way no oral version could be. (105)

To a certain extent, then, the impetus toward investing authority in writing may be present in the fact of writing itself, at least in certain circumstances. Again the materiality of the text comes into play: speakers die, but texts endure, connecting the present to the past through a tangible form. Caution is necessary when drawing this parallel, however. For the situation of a modern anthropologist, with his or her new communication technology, suddenly arriving in a traditional, nonliterate society, is not exactly the same as the long-term, but specialized presence of writing in an ancient society where literacy is the provenance of an elite few. The more direct lesson may be rather one of fixity than of authority. "[T]he written version of an oral recitation transforms one of many possibilities into a fixed text. That fixed text then has to be taken into account in future performances or exegesis" (104).

There are two implications of this statement, at least for those who read. One is the stability of the text; the other is the concomitant need to interpret it. Theorists of orality and literacy have sometimes appealed to the "evanescence" of the spoken word (Luria, Ong, Botha). While such a formulation does not do justice to other ways in which oral discourse weaves both immediate and enduring effect into the social fabric, there is, nonetheless, a marked difference in the possibility for verification between what somebody just said (much less, is said to have said long ago) and what is written. This does not mean writing cannot be changed; it does mean that it can only be changed in a significant way by intention. Its meaning or application can be manipulated in any number of ways, but its power lies in part in its objective immutability. A written source can be checked.

But if sources can be checked, and are important enough to be, they will also have to be interpreted. It may be that the development of an interpretive tradition around a body of literature is the surest sign of its status as canon and, indeed, of the degree to which that canon has become closed. J. Z. Smith states this inversely by his observation that the "formal requirement of closure"

> generates a corollary. Where there is a canon, it is possible to predict the *necessary* occurrence of a hermeneute . . . whose task it is continually to extend the domain of the closed canon over everything that is known or everything that exists *without* altering the canon in the process. (citing p. 48 of his 1979 book, *Imagining Religion*)

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[5] Note that Parry was using a recording device earlier than this.

But we are still left with further work to do on the question of how a text attains that canonical status (even using the word more loosely than Smith does) in the first place. I would like to examine the possibility that ritual plays a role in this process.

5.   Canon, ritual, and authority

In Goody's experience there was an accidental quality to the transformation of oral tradition into writing. The early anthropologist recorded the version of the myth he or she happened to hear (105). The situation of the Bible is certainly more complicated. What is preserved there may be to some extent the result of historical accident,[6] but also at least equally the result of various theological, ideological, and political motivations. But the promulgation via writing of a given view of deity or social order, or the political justification of a regime, does require that the writing be read in a context where it can perform its social-functional task and where in fact it might receive this constructive capacity in the first place.

Texts may contain instructions for the proper conduct of rituals (though it is notable that the Bible typically details only the disposition of the grain or blood and body parts of the sacrificial animal). They may contain words that must be recited properly, even exactly, if a ritual is to be effective, as with magical incantations (or modern high church liturgies). Proper recitation involves verbatim memorization, which Goody argues becomes even more important with literacy than it is in strictly oral contexts, precisely because correctness can be checked (33). The need for ritual correctness is one important reason why houses of learning are often attached to temples, even if this is not their only context in a given culture. The use of writing as the basis for proper ritual may be considered, then, one of the sources of its authority in a largely oral culture, if only among the priests and temple scribes.

Beyond this, however, lies also the possibility of actual ritual reading of texts, a process that enhances their iconic status whether or not the content is understood. J. Z. Smith makes the point by the example of medieval single-volume manuscript scriptures, the majority of which "contained either the Gospels and Psalter, or were in the form of evangelaries and epistolaries which contained only those portions of scripture that were read aloud. . . . These texts . . . constituted the Bible for the vast majority of European layfolk, even if they could not understand the Latin and attended the 'liturgy of the Word' irregularly" (307). Smith connects this example to Kendall W. Folkert's distinction between two modes of canon, based on their "vectoring," that is, "the means or mode by which something is carried" (Smith 301).

> Texts of the Canon I variety are "carried by some other form of religious activity" . . . By contrast, Canon II is its own "vector," or, more precisely, a "vector of religious authority." In texts of the Canon I type it is the employment that is definitive, more so than its boundaries. Indeed, from a functional viewpoint, the texts can be interchangeable. Texts understood as Canon II are "viewed as independently valid and powerful, and as such, as being absolutely closed and complete." Furthermore, "each form can and does occur within a single religious tradition, the two even existing simultaneously at times. . . ." (Folkert 1989: 172-73, cited in Smith 1999: 301)

The distinction is further developed by John E. Cort in terms of authority: "Canon I 'changes with time and place, and authority flows from the accumulated tradition *into* the texts"; Canon II 'is (more or less) fixed and closed, and authority is conveyed or vectored *via* the texts'" (Cort 1992, cited by Smith 1999: 303).

Even if one wishes to qualify Smith's view (with Folkert) that this means "there are no scriptural canons, in the sense of Canon II" before the Reformation (303), it seems clear that Ben Sira's "Bible" is a canon in process, or a Canon I, insofar as it is not yet a closed list. Indeed, I would argue that Ben Sira's text shows it sitting astride this line. While I do not think we have

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[6] Though contrast Haran (REF).

the tripartite canon that some have seen here, the contents of the poem in praise of the ancestors indicates awareness of the Torah and the Prophets at least nominally as we know them. On the other hand, the scribe's claim of inspiration for his own writing suggests his ambition to "make the list" himself. What then might we say about the need of these texts for "vectoring" or authorization from other religious forms? Important in this regard is Ben Sira's connection of the narrative from the Law and the Prophets with the cultic ceremony led by Simeon.

6.   Narrative and ritual

Writing, asserts Goody, allows one to conquer time by means of organizing it. Time and writing come together in a special way in narrative, with its "insistent emphasis on time. . . . For narrative has a very special relationship to time, being located at a specific conjunction in time and space, and unwinding in the framework of time" (63). Sirach further connects narrative with ritual experience in the poem in praise of the ancestors, where a rehearsal of the great heroes of Israel's past culminates in an epiphany of the high priest Simeon in the Jerusalem temple.

Ben Sira's articulation of narrative time and space does not by any means compare to that of the eighteenth century novels which set the standard for what Goody means by "narrative" in the words just quoted (and which he associates with the domestication of time wrought by the modern clock), nor even to an ancient example like the epic of Gilgamesh. I have called attention elsewhere to the curious lack of attention to space in Ben Sira's rehearsal of the ancestors' story, coupled with his strong sense of temple/house space in his own present time (Camp 2002: xx). Likewise, there is little specification of time in this account, yet, on the other hand, a manifestation of eternity: from the beginning (or at least from Enoch, or Noah) until "now," as figured in the succession of illustrious personages ending with Simeon in his ritual glory. This sort of extended account reaching sequentially back to ancient times is a hallmark of literacy in Goody's view. It stands in contrast to an oral form like the genealogy (which it in one sense resembles: Simeon could be seen as "son" to a succession of fathers) precisely in its spatial vacuum. As studies of biblical and other genealogies have shown, "the oral genealogy is more often a statement about space (especially social space) than one about time, since among other things it often represents the contemporary, or near-contemporary, distribution of living groups as much as the relations between dead individuals" (81; cf. Numbers/Joshua xx; Ezra xx). The praise to the fathers also contrasts with oral forms generally, which, according to Goody, in fully nonliterate cultures rarely include extended narrative with strong narrative structure (73).

That Ben Sira's poem is not simply written, but also literate, should come as no surprise, given that its source(s?) is/are presumably already part of such a tradition. Yet the poem's culmination in the ritual moment of priestly glorification also suggests the possibility of its oral recitation in that context. What are the dynamics of authority transfer here? Is an already authoritative written text being used to legitimate this high priest, or is the authority that flows from the cult helping to legitimate the text itself? As "genealogy" the text seems to legitimize or glorify Simeon by connecting him with the past. Yet the elevated description of his ritual appearance also has a self-authorizing quality to it (indeed, interpreters often regard it as originally a separate poem) that shines its light on the narrative that precedes it: he is not only the current moment in the heroic sequence, but its culmination. In sense the ritual experience is the vector of authority for the narrative drawn from the Torah and the Prophets. But we need to consider more carefully the nature of the narrative text itself, which is dual: it is most immediately Ben Sira's own text, a hymnic poem that in effect summarizes Torah and Prophets, but which in so doing makes present in itself those very writings. If this poem was in fact read in ritual, then its own authority is being vectored along with that of its sources.

7.   Narrative and history

Goody's discussion of the connection of narrative and time raises the issue of history, or the sense a culture has and expresses of history, as it relates to orality and literacy.

> The relative absence of history of and within oral cultures is not at all a matter of their "childlike" nature. It is rather a question of a lack of means. . . . [O]ne of the first "scholarly" activities of newly literate groups in contemporary Africa is to write their own "histories." On the one hand, this activity is undoubtedly promoted by contact with other historiographic traditions, those of Islam and Europe. On the other hand, the impulse seems very widespread. And it is not simply a question of people having history in their heads waiting to be written down. *The existence of new cognitive tools enables people to undertake new cognitive tasks* (82, my emphasis).

Ben Sira hardly experiences writing like a person in a culture where it has been introduced for the first time. On the other hand, in his praise to the fathers, he creates a textualized history that draws on earlier writings yet is not quite like anything else in the Bible.

Like some of the Psalms (78; 105; 106; 135; 136), the poem condenses a longer version of Israel's story, apparently for recitation in worship. The focus of most of these Psalms, however, is limited to the events of the Exodus and wilderness wandering (135; 136), though 105 begins with Abraham and gets as far as taking possession of the "lands of the nations" and 106 mentions idolatry in Canaan. The focus on Exodus and especially the rebellion in the wilderness also marks Psalm 78, but this psalm is unusual in two respects. First, it signals its origin in the wisdom tradition by calling its listeners to "give ear . . . to my teaching," which will include "a proverb/parable" and "riddles from of old" (78:1-2). Second, its narrative extends to the selection of David, which is associated with the building of the sanctuary on Mt. Zion (78:68-71). To this degree the psalm resembles the way in which Ben Sira condenses history to project its culmination in a particular human leader associated with the temple. On the other hand, the psalm's sense of history remains in an oral mode, with great attention paid to a limited range of material that makes the point at hand (Israel's insistent rebellion and God's compassion). The contrast with Ben Sira's systematic and comprehensive review of the ancestral heroes throughout time is marked. Likewise, although Psalm 78 is possibly a post-exilic text, whose culmination with David may have been designed to support the claims of some nouveau monarch, Ben Sira is unique in identifying the present-day person to whose authority he offers support.

In this sense the effect of his poem is more like that of the Chronicler's history, including Ezra-Nehemiah, which also presents a history of Israel beginning with creation and presumably ending (the sequence is now confused and likely artificial) with a present-day leader, if Nehemiah can be so understood (though his is hardly a glorious portrayal). On the other hand, if Chronicles is read independently of Ezra-Nehemiah, the analogy fails, for this text, ending with the decree of Cyrus, validates a more general priestly rule indirectly, by appeal to the cultic organization established by David. Chronicles/Ezra/Nehemiah remains, moreover, an extended narrative work, explicitly dependent on a multitude of sources and formally quite different from the focused sequence of heroes that Ben Sira seems to draw directly from the Torah and Prophets as we know them. Is this poem a signal of an application of the technology of canon that allows and encourages the manipulation of history in a new way? [Aichele REF]

Let us imagine our way back: Ben Sira, in producing his poem in praise of the ancestors, works from a written text, a narrative text. While this narrative surely has already some stature, it is not yet universally acknowledged as holy writ. There is not yet a standardized text and—if Artapanus can be dated ca. 200 (cf. Collins 1986: 33)—traditions about as important a figure as Moses, including his identity as lawgiver, continue to vary wildly. As Goody points out, one problem with writing is that it "crystallizes a particular recitation, creating text from utterance" (104). These moments of crystallization had, if the Documentary Hypothesis still holds any meaning for us, happened repeatedly in the case of the biblical narratives and, on a meta-level, had happened (ultimately but not immediately) decisively at the point that earlier crystallizations were re-composed into the singular but multi-faceted narrative, from creation to exile, something like the Primary Story we know now. Ben Sira takes this text and those of the prophets and some

information he has on Nehemiah and re-crystallizes the story once more. It is a new telling, one possible version among many. It draws on earlier writings, but it is now in a form that is both ritual and written, that is, (formally at least) re-oralized. Was it actually performed? Was it performed repeatedly? What power would this sort of fixed text, ritually used, have had to promote the reception, as canon, of a large part of what becomes Tanak?

8.   Wisdom and law: from orality to literacy and back

Writing and orality intersect in a particularly important way in Judaism after the time of Ben Sira in the tradition of the "Oral" Torah. "What is really strange here is that at the very period in time when literacy made it possible to minimize memory storage, human society adopted the opposite track, at least in some contexts. . . . But it is significant that the people in charge of this process were the scribes (*soferim*), the experts in writing themselves" (Goody, 33). Goody's point is that not only the Torah itself but in relatively short order the "oral" Torah as well was in fact written. The encounter with it, then, took the form of verbatim memorization, a different track than oral transmission. A form of (non-cultic) ritual itself, memorization and recitation is another form of re-oralization of written texts.

One might wonder exactly when the scribes began this form of inscribing. Horsley (REF semeia) notes that it was about the time of Ben Sira that the first written halakhic-type interpretations of Torah appear at Qumran. This raises the question of why no such intellectual activity appears in Sirach. Was interpretation of the law not yet, as Horsley surmises, part of the work of the temple scribe? Or was *written* interpretation not yet part of the pattern? Does Ben Sira represent that interpretive mode that gave rise to the notion of *Oral* Torah in the first place, with writing reserved for other forms of discourse such as his instructions and hymns? One way or the other, how might we make sense of the seeming paradox of Ben Sira's elevated understanding of Torah as preexistent Wisdom in ch. 24 and his lack of any overt reference to, much less interpretation of, any particular laws?

The place of the law in Sirach can be considered in terms of the relationship of orality and literacy to canon formation. J. Z. Smith's comments regarding canon provide a point of departure:

> The history of canon is not primarily one of transmission, but of reception. Authority and power inhere less in the book than in the capacity to manipulate the book, the language of the text, in such a way exegetically as to create *parole*, inviting both a sense of plausibility and conviction (J. Z. Smith 1979). From this point of view, "canon" is largely a professional's category (1998: 299).

The creation of *parole*, the spoken word, is another way of referring to what I have called re-oralization. Ritual, I have suggested, is one context of re-oralization in which the plausibility and conviction that are necessary for the reception of a text as canon can be induced. If we can imagine Ben Sira's ancestors poem as a ritual text, then the object of authorization is the narrative of God's relationship to Israel's heroes. Embedded in this narrative, however, are several references specifically to the law. Sir. 44:20 cites Abraham(!) as one who kept "the law of the Most High." Moses was given "the commandments face to face, the law of life and knowledge, so that he might teach Jacob the covenant and Israel his decrees" (45:5), a teaching function then passed on to Aaron (45:17). "By the law of the Lord [Samuel] judged the congregation" (46:14). The kings of Judah came to an end because "they abandoned the law of the Most High" (49:4). That the law should be wrapped up in narrative comes as no surprise to readers with two thousand years of Bible behind them. But perhaps we take this fact too much for granted, for the law codes stick out literarily like a sore thumb in the Pentateuch narrative while going missing in Chronicles. One wonders, then, whether the connection of *written* law with narrative was a

relatively new innovation in Ben Sira's day, and what role he might have played in wedding the two in the interests of authoritative *parole*.[7]

      Parole, re-oralization, happens in other ways as well. Ben Sira's grandson and translator understands his grandfather's purpose to be helping people to gain learning so that they might "live according to the law" (Prologue, two times). Yet, as noted, the text of Sirach never teaches about or interprets specific laws in any direct sense, either for the purpose of authorizing power or so that folk may live "accordingly." It would appear, however, that Ben Sira's grandson perceives that the sage's instructions in the first part of his book *are* considered to be teaching about how to live according to the law. It is not obvious, in fact, that Ben Sira himself, although he certainly recognizes a tradition of Moses-law with a special status (24:23), clearly differentiates its contents from ancient wisdom, prophecies, sayings, parables, and proverbs (39:1-3). What scholars call wisdom instructions, then, continuing a long tradition of non-legal teachings on how to live, are now also taken as a re-oralization of law, the one irony being, of course, that they too are passed on in written form.

      Ben Sira's most commanding reference to Torah comes in ch. 24, where he identifies it with female personified Wisdom. As in Proverbs, Wisdom herself speaks, that is, produces *parole*, specifically the *parole* of sensuality and desire that the sage disallows from actual bodily experience (cf. Camp 1987: 102-105). And, even more explicitly than in Proverbs, the instruction pouring forth from Wisdom-*cum*-Torah is identified with the teaching of the scribes, poured out like prophecy by Ben Sira himself, the ultimate manipulator of a text that is not quite canon.

9.   Literacy, canon, and theology

      Writing tends to fix traditions where orality allows change. Canonization advances fixation by a mutually reinforcing combination of writing's material reality with an ideology that increasing validates stasis over change. Goody relates this phenomenon to relative degrees of fixity in ideas about God in oral and literate cultures.

> [B]ecause African religions are closely linked to matters of health and well-being, they are inevitably more open-ended, if only because they are constantly faced with the problem of the God that failed, the unsuccessful cure, the promise made but unfulfilled. The closer the entailment of religious activity with the affairs of daily life, that is, the greater the contextualization, the more often the problem will arise. Consequently, I argue that truth is not fixed, as if residing in an immutable text, but involves a constant search, a seeking, a quest, after new solutions to old problems (102).

It would be difficult to prove that popular (oral) religion in Israel was "closely linked to matters of health and well-being" in the same way that Goody has observed in Africa. On the other hand, it is hard to imagine a popular tradition that did not have such issues strongly in the foreground, a supposition for which many of the Psalms provide some formal evidence. And, for all that they mainly serve to suppress the concern, the psalms of lament certainly point as well to "the problem of the God that failed." Orality allows for mutability in religious tradition, including the adaptability to encompass God's failures; life requires that this adaptability be put to use. The problem of theodicy thus becomes particularly disturbing with the move towards writing; it becomes intractable in the presence of a canon. Though Ben Sira's doubts about God's justice are not very different from those of Qohelet before him, they are, as I have argued

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[7] It is possible that we touch on at this point what might be a sore spot in the relationship of priests and scribes, especially those scribes who worked for the temple. While the possibility of authoritative literature under their control might excite the interest of a scribe, the priests could well be less than enthusiastic precisely because the content and interpretation of the law escapes the domain of carefully guarded sacred knowledge passed down from one generation of *cognoscenti* to another.

elsewhere, unlike Qohelet in being both apparent and suppressed (Camp xxxx). Is this struggle to constrain his doubts rather than adopt the tradition of expression in part a function of the emerging canon itself?

There is another factor that intensifies this tension between an increasingly unchangeable tradition and the life to which is it still supposed to be relevant. Goody observes a difference between the content of the central myth of the LoDagaa (however much this varies from one performance to another) and a fuller picture of the religious system that accounts for all its beliefs and actions. Compared to the larger system, the myth is "more theocentric" and "leans more toward a picture of the universe that, if not monotheistic, at least emphasizes God's role." His effort to explain this fact is interesting.

> In suggesting why this should be so, one is on difficult ground. But because the myth deals with the creation of the world, or rather of culture, it tends to emphasize the unique source of the unique act. If the myth had been more directly concerned with healing, then the emphasis might perhaps have been on the plurality of the saints (or shrines) rather than on the uniqueness of God. And saints, like ancestors, are by definition nonscriptural, or rather postscriptural. If we go back to the Book, we eliminate them, though by so doing we may create a gap in our understanding of the world. That argument suggests one kind of possible explanation of the tendency of written religions to emphasize the uniqueness of the godhead (105).

Is the implied argument here that writing helps to produce monotheism because of the part of their religious tradition (that is, myths) that people (often? typically? always?) choose to write down, once writing becomes an option in a largely oral culture? This is not clear. If so, Goody is ambiguous as to whose choice it is to write down myths in preference to other forms. His only example is the Bagre myth of the LoDagaa. At one point [REF] he suggests that it is Westerners who focus on the myths of other cultures. On the other hand, his ensuing discussion in the present context, with its broad references to nonscriptural saints (in Christianity) and jinn (in Islam), implies a general, emic rather than etic, tendency to inscribe myths as opposed to other sorts of tradition from the religion. In any case, the mythic focus on originary, and therefore unique, acts tends toward a focus on a singular deity (or, at least, a supreme deity in an organized pantheon). To the extent that writing exercises a certain cultural control over orality, the tendency toward monotheism already evident in the oral stages of myth is increased.

If we take Goody's point, there are important implications regarding the influence of writing on theology. Monotheism, as is often recognized (e.g., Berger REF), heightens the problem of theodicy by placing all agency in a single being. This fact interacts with another, namely, that the singularity of the acts told in myths tends toward a static and orderly view of the universe; myths assume a rightful sameness for eternity. In other words, neither the character of deity nor the assumption of order in myths lend themselves to the adaptability necessary for daily life that is available in other aspects of the religion (whether the LoDagaa's changing shrines and "beings of the wild," which deal with failures in efforts at healing, or Christianity's mediating saints, who comfort in the face of a judgmental or, worse, inexplicable God). Thus the unchangability associated with writing (and even more with canon) interacts with myth's inflexible assignment of agency to a single, or most powerful, god to exacerbate the problem of theodicy.

The problem of theodicy flows constantly through the biblical narratives, but it does so in a behind-the-scenes way. A reader must often tease apart, if not altogether deconstruct, these stories to see its traces beneath a surface of apparent just retribution. It is only in the so-called wisdom texts of Job and Qohelet, along with a few psalms, that overt reflection on the issue takes place. Goody has suggested that this sort of sustained reflection on contradiction is a function of literacy (143 and elsewhere). Do the biblical narratives reflect an oral-mode willingness to adaptation while the wisdom literature—not only fully literate, but also the product of a scribal

class self-conscious about its own literacy—manifests the literacy-driven need to tackle the problem head on, but also apart from the central cultural myths?

What happens then with Ben Sira? As I've noted, the problem of theodicy looms large for him but, unlike Qohelet, he works hard to suppress it rather than acknowledging it openly. While this difference could be simply a matter of personal inclination, it seems also possible that it is a function of the new textual situation that he is in. On the one hand, his instructions in the early part of the book reflect the sort of health-and-prosperity religion that is dependent on some degree of flexibility in order to maintain its viability (here already problematized by being written down). On the other hand, in combination with this instruction, he is committed to the articulation of the central myth with its doubly rigidifying underpinnings of radical monotheism and of writtenness itself. No wonder Ben Sira is in a bind.

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