“Changing the Order of Creation”: The *Toldot Ben Sira* Disrupts the Medieval Hebrew Canon

*Shamma Boyarin*

The medieval *Toldot Ben Sira*, or Chronicle of Ben Sira,¹ tells the fictional biography of the author of the apocryphal *Wisdom of Ben Sira*: his conception and birth, his great feats of wisdom, and his ultimate test by Nebuchadnezzar at his court.² Pseudo-biography like this was not a genre written in the so-called “rabbinic” period of late antiquity. The convention in medieval Hebrew literature was to follow the models established in the rabbinic period, so our text is quite unusual. I argue that this departure from convention is part of a bigger *iconoclastic* stance developed in the *Toldot* regarding the influence of earlier Hebrew text.

The narrative begins by detailing events leading up to the conception and birth of the hero Ben Sira, providing him with an illustrious father, none other than the biblical prophet Jeremiah. As part of this relationship, Ben Sira says:

* למה [ירמיהו] עשה ספר באלפא ביתא ויש שם דברים קשים עד שיסתרו בהם בני אדם. אף אני אעשה ספר באלפא ביתא ויש שם דברים קשים עד שיסתרו בני אדם.*

This is a reference to the biblical book of Lamentations, traditionally considered to be the work of Jeremiah, whose verses form an acrostic of the Hebrew alphabet; the book is considered “difficult,” or hard, because of its topic: the destruction of Jerusalem and the harsh punishment of the people of Judah, which the Babylonians carried out on behalf of God. There are several options

---

¹ Referred to as the *Toldot* henceforth.

² The Hebrew text is published in Eli Yassif, *The Tales of Ben Sira in the Middle Ages: A Critical Text and Literary Studies*. Jerusalem: Magnes, 1984 [Hebrew]. All translations are mine. Yassif presents editions of two recensions of the *Toldot*: one that is based on the way the text was transmitted in Ashkenaz, and one based on the way the text was transmitted in Italy. Although the differences between the two affect some details of my argument, the main point of it applies to both. For the sake of simplicity and clarity my readings are based just on the edition of the Italian recension.

³ Yassif, *The Tales*, 201: “[Just as] [Jeremiah composed a book by [following] the alphabet, and in it are matters so difficult that people hid them, so too will I compose a book by the alphabet, and in it will be matters so difficult that people will hide it.]”
Changing the order of Creation for understanding what composition of Ben Sira the child Ben Sira is speaking about. It does not seem likely that he is alluding to the Hellenistic-era work Wisdom of Ben Sira, because it is not organized alphabetically. This leaves two possibilities. One is external to the Toldot: there were several collections of aphorisms in Hebrew and Aramaic circulating in the middle ages, attributed to Ben Sira and organized alphabetically, of which at least one, and perhaps all, were explicitly called אלפבית בן סירא, The Alphabet of Ben Sira; the character in the Toldot may be referring to one of these texts. The other possibility is internal to the Toldot; the character may be referring to a later episode, in which the young Ben Sira recites aphorisms beginning with each letter of the alphabet, as part of a test posed to him by a teacher. (I will discuss this episode at length shortly). Either way, Ben Sira is represented as making the bold statement that he is destined to compose a book that will equal a biblical composition. This comparison, which may seem just a passing moment in the narrative, is actually central to the Toldot as a whole. The medieval author of the Toldot is using Ben Sira to collapse boundaries between various categories of text: the biblical Book of Lamentations is put on the same plane as the non-biblical aphorisms of Ben Sira. This is also a temporal flattening: Ben Sira’s aphorisms, the composition of the son, are held up as equal to the composition of the father. As already noted, it is unclear what text is being referred to as the composition of the son, which will rival the Book of Lamentations; this ambiguity furthers this destabilization of literary hierarchies.

When the young Ben Sira goes to the synagogue to learn, he is challenged by the melammed, a teacher of young children. Ben Sira is one year old at this point, and the melammed refuses to teach him, citing the Sages, who say that one begins studying scripture at the age of five. Ben Sira refuses to accept this, and answers with a different quotation from the Sages. This exchange turns into Ben Sira’s first test of wisdom, as the melammed starts challenging Ben Sira to recite aphorisms. After Ben Sira is able to recite an appropriate aphorism for each letter of the Hebrew alphabet, the melammed admits defeat, and

---

4 See Eli Yassif’s discussion of this in The Tales, 170–1. One of these Aramaic collections gets expanded at some point, and Hebrew translations and illustrative stories are added to it. In some cases this expanded version circulates together with the Toldot. Yassif also published an edition of this as part of The Tales.

5 Of course it is possible that behind this move lies knowledge of the fact that in Christian circles the Wisdom of Ben Sira had achieved biblical status—this would make the comparison more understandable, but no less transgressive.

6 The reference is to m. Avot 5:21.