In the Fall of 2007, Susan Werner, a well-known singer and songwriter, came to Lehigh University, where I teach, to perform music from her newest project, “The Gospel Truth,” in which she adopts the voices of different types of people—believers to sort-of believers to agnostics—in order to comment on and challenge aspects of contemporary Christianity in America.¹ When one of my students, blithely assuming that all the lyrics represented Ms. Werner’s own beliefs, asked her how she could hold these different positions at the same time, Ms. Werner replied with the quote that serves as the epigram above. At the time of her appearance at Lehigh, I was writing this paper, and Ms. Werner’s caution about presuming that what someone says or writes is first and foremost autobiographical prompted me to think more intently about the extent to which scholars have focused on autobiography in the Wisdom of Ben Sira, an attention that potentially obscures any rhetorical functions such passages might have. That is, scholars often take certain features of the book, particularly the use of first-person pronouns, at their face value, but when given a close reading, these passages, whether or not they reflect Ben Sira’s personal experience, work to construct an ideal sage who is lifted up before the student/reader of the book as an exemplar to be emulated. Moreover, the way the first-person passages function in Ben Sira might be compared to the way that pseudepigraphical authorship works in a book like Jubilees.

In current scholarly literature and conversation, Hindy Najman has written about the pseudepigraphical attribution of Second Temple Jewish works to figures from the ancient past. In Seconding Sinai, she questioned the extent to which, in the Second Temple period, we can

¹ For Susan Werner, go to www.susanwerner.com. This article is a thoroughly revised version of the paper I gave in the Hellenistic Judaism Section at the 2007 Annual Meetings of the SBL in San Diego.
distinguish sharply “between the transmission and the interpretation of biblical traditions.” There she describes the appearance in texts such as Jubilees of what she calls Mosaic discourse, “a discourse tied to a founder,” in which “to rework an earlier text is to update, interpret, and develop its content in a way that claims to be an authentic expression of the law already accepted as authoritatively Mosaic.” In this manner, attribution to a pseudonymous author legitimizes the attendant interpretations and ideologies that the pseudepigraphical text’s “real” author expresses. Pseudepigraphy, then, plays a central role in establishing the authority of the text, its contents and claims.

More recently, Najman has extended this work on pseudepigraphy to ask how these authorizing figures—people like Moses, Enoch or Ezra—serve as exemplars and how they function in text-production and text-interpretation. Exemplary figures work on two levels. On the primary level, the exemplar, someone such as Moses, does more than simply confer authority on the pseudepigraphical text. The author’s act of effacing himself via the use of “pseudonymous attribution should be seen as a metaphorical device, operating at the level of the text as a whole, whereby the actual author emulates and self-identifies as an exemplar.” His emulation of the exemplar in pseudepigraphy should be considered “a spiritual discipline, an asceticism of self-effacement.” The exemplar thus plays a revelatory role and thereby produces a prophetic text. So, in the case of Jubilees, both the Angel of the Presence and Moses are the exemplary figures to whom the discourse of Jubilees is attributed. The angel dictates the heavenly tablets to Moses, the exemplary scribe, who accurately writes what he hears—so, as Najman observes, “at the level of authorship the text is both angelic and Mosaic.” Whereas we understand Jubilees to be interpreting previous texts, the self-presentation is as prophetic revelation. Whereas in much biblical scholarship, the categories of revelation and interpretation are often considered distinct