

## AUTHORITATIVE SCRIPTURES AND SCRIBAL CULTURE

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At this conference, which is held in honour of a great scholar, I would like to focus on the relationship between authoritative Scriptures and scribal culture in order to examine whether the role of scribes and scholars may shed light on the theme of our meeting and if so how. Before doing so, I will start by discussing a few notions to be found in the sources of the time, the Hellenistic era, which mark the authoritativeness of particular books.

A most interesting passage can be found in the Prologue to the Wisdom of Jesus ben Sira.<sup>1</sup> It reads:

My grandfather Jesus, who had devoted himself for a long time to the reading of the Law, the Prophets, and the other books of our ancestors,  
and developed a thorough familiarity with them,  
was prompted to write something himself  
in the nature of instruction and wisdom (8–12)

This passage, referring to a given set of books, contains a significant feature which deserves attention. The expression “the other books of our ancestors” implies that all the books involved are considered “ancestral” (πατριος). In antiquity, the notion of being “ancestral” or “ancient” meant that the object concerned was considered authoritative.<sup>2</sup> Thus, the collection designated here as “the Law, the Prophets and the other books,” has a special position in the sense of worthy of

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<sup>1</sup> For another passage that is of interest, see Josephus, *C. Ap.* 1.42.

<sup>2</sup> Cf. H.G. Kippenberg, “Die jüdischen Überlieferungen als patrioi nomoi,” in *Die Restauration der Götter: Antike Religion und Neo-Paganismus* (ed. R. Faber and R. Schlesier; Würzburg: Königshausen und Neumann, 1986), 45–60; G.G. Stroumsa, “The Christian Hermeneutical Revolution and its Double Helix,” in *The Use of Sacred Books in the Ancient World* (ed. L.V. Rutgers et al.; Leuven: Peeters, 1998), 9–28 (11). See also K. van der Toorn, *Scribal Culture and the Making of the Hebrew Bible* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2007), 256.

respect and sacrosanct.<sup>3</sup> The emphasis here is on the idea of “ancient” in the sense of constituting a basic element of a religion and culture, in this case of the temple state of Judea.

The notion of “ancestral” also marks the difference in status between the ancient books, on the one hand, and the writing of Ben Sira, on the other. It indicates that the Wisdom of Ben Sira, at least in the view of the grandson, does not have the same status as the books of the ancestors, although it is also clear from his Prologue that the new book is considered significant precisely because it is based on a study of the ancestral ones.<sup>4</sup>

This element, the “study” of the books of the ancestors, is just another feature that points to these writings enjoying a position of authority. The grandson praises his grandfather as someone who “devoted himself for a long time to the reading of the ancient books and as someone who developed a thorough familiarity with them.” The terms used here (ἀνάγνωσις and ἔξις) are also found in the *Letter of Aristeas* (§121), where they reflect the standards of Alexandrian scholarship. The “reading” of Scriptures implied study and interpretation, as is clear from other texts, such as 1QS 6:7 and, again, the *Letter of Aristeas* (§305). The figure of Ezra, who will be discussed below, is also of relevance as a priest and scribe who, according to Neh 8:13, explained the law to others, which of course presupposes a reading in the sense of study (cf. Ezra 7:10).

The emphasis on the study of ancient books is attested by other documents of the time, such as the so-called Halakhic Letter (4QMMT), dating from the middle of the second century B.C.E. In C 10 it is stated: “We have [written] to you so that you may study the book of Moses and the books of the Prophets and (that/those of?)<sup>5</sup>

<sup>3</sup> The designation implies a “defined” collection that is not to be confused with the idea of a “definitive” one (in the sense of a closed canon). See A. van der Kooij, “The Canonization of Ancient Books Kept in the Temple of Jerusalem,” in *Canonization and Decanonization* (ed. A. van der Kooij and K. van der Toorn; Leiden: Brill, 1998), 17–40 (28). This distinction is overlooked by A. Lange, “Pre-Maccabean Literature from the Qumran Library and the Hebrew Bible,” *DSD* 13 (2006): 277–305 (287).

<sup>4</sup> On the position of the Wisdom of Ben Sira in early Judaism, see V. Koperski, “Sirach and Wisdom: A Plea for Canonicity,” in *The Biblical Canons* (ed. J.-M. Auwers and H.J. de Jonge; Leuven: Peeters, 2003), 255–64.

<sup>5</sup> T.H. Lim has argued that “in David” is probably best understood “as an elliptical reference to David’s deeds” (“The Alleged Reference to the Tripartite Division of the Hebrew Bible,” *RevQ* 20/77 [2001]: 23–37 [35]). It is true that the Hebrew verb (כִּי הִיפִּיל *hip’il*) can be used in relation to the understanding of the deeds of someone (God, or kings) in Qumran writings, but in the case of 4QMMT C 10 it stands more to reason to interpret the elliptical expression “in David” in light of the preceding terminology,

David.”<sup>6</sup> The Hebrew verb for “to study” used here (לִּפְתּוֹחַ *hip’il*) also occurs in Dan 9:2, again referring to the reading and interpretation of ancient books—in this case the book of Jeremiah.<sup>7</sup>

A third element can be added to these two elements, namely, the fact that the ancient ancestral books were kept in the temple of Jerusalem. This we know from several sources of the time.<sup>8</sup> One of the passages that presupposes books being deposited in the temple can be found in CD (7:14–18). It interprets Amos 5:26 by saying that God will remove the books of the Law and the books of the Prophets “from my tent,” that is, from the temple, to Damascus. According to Josephus the highest authorities of the temple—the chief priests—were responsible for taking care of the collection of biblical books (*C. Ap.* 1.29). The fact that books were deposited in a temple is indeed another indication that these books were held to be important, because depositing them in the temple gave them an official status (cf. Deut 31:26; 2 Kgs 22–23).<sup>9</sup>

These three elements—being ancestral, being an object of study and being deposited in a temple library (or archive)—mark the significance of particular writings of the time. The first and third aspects—being ancestral and being kept in the temple—help us understand why particular books were potentially held in high esteem, but they do not tell us anything about the way, or to what purpose, these books were used. As to this question, the aspect of “study” is most interesting and important because without being studied, the ancient books—the Scriptures—would remain silent objects.<sup>10</sup>

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“in the book, or books of.” In the case of “deeds,” one would have expected an explicit reference in the text. See also the contribution of Émile Puech in this volume.

<sup>6</sup> The text continues thus: “[and the] [events of] ages past.” The expression used here does not refer to writings (*pace* J.C. VanderKam, “Authoritative Literature in the Dead Sea Scrolls,” *DSD* 5 [1998]: 382–402 [388]), as is clear from 4Q270 (see E. Qimron and J. Strugnell, *Qumran Cave 4.V: Miqsat Ma’ase Ha-Torah* [DJD 10; Oxford: Clarendon, 1994], 59).

<sup>7</sup> For the root לִּפְתּוֹחַ alluding to the study of Scriptures, see e.g. CD 10:6; 13:2; 14:7.

<sup>8</sup> See A. van der Kooij, *Die alten Textzeugen des Jesajabuches* (Freiburg, Schweiz: Universitätsverlag, 1981), 332–35; R.T. Beckwith, *The Old Testament Canon of the New Testament Church and Its Background in Early Judaism* (London: SPCK, 1985), 80–86.

<sup>9</sup> On the significance of libraries or archives in antiquity, see K. van der Toorn, “From Catalogue to Canon? An Assessment of the Library Hypothesis as a Contribution to the Debate about the Biblical Canon,” *BiOr* 63 (2006): 5–15.

<sup>10</sup> In addition to the aspect of study, the “public reading” of Scriptures should be mentioned; see A. van der Kooij, “The Public Reading of Scriptures at Feasts,” in *Feasts and Festivals* (ed. C.M. Tuckett; Leuven: Peeters, 2009), 27–44.

To provide an illustration of the study and interpretation of Scriptures,<sup>11</sup> I would like to come back to Jesus ben Sira. According to his grandson, Ben Sira wrote his book, *Wisdom*, on the basis of a thorough knowledge of the Scriptures. If we look at the work itself, however, we need to modify this evaluation. First, there is reason to believe that the sources of wisdom as listed in Sir 39:1–4 imply a wider literary horizon than the ancient books of Israel.<sup>12</sup> Second, the grandfather's book has two parts: the first contains wisdom, in the strict sense of the word (1–43), the second is called the Praise of the Fathers (44–50). As to the issue of the use of Scriptures, there is a great difference between the two sections. There are only a few instances in the first part where passages from the ancient books are alluded to,<sup>13</sup> whereas the second part is heavily based on them:

Throughout these chapters, Ben Sira manifests an easy and thorough familiarity with the earlier Scriptures—the Pentateuch (the Law), Deuteronomy [sic], Joshua, Judges, Samuel and Kings, Chronicles, Nehemiah, Psalms, Proverbs, and Job.<sup>14</sup>

These chapters (44–50) contain a rather detailed depiction of leading figures of ancient Israel. What did Ben Sira want to make clear in this part of his book? As Alexander Di Lella puts it: “he attempts to show how Israel's ancestors have something significant to say to believers of his day.” They could be seen as models of righteous behaviour (cf. 44:10: “Yet these also were godly people whose virtues will not

<sup>11</sup> The term “Scriptures” is used here both for the late Persian and the Hellenistic periods. There is reason to believe that the literature considered authoritative acquired additional significance after the crisis of the years 169–164 B.C.E. in Jerusalem, as the dramatic events of these years resulted in a stronger emphasis on everything “ancestral,” including the ancient books kept in the temple (van der Kooij, “Canonization of Ancient Books,” 36). For a similar observation, see Lange, “Pre-Maccabean Literature,” 288–90.

<sup>12</sup> See P.W. Skehan and A.A. Di Lella, *The Wisdom of Ben Sira* (New York: Doubleday, 1987), 46–50; Van der Kooij, “Canonization of Ancient Books,” 33–35. For a different view as far as 39:1–3 is concerned, see P.C. Beentjes, “Happy the One who Mediates on Wisdom” (*Sir. 14,20*): *Collected Essays on the Book of Ben Sira* (Leuven: Peeters, 2006), 118–20.

<sup>13</sup> For the evidence, see Skehan and Di Lella, *Wisdom of Ben Sira*, 40–44 and Beentjes, *Collected Essays*, 169–86.

<sup>14</sup> Skehan and Di Lella, *Wisdom of Ben Sira*, 500. See also L.L. Grabbe, “The Law, the Prophets, and the Rest: The State of the Bible in Pre-Maccabean Times,” *DSD* 13 (2006): 319–38 (323–27).

be forgotten”) and a source of pride for the contemporary Judeans. There is, however, more to it. The crucial question concerns the role of Sir 50, which contains praise of the high priest Simon. Di Lella considers this chapter to be an appendix,<sup>15</sup> but in recent times many scholars have suggested that the praise of Simon forms an integral part of Sir 44–50. Several features indicate that it is the climax of the whole section.<sup>16</sup> An important structural element in this respect is the agreement between 45:25–26 and 50:22–24.

May his kindness toward Simon be lasting; may he fulfil for him the covenant with Phinehas So that it may be not abrogated for him or for his descendants, while the heaven last. (Sir 50:24)

This statement is closely related to 45:24–25, the passage about the covenant made by God with Phinehas for an eternal high priesthood, which is based on the story about Phinehas in Num 25:6–13 (esp. 12–13). It is striking that, unlike the text in Numbers, Sir 45:24–25 also contains a reference to the covenant with David (concerning kingship). As scholars have convincingly argued, both verses testify to a particular ideology of the time, namely, that the office of high priest was held to include the royal office.<sup>17</sup> Other elements in the writings of Ben Sira support this interpretation of the passage under discussion.

Ben Sira used and interpreted Scriptures, in particular the passage in Num 25, in a way that served political interests. Using and interpreting them in this way helped to legitimize the high priesthood of his day, the office that was held by members of the Oniad family. This was, of course, a matter of major interest since the office of high priest was crucial to the polity of the Jews in the Hellenistic era (see further below).

We know of other examples of the legitimation of leadership on the basis of the Scriptures. An interesting case can be found in the writings (pesharim) from Qumran where the Teacher of Righteousness is presented as the fulfilment of ancient prophecies, such as the prophecies of Habakkuk. This procedure implies that he was seen as the legitimate leader and teacher of the community (in the final days), in contrast to

<sup>15</sup> Skehan and Di Lella, *Wisdom of Ben Sira*, 499.

<sup>16</sup> See J. Corley, “A Numerical Structure in Sirach 44:1–50:24,” *CBQ* 69 (2007): 43–63. Cf. Beentjes, *Collected Essays*, 123–33.

<sup>17</sup> See A. van der Kooij, “The Greek Bible and Jewish Concepts of Royal Priesthood and Priestly Monarchy,” in *Jewish Perspectives on Hellenistic Rulers* (ed. T. Rajak et al.; Berkeley, Calif.: University of California Press, 2007), 255–64 (259–60).

a figure such as the Wicked Priest, who was considered an illegitimate leader on the basis of Scripture. Legitimation by way of a particular interpretation could thus pertain to a particular person as leader, but it could also apply to a type of leadership. For instance, it is likely that the phrase “royal priesthood” in LXX Exod 19:6 refers to the priests as rulers of the Jewish people, pointing to a political ideology very similar to the one expressed in Sir 45:24–25.<sup>18</sup>

The interpretation and application of the books of the ancestors as illustrated by the work of Ben Sira shows that they were used as a source of authority. His reading and understanding of the ancient books made them relevant to his time and to his readers and established the authority of the ancient texts.<sup>19</sup> This is particularly clear when, as argued above, this authority was used to legitimize the priestly leadership of the time.

It needs to be noted that Ben Sira, as well others, made his interpretation explicit by producing a new text. The interpretation offered in writings such as the Wisdom of Ben Sira was presumably taught orally—in the setting of a school—but, for one reason or another, it was also put into writing. Both elements, that of study and teaching in the setting of a school and, more particularly, the production of new books, fit the Hellenistic culture of the time. This period was marked by the appearance of schools and libraries and by a growing reading public (relatively speaking).<sup>20</sup> This may shed light on new literary productions such as those that were based in one way or another on the “ancestral” books.<sup>21</sup> Furthermore, one can imagine that this new climate of book production also had a bearing on the ancient books themselves. It would have stimulated the making of copies for reading and study purposes.<sup>22</sup>

<sup>18</sup> See van der Kooij, “Greek Bible and Jewish Concepts,” 258–59.

<sup>19</sup> This procedure includes several uses of Scriptures, such as quotations, allusions, and forms of rewriting. On quotations and allusions in writings from Qumran, see Lange, “Pre-Maccabean Literature,” 288–90.

<sup>20</sup> See van der Toorn, *Scribal Culture*, 23–25. On the issue of literacy, see also A.I. Baumgarten, *The Flourishing of Jewish Sects in the Maccabean Era: An Interpretation* (Leiden: Brill, 1997), 116–17.

<sup>21</sup> For example, *Jubilees*. See also Lange, “Pre-Maccabean Literature,” 289.

<sup>22</sup> Cf. van der Toorn, *Scribal Culture*, 26; Lange, “Pre-Maccabean Literature,” 290.

The issue of the study of Scriptures discussed above, however, is only part of the picture because to interpret the ancient books one needed persons who were able to do so—“scribes.” In his stimulating study, *Scribal Culture and the Making of the Hebrew Bible*, Karel van der Toorn draws our attention to the role of the scribes, as specialists and people of social standing, in the making of the Hebrew Bible. Similarly, one cannot look at the authoritativeness of Scriptures without paying attention to the role of the scribes—that is to say, to the experts who were responsible for the interpretation of ancient texts. Although, as noted above, a growing number of people were able to read in the Hellenistic period, the interpretation of Scriptures was a matter for specialists.<sup>23</sup> As I will argue, the relationship between the authoritative Scriptures and the role of the scribes is crucial, because the scribes were the appropriate authorities for the interpretation of the ancient books.

This of course raises the question: who were the “scribes”? The answer is too complex to examine in detail here, but the following remarks and observations may suffice to make my point clear.<sup>24</sup> Although various terms are used to designate scribes, the word *sofer* is the most well known. It has different shades of meaning. Primarily, it refers to a scribe in the sense of a secretary, but in sources dating to the late Persian and Hellenistic periods it is also used to denote leading scholars of the time, such as Ezra, the priest (Ezra 7:6), and Ahiqar, a wise counsellor at the court of a king (*The Story of Ahiqar* 1.1 [Aramaic]). Interestingly, in both cases the phrase ספר מִהִיר is used, conveying

<sup>23</sup> Those who were able to read were few in number. Most people learned by *listening* to readings and teachings, particularly as far as the Law was concerned. See, e.g. Neh 8:7–8; the passage of Hecataeus of Abdera quoted above; Josephus, *C. Ap.* 1.175 (about the Sabbath assemblies). See also Baumgarten, *Jewish Sects*, 120–21.

<sup>24</sup> For literature on the subject, see e.g. J. Jeremias, *Jerusalem in the Time of Jesus* (3d ed.; London: SCM, 1976), 233–45; E.J. Schnabel, *Law and Wisdom from Ben Sira to Paul: A Tradition Historical Enquiry into the Relation of Law, Wisdom, and Ethics* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1985), 63–69; D.E. Orton, *The Understanding Scribe: Matthew and the Apocalyptic Ideal* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1989), 39–133; J. Blenkinsopp, *Sage, Priest, Prophet: Religious and Intellectual Leadership in Ancient Israel* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1995); C. Schams, *Jewish Scribes in the Second-Temple Period* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1998); H.-F. Weiss, “Schriftgelehrte: I. Judentum,” *TRE* 30:511–16; Van der Toorn, *Scribal Culture*, 51–108.

the notion of an expert scribe.<sup>25</sup> Other examples of this usage are to be found in Sir 38:24 and in 11QPs<sup>a</sup> 27:2–3 (about David).<sup>26</sup> In these two cases as well as in *The Story of Ahiqar*, the scribe is portrayed as a “wise” man.<sup>27</sup> Such figures belonged to the intellectual elite of their time and held an important position in society (cf. Sir 38:24–39:11).

Nehemiah 8 contains a story that provides a nice illustration of a scholar-scribe as an authority. The story says that Ezra, “priest” and “scribe,” read the book of the law to the people at a public and official meeting and therefore affirmed “the authority of the written word for the life of the community.”<sup>28</sup> The law was thus publicly ratified and brought into force.<sup>29</sup> Such a proclamation of the law, however, is only effective if the people recognize the person conducting the ceremony as an authority.

Interestingly, the Levites also appear in the story of Neh 8 because it is they who are said to help the people understand the law by reading it aloud “clearly” and “by giving its sense” (Neh 8:7–8). In other words, they play the role of teacher (see also 2 Chr 17:7–9).

Thus, Ezra the priest is presented as the leading scholar, whereas the Levites, as teachers of the people, have a lower position. Ezra is the prime authority, as is also clear from another passage in this chapter: “On the second day the heads of father’s houses of all the people, with the priests and the Levites, came together to Ezra the scribe in order to study the words of the law” (Neh 8:13). Ezra is the one who explains the words of the law concerning the stipulations for the Feast of Tabernacles to the heads of families (lay people) and to priests and Levites. It should be noted that the term *sofer* is used only for Ezra as the leading scholar and not for the Levites, who are often consid-

<sup>25</sup> See also Ps 45:2.

<sup>26</sup> See also Enoch, who is designated as a “distinguished scribe” (4Q203 8 4 and 4Q530 2 ii + 6–12 14).

<sup>27</sup> Schams, *Jewish Scribes*, 101–2, argues that one should distinguish between the “scribe” mentioned in Sir 38:24 and the wise men as referred to, in her view, in Sir 38:32–39:11. This is, however, not plausible since the section 38:24–39:11 is best seen as a unity. See, e.g. Beentjes, *Collected Essays*, 115–22.

<sup>28</sup> G.N. Knoppers and P.B. Harvey, Jr., “The Pentateuch in Ancient Mediterranean Context: The Publication of Local Lawcodes,” in *The Pentateuch as Torah: New Models for Understanding Its Promulgation and Acceptance* (ed. G.N. Knoppers and B.M. Levinson; Winona Lake, Ind.: Eisenbrauns, 2007), 105–41 (137).

<sup>29</sup> On this aspect, see J. Schaper, “The ‘Publication’ of Legal Texts in Ancient Judah,” in *Pentateuch as Torah* (ed. Knoppers and Levinson), 225–36 (231).

ered to be “the scribes.”<sup>30</sup> This is not to deny that the Levites played a “scribal” role, but only that they are not designated *sofer* in the sense of a leading scholar.<sup>31</sup>

Nehemiah 8 is instructive for yet another reason: Ezra is not only depicted as priest and scribe (scholar) but is also presented as the leader of the people. The text of Ezra–Nehemiah contains elements which strongly suggest that Ezra is seen as the legitimate priestly leader of the Judean people. He is said to be the son of Seraiah, son of Azariah . . . son of Eleazar, son of Aaron, “the chief priest” (Ezra 7:1–5) and thus is presented as a descendant of the priests who held the office of high priest (see 1 Chr 6:29–41 [MT; RSV: vv. 3–15]). The underlying claim is therefore that Ezra should be seen as the legitimate priestly leader of the Judean people. Since, as far as we know, others held the office of high priest in the Persian period (Neh 12:10–11),<sup>32</sup> this strongly suggests a rival claim. Nevertheless, Ezra is described as the leader of the people as well as the prime expert and interpreter of the law.

This picture of a leading scholar who is also a political leader also arises in other sources of early Judaism. In his description of the Jewish nation, Hecataeus of Abdera (ca. 300 B.C.E.) depicts the high priest as follows:

... authority over the people is regularly vested in whichever priest is regarded as superior to his colleagues in wisdom and virtue. They call

<sup>30</sup> See, e.g. van der Toorn, *Scribal Culture*, 88–96. A greater distinction than that suggested by van der Toorn should be made between Levi and the sons of Levi in documents such as *Jubilees*, on the one hand, and the Levites in books such as Chronicles and Ezra–Nehemiah, on the other. Unlike the latter, the former are about priests and priesthood and not about the Levites as officials below the priests, as in the books mentioned.

<sup>31</sup> See further below. In a few instances the term *sofer* is used for Levites (see 1 Chr 24:6; 2 Chr 34:13; compare the edict of Antiochus III: “scribes of the temple” [Josephus, *A.J.* 12.142]), but in all these cases it does not convey the notion of leading scholar but rather of secretary or administrator. As is clear from Neh 8:7–8 Levites could also teach the law, but here the participle *hip’il* is used (cf. 1 Chr 25:8; 2 Chr 35:3), not *sofer*. On the scribal Levites of Chronicles, see A. Labahn, “Antitheocratic Tendencies in Chronicles,” in *Yahwism after the Exile: Perspectives on Israelite Religion in the Persian Era* (ed. R. Albertz and B. Becking; Assen: Van Gorcum, 2003), 115–35 (123–27).

<sup>32</sup> On this passage, which seems to present a reliable picture of the high priests in the Persian period, see J.C. VanderKam, *From Joshua to Caiaphas: High Priests after the Exile* (Minneapolis, Minn.: Fortress, 2004), 46–49. It is unlikely that Ezra was a high priest in the Persian Yehud. On this issue, see also J.W. Watts, “The Torah as the Rhetoric of Priesthood,” in *Pentateuch as Torah* (ed. Knoppers and Levinson), 319–31 (323 n. 9).

this man the high priest, and believe that he acts as a messenger to them of God's commandments. It is he, we are told, who in their assemblies and other gatherings announces what is ordained, and the Jews are so docile in such matters that straightway they fall to the ground and do reverence to the high priest when he expounds the commandments to them.<sup>33</sup>

According to Hecataeus' source of information, priests under the supreme direction of the high priest ruled the Jewish nation. The latter is said to have assumed authority over the people and to have been the authoritative interpreter of the law.<sup>34</sup> Another example can be found in the *Letter of Aristeas*. Here the high priest Eleazar is described both as the head of the Jewish temple state and as the interpreter of the law (§§128–169).<sup>35</sup> This reminds one of the דורש התורה in Qumran documents (CD 6:7; 7:18; 4Q174 1–2 i 11–12)—“the Interpreter of the Law”—who presumably is also to be seen as a high-priestly leader.<sup>36</sup> In this case we are also dealing with a scholar who, due to his position as leader, is the main authority as far as the interpretation of the law is concerned. All these examples pertain to the interpretation of the law, but we also know of a leading figure and priest who is said to have the wisdom to interpret the words of the prophets—the Teacher of Righteousness.

All in all, “scribes” as scholars were those people who were able to read and interpret the Scriptures and who were therefore specialists who belonged to the intellectual elite of Jewish society. They were men of authority, as they were not only leading scholars but also people who held a high position in the Jewish temple state or in a given Jewish

<sup>33</sup> M. Stern, ed., *Greek and Latin Authors on Jews and Judaism, Vol. I: From Herodotus to Plutarch* (Jerusalem: Israel Academy of Sciences and Humanities, 1974), 28.

<sup>34</sup> Cf. VanderKam, *From Joshua to Caiaphas*, 120–22. See also M. Brutti, *The Development of the High Priesthood during the pre-Hasmonean Period: History, Ideology, Theology* (Leiden: Brill, 2006), 138–41. The idea of priestly rule of the Jewish nation is also known in other sources; see van der Kooij, “The Greek Bible,” 258–60.

<sup>35</sup> On Eleazar in the *Letter of Aristeas*, see VanderKam, *From Joshua to Caiaphas*, 157–67; Brutti, *High Priesthood*, 141–47. For other texts about the leading priests as interpreters and teachers of the law, see, e.g. Deut 33:10; Sir 45:17; *Jub.* 31:15. For Qumran, see F. García Martínez, “Priestly Functions in a Community without Temple,” in *Gemeinde ohne Tempel: Zur Substituierung und Transformation des Jerusalemer Tempels und seines Kultes im Alten Testament, antiken Judentum und frühen Christentum* (ed. B. Ego, A. Lange, and P. Pilhofer; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1999), 303–19 (309–11).

<sup>36</sup> See J.J. Collins, *The Scepter and the Star: The Messiahs of the Dead Sea Scrolls and Other Ancient Literature* (New York: Doubleday, 1995), 114. For another example, see 1 Macc 14:14 (Simon, the high priest, studying the law).

community (such as the Qumran community). As has become clear from the examples given above, the high priest was seen as the highest authority, both as a political leader of the people and as an interpreter of Scriptures, a situation that clearly implies a hierarchy of positions (e.g. Ezra above the Levites; see also below). The fact that scholars were part of the leadership added, of course, to their authority. All this may help us understand the authoritativeness of the Scriptures as they were read, interpreted and taught by the appropriate authorities—leading scholars who were also important officials in society.

In relation to this, a remark on terminology regarding scholars and scribes may be in order. As stated above, the term *sofer* is the best known word for designating a scholar-scribe, but it is not attested to in all the writings referred to above. It is found in Ezra-Nehemiah (for Ezra, the priest), in *The Story of Ahiqar* (for Ahiqar, the wise counsellor), in Sir 38:24 (for the wise scribe), in 11QPs<sup>a</sup> 27:2 (for David) and in 4QEnGiants (for Enoch; see note 26).<sup>37</sup> In all these instances, the term is employed for scholars who are assumed to hold a very high, or even the highest, position in society.

This usage of the term seems to be typical of sources dating from the Persian and Hellenistic periods. In Jewish texts dating from Roman times, the term conveys, among other meanings, a more specific connotation referring to teachers of the written law.<sup>38</sup> Their position was below that of the priests<sup>39</sup> or the wise (the sages). As to the latter, a passage in the Mishnah, *m. Soṭah* 9:15, is illustrative:

R. Eliezer the Great says: Since the day that the temple was destroyed the sages (*hakamim*) began to be like the teachers (*soferim*), and the teachers like the servants, and the servants like the people of the land.

Unlike the usage in earlier days, these texts clearly distinguish the wise (sage) from the scribe who comes after him. Rabbinic sources show an awareness of the difference in meaning, as is clear from the well-known statement in *b. Qidd.* 30a: “the early (sages) were called *soferim*.”<sup>40</sup> In earlier days, the title *sofer* was applied to the wise—sages

<sup>37</sup> An additional instance is to be found in 1 Chr 27:32 (about Jonathan, counsellor of David).

<sup>38</sup> See van der Kooij, *Textzeugen*, 199; Schams, *Jewish Scribes*, 239–51.

<sup>39</sup> For “scribes” below the priests (i.e. the position of the Levites), see e.g. *Tg. 2 Kgs* 23:2. On this issue, see van der Kooij, *Textzeugen*, 199–201.

<sup>40</sup> This usage is also found in the Mishnah (e.g. *m. ‘Or.* 3:9; *m. Yebam.* 2:4; 9:3). See Schnabel, *Law and Wisdom*, 68.

(like Ezra)—but this was no longer the case in Tannaitic times, since scholars of the highest rank were called “sages” (*hakamim*) not *soferim* because this latter term was now only used for scribes whose position was below the sages.

To return to our main topic, the term *sofer*, however, does not occur in the other writings referred to above—Hecataeus of Abdera, *Letter of Aristeeas* and Qumran documents. These sources do refer to leading scholars, literate people and interpreters of Scriptures among the Jews but without making use of the word *sofer*. This also applies to other writings, such as the book of Daniel. In 1:17, Daniel and his three friends are presented as scholars and literates (“God gave them knowledge and proficiency in all literature and wisdom”) who were admitted to the service of the king and were his counsellors, but the term *sofer* is not employed in this verse, nor in the rest of the book. Similarly, the term *sofer* occurs only twice in Qumran documents, 11QPs<sup>a</sup> being one of two instances.<sup>41</sup> There is, however, an interesting case that makes clear that the term was understood in the same way—in the sense of leading scholar—as in the sources dealt with above. In 4QpPs<sup>a</sup> (4Q171), “the skilled scribe” of Ps 45:2 seems to have been identified with the Teacher of Righteousness.<sup>42</sup>

## 4

Two figures play an important role in this contribution—Ben Sira and the high priest of his time (Simon in Sir 50). In the final section, I would like to deal with the question of how Ben Sira as scholar-scribe was related to the high priest, who, as argued above, was considered the prime authority both as a leader and as a scholar/interpreter. In view of the close link between scholarship and leadership this demands some comments on the form of government of the Jewish nation.

<sup>41</sup> Also see 4Q461 2, where the plural *soferim* is found without any context. See E. Tov, “Scribes,” in *Encyclopedia of the Dead Sea Scrolls* (ed. L.H. Schiffman and J.C. VanderKam; New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 2:830–31 (831).

<sup>42</sup> Cf. G.J. Brooke, “Thematic Commentaries on Prophetic Scriptures,” in *Biblical Interpretation at Qumran* (ed. M. Henze; Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 2005), 134–57 (142). The conclusions drawn by Schams, *Jewish Scribes*, 260, with regard to the Qumran evidence (“lack of reference to scribes...scribes were not part of the leadership”) are difficult to accept as they are based too much on the usage and non-usage of *sofer* alone.

In the Hellenistic era, the polity of the Jews in Judea was that of a temple state that developed into a national state under Maccabean rule.<sup>43</sup> The government of the Jewish nation consisted of two elements—first, the ruling priesthood and, second, the council of the elders or the senate (γερονσία).<sup>44</sup> A few passages may illustrate this. According to 1 Macc 7:33, some of “the priests from the temple” and some members of the senate (“elders of the people”) came out from the holy place to extend a friendly welcome to him, that is, Nikanor. In 1 Macc 14:28 a large assembly consisting of “priests,” also called “rulers of the nation,” and “the people,” also designated as “elders of the land,” met in the temple area. This form of government is reflected in the twofold designation of “Aaron and Israel” in the writings from Qumran (e.g. CD 1:7; 6:2; 1QS 5:21–22; 8:5–6; 9:6; 1QSa 2:13–14). The passage CD 6:2–3 is interesting as it speaks of “men of knowledge” (גְבוּנִים) from Aaron and “wise men” (הַכַּמִּים) from Israel. The officials, the leading priests and the representatives of the lay people are depicted here as scholars. Another passage that is of interest is to be found in Josephus, *A.J.* 11.329–339. It tells the story of a meeting between Alexander the Great and the leaders of Jerusalem: “When he (i.e. Jaddus, the high priest) learned that Alexander was not far from the city, he went out with the priests and the body of citizens” (*A.J.* 11.329). This story, whatever its historical reliability or plausibility, also testifies to the leadership being composed of the ruling priesthood—with the high priest at its head—and the body of citizens, the senate.

The ruling priesthood consisted of the priests whose permanent function was in the temple—that is, the deputy priest and the chief priests under the supreme direction of the high priest.<sup>45</sup> The senate, the council of the elders, was formed by the representatives of what was called “the people” // “Israel” (in the sense of the lay people, not the people as a whole; cf. “the heads of the father’s houses” in Neh 8:13).

<sup>43</sup> For this change taking place in the 140s B.C.E. due to the policy aimed at the acquirement of the territories (“inheritance”) of the ancestors (cf. 1 Macc 15:33–34), see D. Mendels, *The Rise and Fall of Jewish Nationalism* (New York: Doubleday, 1992), 83, 134. It should be noted that the temple state of the Jews in the pre-Maccabean period was of a modest nature as far as its territory was concerned, see e.g. the wording of Polybius (quoted in Josephus, *A.J.* 12.136): the Jews “living around the temple.”

<sup>44</sup> For literature on this subject, see e.g. D. Goodblatt, *The Monarchic Principle: Studies in Jewish Self-Government in Antiquity* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1994).

<sup>45</sup> On these high-ranking priests, see Jeremias, *Jerusalem in the Time of Jesus*, 147–82.

To return to Ben Sira, where to position him in the society of his day is disputed. Was he a priest, one of the “scribes of the temple” (Levites), or a member of the senate, the body of elders?<sup>46</sup> Going on the assumption that the picture of the wise scribe in Sir 38–39 also applies to the author himself,<sup>47</sup> there is an element in this passage which may help us further. According to Sir 38:33, the scribe was supposed to be a member of the βουλή, the council of the people. As we know from the writings from Qumran, the council was composed of priests and “men of Israel” (i.e. elders) (see 1QS 8:1; 1QSa 2:11), hence Ben Sira can be regarded as a priest or one of the elders but not a “scribe of the temple” (Levite). Scholars have criticized the view that he might have been a priest. “Ben Sira a pu aimer la liturgie, vénérer les prêtres et la Torah sans être prêtre.”<sup>48</sup> There are indications that suggest that Ben Sira was a lay person, presumably a member of the senate, rather than a priest. Firstly, the passages 38:24–39:11 do not contain any specific element that would point to him being a priest;<sup>49</sup> on the contrary, the perspective of the whole section is that of the lay people of Jewish society of the time and not of the temple and its priesthood. Secondly, the notion of the scribe as wise man fits the idea of being one of the “wise men” of Israel (CD 6:2), that is, a representative of the lay people. Thirdly, passages such as 6:34 and 7:14 strongly suggest a great familiarity with the assemblies of the body of elders. In short, as a scholar and member of the βουλή he was a most influential person, a man of great prestige.

As to how Ben Sira was related to the high priest, Otto Mulder has suggested that he be thought of as a counsellor of the high priest.<sup>50</sup>

<sup>46</sup> For Ben Sira as priest, see e.g. H. Stadelmann, *Ben Sira als Schriftgelehrter* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1980), 222; as belonging to the scribes of the temple, see e.g. T. Middendorp, *Die Stellung Jesu ben Siras zwischen Judentum und Hellenismus* (Leiden: Brill, 1973), 84; and as a lay person, see e.g. L. Schrader, *Leiden und Gerechtigkeit: Studien zu Theologie und Textgeschichte des Sirachbuches* (Frankfurt am Main: Lang, 1994), 303.

<sup>47</sup> Cf. Beentjes, *Collected Essays*, 119.

<sup>48</sup> M. Gilbert, “Siracide,” *DBSup* 12:1389–1437 (1405). See also, P.C. Beentjes, “Recent publications on the Wisdom of Jesus Ben Sira (Ecclesiasticus),” *Bijdragen* 43 (1982): 188–98 (191–93); H.-J. Fabry, “Jesus Sirach und das Priestertum,” in *Auf den Spuren der Schriftgelehrten Weisen: Festschrift für Johannes Marböck* (ed. I. Fischer, U. Rapp, and J. Schiller; Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2003), 265–82 (272–73).

<sup>49</sup> Cf. Weiss, “Schriftgelehrte,” *TRE* 30:511–20 (512).

<sup>50</sup> O. Mulder, *Simon the High Priest in Sirach 50: An Exegetical Study of the Significance of Simon the High Priest as Climax to the Praise of the Fathers in Ben Sira’s Concept of the History of Israel* (Leiden: Brill, 2003), 253.

This makes good sense, the more so since, as noted above, Ben Sira supported and defended the office of high priest. If this was the case, his position and role may be compared to that of scholars serving at the court of a king, such as Ahiqar, or Daniel and his friends.

Leadership was organized hierarchically.<sup>51</sup> The high priest, together with the chief priests and other priests formed the ruling body of the Jewish nation,<sup>52</sup> with the elders and council of elders at the next level of leadership, whereas the Levites occupied a position below the priests within the temple. As sources of the time indicate, priests, Levites and elders (wise men) were authorized to interpret and teach Scriptures.<sup>53</sup> The hierarchy involved, however, would make it reasonable to assume that they did not have the same competences when it came to the interpretation of Scriptures, but this is an issue to be dealt with elsewhere.<sup>54</sup> As indicated in Neh 8:13, this was all carried out under the supervision and guidance of the high priest as the authoritative interpreter. This picture is also implied in the writings of Ben Sira. The relationship between the hymnic passages in Sir 24 (on wisdom) and in Sir 50 (on the high priest) indicates that the high priest was seen as the main authority as far as wisdom and law were concerned.<sup>55</sup>

<sup>51</sup> Passages in Qumran documents that are of interest in this regard are 1QM 2:1–4; 1QS 2:19–23; 6:8–9; 1QSa 2:11–21; CD 14:3–5.

<sup>52</sup> This does not mean to say that everyone at the time agreed upon this form of government. We know of circles that were strongly in favour of a king as leader of the nation (see, e.g. Diod. Sic. 40.2), whereas Qumran documents testify to the model of diarchy.

<sup>53</sup> The priests were the most important experts and scholars, but lay persons (elders/wise men) also played an important role as scholars (such as, presumably, Ben Sira). It is often assumed that non-priestly scholars came to the fore in the wake of Hellenism, but this is not plausible since texts such as Neh 8:13 and 2 Chr 17:7–9 indicate that lay persons (elders) were involved in the study and instruction of the law at an earlier date.

<sup>54</sup> There is reason to believe that leading priests were authorized to interpret dreams and visions. See A. van der Kooij, *The Oracle of Tyre: The Septuagint of Isaiah 23 as Version and Vision* (Leiden: Brill, 1998), 107–8; G.J. Brooke, “Prophecy and Prophets in the Dead Sea Scrolls,” in *Prophets, Prophecy, and Prophetic Texts in Second Temple Judaism* (ed. M.H. Floyd and R.D. Haak; New York: T&T Clark, 2006), 151–65 (162–63).

<sup>55</sup> Both wisdom (Law) and the high priest are depicted as “ministering before God” (24:10 and 50:11–15). On the specific link between Sir 24 and Sir 50, see J.-C.H. Lebram, *Legitimiteit en charisma: Over de herleving van de contemporaine geschiedschrijving in het jodendom tijdens de 2e eeuw v. Chr.* (Leiden: Brill, 1980), 9; A. Fournier-Bidoz, “L’arbre et la demeure: Siracide xxiv 10–17,” *VT* 34 (1984): 1–10 (9); J. Marböck, “Der Hohepriester Simon in Sir 50: Ein Beitrag zur Bedeutung von Priestertum und Kult im Sirachbuch,” in *Treasures of Wisdom: Studies in Ben Sira and the Book of Wisdom*:

Consequently, one can easily imagine that the interpretation of Scriptures offered by the scholars above would be in line with the ideas of the high priest. It is therefore understandable that in the case of polemics the study of Scriptures served the interests of leadership. Sir 45:24–25 is an interesting example in this regard. It may well be that the explanation of Num 25:12–13 by Ben Sira in this passage was not a novel account by the scholar-scribe, but actually part of the priestly or high-priestly ideology of his day.

## 5

Let me summarize and conclude with the following statements.

1. A given set of books were considered authoritative because they were ancestral/ancient, were kept in the temple and were worthy of study.
2. Study of these books is the clearest indication that they really were used as an authoritative source. They were considered significant during the interpreter's time. They could be used, for example, to legitimize leadership, thus serving political interests.
3. Study was not only important for teaching purposes, but it also resulted in the production of new books which were based, in one way or another, on the ancient ones. The book of Ben Sira is a good example, but one can also think of parabiblical texts or writings known as the "rewritten Bible." The phenomenon of book production is best understood against the background of the Hellenistic culture of the time.
4. It should be noted, however, that the ancient books, Scriptures, would not have been seen as carrying any authority if their teachings had not been brought into force and if they had not been studied by the appropriate authorities—the scholar-scribes. Interpretation of books that were considered authoritative required authoritative and authorized persons to bring the ideas into effect.
5. Scholarship and leadership were closely related in the *ethnos* of the Jews or in a given Jewish community within Judaism of the time

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(e.g. the Qumran community). This situation greatly enhanced the authority of the scholars as interpreters of Scriptures.

6. In line with the way the polity of the Jews was organized, the positions of scholars and scribes were ordered in a hierarchical manner. This aspect, the hierarchy of scholarship, should be taken into greater account in research on the scribal culture of early Judaism. The high priest, as the prime authority, stood at the top of the pyramid. He was not only the leader but also a scholar. The interpretation and teaching of the ancient books was under his supervision. It therefore is fully understandable that the interpretation of Scriptures could, if deemed appropriate, serve political interests.
7. This statement about the high priest brings me to my final remark: it really is a great pleasure for me to provide this contribution to a volume in honour of Florentino, precisely because he is such a top scholar.

