

Studies in the Book of Ben Sira

Supplements to the
Journal for the
Study of Judaism

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VOLUME 127

Studies in the Book of Ben Sira

Papers of the Third International Conference on
the Deuterocanonical Books, Shime'on Centre, Pápa,
Hungary, 18-20 May, 2006

Edited by

Géza G. Xeravits
József Zsengellér



BRILL

LEIDEN • BOSTON
2008

This book is printed on acid-free paper.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in Publication data

International Conference on the Deuterocanonical Books (3rd : 2006 : Pápa, Hungary)
Studies in the book of Ben Sira : papers of the Third International Conference on the
Deuterocanonical books, Shime'on Centre, Pápa, Hungary, 18-20 May 2006 / edited by
Géza G. Xeravits, József Zsengellér.

p. cm. — (Supplements to the journal for the study of Judaism ; v. 127)

Includes index.

ISBN 978-90-04-16906-7 (hardback : alk. paper)

1. Bible. O.T. Apocrypha. Ecclesiasticus—Criticism, interpretation, etc.—Congresses.
I. Xeravits, Géza G. II. Zsengellér, József. III. Title. IV. Series.

BS1765.52.I58 2006

229'.406—dc22

2008015444

ISSN: 1384-2161

ISBN: 978 90 04 16906 7

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PRINTED IN THE NETHERLANDS

THE PRESENT VOLUME IS DEDICATED TO
THE TALENTED HUNGARIAN JEWISH SCHOLARS OF ANCIENT JUDAISM
OF THE LAST TWO CENTURIES
ESPECIALLY TO THE MEMORY OF
PROF. DR. ALEXANDER SCHEIBER
(1913-1985)

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PREFACE

The present volume contains papers read at the Third International Conference on the Deuterocanonical Books, organised by the Shime'on Centre for the Study of Hellenistic and Roman Age Judaism and Christianity of the Reformed Theological Academy, Pápa, Hungary. The topic of the conference was the Book of Ben Sira. This book, on the one hand, is an early Jewish document with crucial importance; and, on the other hand, has a "Hungarian relationship." It is well known, that an important fragment of an unknown manuscript of the Hebrew text of Ben Sira was discovered by the rabbi and professor Alexander Scheiber in the Taylor-Schechter Collection (Cambridge) in the early eighties. It is thus appropriate to dedicate this volume to those Hungarian Jewish scholars of the last two centuries, who actively and creatively participated the study of various aspects of ancient Judaism.

The material of this volume can be divided in three main parts. In the first, the authors deal with introductory problems of the complex oeuvre of Ben Sira. The first two essays focus on rarely investigated ancient versions of the book; then its intellectual background is studied. The first part is finished by two complementary articles, touching certain aspects of the question of canon. The second main part of the volume focuses primarily on the wisdom part of Ben Sira. Here we read a treatment of a particular theme (divorce); a methodological and lexicographical essay on the possibility of the identification of the concepts of wisdom and law in Ben Sira; finally, an analysis of the relationship between wisdom thought and the Temple. At the end of the present volume, the reader will find four papers dealing with particular pericopae of the Praise of the Fathers section of the book.

The editors express their deep gratitude to series editors John J. Collins, Florentino García Martínez, and Hindy Najman, who kindly accepted this book for publication in the series of JSJ Supplements; and also to Ms. E. Kekk, who prepared the indices.

Pápa, Hungary
25. February 2008

the editors

LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

AB	Anchor Bible
ABD	<i>The Anchor Bible Dictionary</i>
AGAJU	Arbeiten zur Geschichte des antiken Judentums und des Urchristentums
AOAT	Alter Orient und Altes Testament
APOT	<i>Apocrypha and Pseudepigrapha of the Old Testament</i> (ed. R.H. Charles)
ATD	Das Alte Testament Deutsch
BA	<i>Biblical Archeologist</i>
BBB	Bonner Biblischer Beiträge
BBET	Beiträge zur biblischen Exegese und Theologie
BETL	Bibliotheca Ephemeridum Theologicarum Lovaniensium
<i>Bib</i>	<i>Biblica</i>
<i>BibInt</i>	<i>Biblical Interpretation</i>
BIFAO	<i>Bulletin de l'Institut Français d'Archéologie Orientale</i>
BJs	Brown Judaic Studies
BKAT	Biblischer Kommentar Altes Testament
BN	<i>Biblische Notizen</i>
BS	The Biblical Seminar
BZ	<i>Biblische Zeitschrift</i>
BZAW	Beihefte zur Zeitschrift für die alttestamentliche Wissenschaft
BZRRG	Beihefte zur Zeitschrift für Religions- und Geistesgeschichte
CBQ	<i>Catholic Biblical Quarterly</i>
CBQMS	Catholic Biblical Quarterly Monograph Series
CCSL	Corpus Christianorum Series Latina
ConBNT	Coniectanea Biblica New Testament
CRINT	Compendia rerum iudaicarum ad novum testamentum
CSCO	Corpus Scriptorum Christianorum Orientalium
CSEL	Corpus Scriptorum Ecclesiasticorum Latinorum
DCLY	Deuterocanonical and Cognate Literature Yearbook
DJD	Discoveries in the Judaean Desert
EDSS	<i>The Encyclopedia of the Dead Sea Scrolls</i>
EtBib	Etudes Bibliques
ETR	<i>Etudes theologiques et religieuses</i>
<i>EvTh</i>	<i>Evangelische Theologie</i>
FAT	Forschungen zum Alten Testament
FRLANT	Forschungen zur Religion und Literatur des Alten und Neuen Testament
FzB	Forschung zur Bibel
GCS	Griechischen Christlichen Schriftsteller
HdO	Handbuch der Orientalistik
<i>Hen</i>	<i>Henoch</i>
HSM	Harvard Semitic Monographs
HTR	<i>Harvard Theological Review</i>

HUCA	<i>Hebrew Union College Annual</i>
HUCM	Monographs of the Hebrew Union College
IDB	<i>Interpreters Dictionary of the Bible</i>
IEJ	<i>Israel Exploration Journal</i>
JANES	The Journal of the Ancient Near Eastern Society of Columbia University
JBL	<i>Journal of Biblical Literature</i>
JCS	<i>Journal of Cuneiform Studies</i>
JDS	Judaeen Desert Studies
JEA	<i>Journal of Egyptian Archaeology</i>
JECS	<i>Journal of Early Christian Studies</i>
JJS	<i>Journal of Jewish Studies</i>
JNES	<i>Journal of Near Eastern Studies</i>
JNSL	<i>Journal of Northwest Semitic Languages</i>
JQR	<i>Jewish Quarterly Review</i>
JSHRZ	Jüdische Schriften aus hellenistisch-römischer Zeit
JSJ	<i>Journal for the Study of Judaism</i>
JSJSup	Journal for the Study of Judaism Supplements
JSNTSup	Journal for the Study of the New Testament Supplements
JSOTSup	Journal for the Study of the Old Testament Supplements
JSP	<i>Journal for the Study of the Pseudepigrapha</i>
JSPSup	Journal for the Study of the Pseudepigrapha Supplements
JThS	<i>Journal for Theological Studies</i>
LCL	Loeb Classical Library
LeDiv	Lectio Divina
LThK	<i>Lexikon für Theologie und Kirche</i>
MEFRA	<i>Mélanges de l'École française de Rome</i>
MSU	Mitteilungen des Septuaginta-Unternehmens
NEB	Neue Echter Bibel
NEBAT	Neue Echter Bibel. Altes Testament
NIB	<i>New Interpreter's Bible</i>
NSKAT	Neue Stuttgarter Kommentar. Altes Testament
NTS	<i>New Testament Studies</i>
OBO	Orbis Biblicus et Orientalis
OLA	Orientalia Lovaniensia Analecta
OTL	Old Testament Library
OTP	<i>The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha</i> (ed. J.H. Charlesworth)
PAAJR	<i>Proceedings of the American Academy of Jewish Research</i>
PEQ	<i>Palestine Exploration Quarterly</i>
PG	Patrologia Graeca (ed. Migne)
PL	Patrologia Latina (ed. Migne)
PTSDSSP	The Princeton Theological Seminary Dead Sea Scrolls Project
PWSup	<i>Paulys Realencyclopädie der classischen Altertumswissenschaft Supplement</i>
RAC	<i>Reallexikon für Antike und Christentum</i>
RB	<i>Revue biblique</i>
RBén	<i>Revue bénédictine</i>
REG	<i>Revue des études grecques</i>
RevQ	<i>Revue de Qumrân</i>
RGG	<i>Religion in Geschichte und Gegenwart</i>
RGVV	<i>Religionsgeschichtliche Versuche und Vorarbeiten</i>
RHR	<i>Revue de l'histoire des religions</i>
SBLDS	Society of Biblical Literature Dissertation Series

SBLEJL	Society of Biblical Literature Early Judaism and its Literature
SBLMS	Society of Biblical Literature Monograph Series
SBLSCS	Society of Biblical Literature Septuagint and Cognate Studies
<i>SBLSP</i>	<i>Society of Biblical Literature Seminar Papers</i>
SBS	Stuttgarter Bibelstudien
SC	Sources Chrétiennes
SFSHJ	South Florida Studies in the History of Judaism
SNTSMS	Society for New Testament Studies Monograph Series
STDJ	Studies on the Texts of the Desert of Judah
SPB	Studia Post-Biblica
SVTP	Studia Veteris Testamenti Pseudepigrapha
TANZ	Texte und Arbeiten zum neutestamentlichen Zeitalter
TCAAS	Transactions of the Connecticut Academy of Arts and Sciences
<i>TDNT</i>	<i>Theological Dictionary of the New Testament</i>
TRE	Theologische Realenzyklopädie
TSAJ	Texte und Studien zum Antiken Judentum
TU	Texte und Untersuchungen
<i>TUAT</i>	<i>Texte aus der Umwelt des Alten Testaments</i>
<i>TWNT</i>	<i>Theologisches Wörterbuch zum Neuen Testament</i>
VC	<i>Vigiliae Christianae</i>
VT	<i>Vetus Testamentum</i>
VTSup	Supplements to Vetus Testamentum
WdF	Wege der Forschung
WMANT	Wissenschaftliche Monographien zum Alten und Neuen Testament
WUNT	Wissenschaftliche Untersuchungen zum Neuen Testament
ZÄS	<i>Zeitschrift für ägyptische Sprache und Altertumskunde</i>
ZAW	<i>Zeitschrift für die alttestamentliche Wissenschaft</i>
ZDPV	<i>Zeitschrift des Deutschen Palästina-Vereins</i>
ZNW	<i>Zeitschrift für die neutestamentliche Wissenschaft</i>

THE PRE-EMINENCE OF THE HEBREW LANGUAGE
AND THE EMERGING CONCEPT OF THE "IDEAL TEXT"
IN LATE SECOND TEMPLE JUDAISM

Stefan Schorch
(Kirchliche Hochschule Bethel, Bielefeld)

The prologue to the Book of Ben Sira is one of the most important testimonies to the intellectual culture of Judaism in the 2nd century BCE, specifically in its second half.¹ It reflects the concepts that were crucial for that milieu and may therefore serve as a starting point for its reconstruction. The following paper will focus on some of these concepts, especially regarding the pre-eminence of the Hebrew language as well as the "ideal text."

1. THE PRE-EMINENCE OF THE HEBREW LANGUAGE

From the perspective of the Masoretic text, Hebrew is of course the language in which the sacred scriptures of Israel were composed, apart from only a few passages which are written in Aramaic. We may expect, therefore, that the Hebrew language has been an important marker of Jewish identity throughout the late second temple period, at least in Palestinian Jewry. Unfortunately, explicit and unambiguous statements regarding the Hebrew language coming from that very time are rare and seem not to cover the whole period.

One of the most important testimonies is preserved in the prologue to the Book of Ben Sira, line 6, containing one of the earliest testimonies of the language name "Hebrew." Before we consider it, however, the question may

¹ It has been suggested by Veltri that the prologue dates to the 1st century CE and not, as the dates given by the text itself seem to indicate, to the 2nd century BCE, see G. Veltri, *Eine Tora für den König Talmi: Untersuchungen zum Übersetzungsverständnis in der jüdisch-hellenistischen Literatur* (TSAJ 41, Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck 1994) 139. However, the basis for Veltri's suggestion seems narrow, being formed only by a small number of lexical parallels between the prologue and Greek texts from the 1st century CE, as the writings of Josephus and the New Testament. Moreover, as will be demonstrated below, the concepts of language (especially with regard to the Hebrew language) and translation one encounters in the prologue fit a 2nd century BCE context but much less the 1st century CE. Therefore, the date provided by the prologue itself still seems the most probable and should be followed unless evidence comes to light which proves the contrary.

be asked, whether the passage “things originally said in Hebrew” (αὐτὰ ἐν ἑαυτοῖς Ἑβραϊστὶ λεγόμενα) does indeed refer to the Hebrew language as apart from the Aramaic. In many similar cases it is not easy to know whether a given ancient Jewish source refers to the Hebrew or rather to the Aramaic language, and often there seems to have been made no clear-cut difference in the designation of the two.

This situation is especially problematic with regard to sources composed in Hebrew or Aramaic: So far, the oldest known testimony which is written in Hebrew and attests the designation עִבְרִי (“Hebrew”) comes from the Babylonian Talmud and thus dates only to the period of the 3rd-5th centuries CE. Even in Talmudic times, however, the name עִבְרִי does not specifically refer to the Hebrew language in the modern linguistic sense, but may be applied to the Aramaic language as well, at least to the Aramaic dialect used by Jews.²

If we look at the Greek sources from the first century CE, the situation is essentially the same: Both the New Testament writings and Josephus apply the adverb Ἑβραϊστί and the adjective Ἑβραίς to the Hebrew as well as to the Aramaic language (e.g. John 5:2; Acts 21:40).³ Philo, on the other hand, seems to mix up the two as well, when he applies the word χaldaῖος not a few times to designate the Hebrew tongue, as has been shown by Wong.⁴

It may be surprising, therefore, that the situation is different if we look into sources from the 2nd century BCE, since they are obviously based on a clear distinction of Aramaic and Hebrew. Most prominently, this distinction appears in the *Letter of Aristeas*, composed probably in the second half of the 2nd century BCE:⁵

LetAris 11:4-6: ἑρμηνείας προσδεῖται χαρακτηῖρσι γὰρ ἰδίοις κατὰ τὴν ἰουδαίαν χρώνται.....καὶ φωνῆν ἰδίαν ἔχουσιν. ὑπολαμβάνονται Συριακῆ χρησθαι τὸ δ' οὐκ ἔστιν ἄλλ' ἕτερος τρόπος (“Translation is needed. They use letters characteristic of the language of the Jews [...] They are supposed to use Aramaic [Syriac] language, but this is not so, for it is another language.”)

LetAris 30:1-3: τοῦ νόμου τῶν Ἰουδαίων βιβλία σὺν ἑτέροις ὀλίγοις τισὶν ἀπολείπει τυγχάνει γὰρ Ἑβραϊκοῖς γράμμασι καὶ φωνῆ λεγόμενα (“Books of the law of the Jews, together with few others, are missing [from the library], for these works are written in Hebrew characters and language.”)

² See e.g. M. Jastrow, *A Dictionary of the Targumim, the Talmud Babli and Yerushalmi, and the Midrashic Literature* (Jerusalem: Horeb [reprint of the edition from 1903]) 1040 s.v. עִבְרִי and J. Blau, “Hebrew Language. Biblical. The Names,” in *Encyclopaedia Judaica* (CD-Rom Edition Version 1.0).

³ See E. Schürer, *The History of the Jewish People in the Age of Jesus Christ (175 B.C.-A.D. 135)* (3 vols., rev. and ed. by Geza Vermes, et al., Edinburgh: T&T Clark 1973-1987) 2: 28, note 118, and compare W. Bauer, *Griechisch-Deutsches Wörterbuch zu den Schriften des Neuen Testaments und der übrigen urchristlichen Literatur* (5th edition, Berlin: de Gruyter 1971) 422.

⁴ For details see C.K. Wong, “Philo’s use of Chaldaioi,” *The Studia Philonica Annual* 4 (1992) 1-14.

⁵ Translation from R.J.H. Shutt, “Letter of Aristeas,” in *OTP* 2: 7-34.

The use of Συριστί and ἡ Συριακή φωνή for "Aramaic" is widespread and especially well attested in the Septuagint.⁶ Referring to the fact that the Aramaic language had been the Semitic *lingua franca* of Palestine and beyond, the author tells the king that it is neither the language of the Jews nor of their laws which are instead written in Hebrew script and language (Ἑβραϊκός).

Thus, the cited references allows for two observations:

1. The anonymous author of the *Letter of Aristeas* makes a clear distinction between Hebrew and Aramaic, and
2. The Hebrew language is referred to as "Hebrew" (Ἑβραϊκός).

A similar distinction, although without using the term "Hebrew," may be found in 2 Maccabees:⁷

2 Macc 15:36: [...] ἔχειν δὲ ἐπίσημον τὴν τρισκαιδεκάτην τοῦ δωδεκάτου μηνὸς Ἀδαρ λέγεται τῆ Συριακῆ φωνῆ [...] ("[...] but to celebrate the thirteenth day of the twelfth month—which is called Adar in the Aramaic language [...]")

In this indication of date, the month is given according to two different systems: First according to the system which is known from the Torah and seems to have been generally followed in Palestinian Judaism throughout the late Second Temple period in religious contexts,⁸ namely the numbering of months (τοῦ δωδεκάτου μηνός, "of the twelfth month"). Subsequently, the author mentions the name of the respective month according to the Aramaic system of month names, which had its origin in Mesopotamia, seems to have been adopted by Judaism in the Persian period⁹ and remained in use mainly for secular purposes.¹⁰

As in the *Letter of Aristeas*, the Aramaic language is referred to as "Syriac language" (ἡ Συριακή φωνή).¹¹ The way the author uses the Aramaic name of the month as a kind of explanation ("which is called Adar in the Aramaic language") indicates that the Aramaic month names must have been in use

⁶ In the Septuagint, Συριστί as the counterpart to אֲרָמִית in the Masoretic text occurs in 2 Kgs 18:26//Isa 36:11; Ezra 4:7; Dan 2:4.

⁷ The translation of Biblical texts mostly follows the NRSV, but deviates where it seemed necessary in the context of the present study.

⁸ This system is attested in 1 *Enoch*, *Jubilees*, the *Temple Scroll* and further writings, see J.C. VanderKam, "Calendars, Ancient Israelite and Early Jewish," in *ABD* (CD-Rom version).

⁹ Thus, it is attested in Ezra, Nehemiah, Esther, and Zechariah.

¹⁰ It is followed by the Elephantine Papyri and the Wâdi ed-Daliyeh Papyri, see VanderKam, "Calendars."

¹¹ Van Henten ponders the possibility that ἡ Συριακή φωνή could refer to the (Neo-) Babylonian language, compare J.W. van Henten, "The ancestral language of the Jews in 2 Maccabees," in *Hebrew study from Ezra to Ben-Yehuda* ed. W. Horbury, Edinburgh: T&T Clark 1999) 61. This, however, seems quite impossible within the context of Palestine in the 2nd century BC.

at that time, otherwise the author perhaps would not have mentioned it. Obviously, however, he regarded the first system—the Hebrew numbering of months—as the regular and normal way. Thus, he makes a distinction between the “foreign” Aramaic (Συριακή) and the “indigenous” Hebrew terminology.

Other than in the *Letter of Aristeas*, however, the term “Hebrew” is not attested in 2 Maccabees. Instead, it uses the designation “ancestral language” (ἡ πατριος φωνή): in chapter 7, both the mother and their sons use this language when being pressed to abandon their Jewish religion or to be put into torture and death. Judas raises the battle cry (12,37), and he and his soldiers praise God in that language (15,29). The passages are as follows:

2 Macc 7:8: ὁ δὲ ἀποκριθεὶς τῇ πατρίῳ φωνῇ προσεῖπεν οὐχί (“He replied in the ancestral language and said to them, ‘No.’”)

2 Macc 7:21: ἕκαστον δὲ αὐτῶν παρεκάλει τῇ πατρίῳ φωνῇ (“She encouraged each of them in the ancestral language.”)

2 Macc 7:27: προσκύψασα δὲ αὐτῷ χλευάσασα τὸν ὦμόν τύραννον οὕτως ἔφησεν τῇ πατρίῳ φωνῇ (“But, leaning close to him, she spoke in their ancestral language as follows, deriding the cruel tyrant.”)

2 Macc 12:37: (Ιουδας...) καταρξάμενος τῇ πατρίῳ φωνῇ τὴν μεθ’ ἕμνων κραυγὴν (“In the ancestral language he (i.e. Judas) raised the battle cry, with hymns.”)

2 Macc 15:29: γεινομένης δὲ κραυγῆς καὶ ταραχῆς εὐλόγουν τὸν δυνάστην τῇ πατρίῳ φωνῇ (“Then there was shouting and tumult, and they blessed the Sovereign Lord in the ancestral language.”)

That the expression “ancestral language” refers to the Hebrew language can hardly be doubted,¹² although it has been explained as referring to Aramaic by generations of scholars who took it for granted that Hebrew died out after the exile.¹³ Today we know that this was not the case and that Hebrew at the time of 2 Maccabees even survived as a spoken language.¹⁴ The distinction standing behind the introduction of the two systems of month names discussed above makes it entirely clear that the author indeed intended to present the seven brothers, their mother and Judas as speaking Hebrew. As to the equation of the attribute πατριος and the Hebrew language, it is attested in a similar way in the prologue to the Book of Ben Sira pointing out that the “ancestral books” (line 10: τὰ πατρια βιβλία) are composed in the Hebrew language (line 22).

If we look at these citations in their respective contexts it becomes obvious that the author of 2 Maccabees regarded the Hebrew language as a very important marker of Jewish identity. This is well in line with the observation that during the Hasmonaean period, Hebrew seems to have become a

¹² Similarly D.R. Schwartz, *The Second Book of Maccabees. Introduction, Hebrew Translation, and Commentary* (Jerusalem: Yad Ben-Tzvi 2004) (in Hebrew) 167.

¹³ For details, see van Henten, “The Ancestral Language,” 65-66.

¹⁴ See A. Sáenz-Badillos, *A History of the Hebrew Language* (Cambridge: University Press 1993) 170f.

Judean national symbol as is suggested by its use on the coins of that period.¹⁵

However, the high status ascribed at that time to the Hebrew language was not confined to its being a national symbol but extended to its pre-eminent religious importance. This is most clearly expressed in a further Jewish literary composition from the 2nd century BCE, the *Book of Jubilees*. In chapter 12, the angel who came to dictate the Torah to Moses tells about Abraham learning Hebrew, which has been the language of creation but has been forgotten over generations:

Then the Lord God said to me: 'Open his mouth and his ears to hear and speak with his tongue in the revealed language.' For from the day of the collapse¹⁶ it had disappeared from the mouth(s) of all mankind. I opened his mouth, ears and lips, and began to speak Hebrew with him—in the language of the creation. He took his fathers' books (they were written in Hebrew), and copied them. From that time he began to study them, while I was telling him everything that he was unable (to understand).¹⁷

According to this passage, Hebrew is the language in which the world had been created by God, it is the language of creation, spoken and revealed by God himself, used for the holy writings and spoken by mankind until the fall of the tower of Babylon. It was re-revealed to Abraham when he was chosen by God and, therefore, the use of the Hebrew language is a sign of belonging to the children of Abraham, of belonging to the chosen ones. Thus Hebrew had been considered as the sacred language, even if the first occurrence of the term לְשׁוֹן הַקְּוֹדֶשׁ is attested only in the 1st century BC, in a fragment from Qumran.¹⁸

The translation of the Book of Ben Sira and the composition of its prologue was carried out at around the same time in which the compositions cited above were written. We should suppose, therefore, that the grandson of Ben Sira by using the term Ἑβραϊστῆ was aware not only of the clear-cut distinction between the Hebrew and the Aramaic language, but of the high

¹⁵ See M. Rubin, "The Language of Creation or the Primordial Language: a Case of Cultural Polemics in Antiquity," *JJS* 49 (1998) 313.

¹⁶ I.e., of the tower of Babel, see J.C. VanderKam, *The Book of Jubilees. A Critical Text* (CSCO Sc.Aeth. 87-88, Louvain: Peeters 1989) 73.

¹⁷ *Jub* 12:25-27; translation from VanderKam, *The Book of Jubilees*, 73-74; Ethiopic text according to the critical edition of VanderKam. For detailed treatments of this passage see especially K. Müller, "Die hebräische Sprache der Halacha als Textur der Schöpfung: Beobachtungen zum Verhältnis von Tora und Halacha im Buch der Jubiläen," in *Bibel in jüdischer und christlicher Tradition: Festschrift für Johann Maier zum 60. Geburtstag* (eds. H. Merklein, et al., Frankfurt: Anton Hain 1993) 157-62 and Rubin, "The Language of Creation," 310.

¹⁸ 4Q464, which, although altogether in a poor state of preservation leaving the context in a high degree of uncertainty, clearly preserves these words, see Eshel, Esther and Stone, Michael, "The Holy Language at the End of the Days in Light of a New Fragment Found at Qumran," *Tarbiz* 62 (1992/93) 170-71 and 174 (in Hebrew).

national and religious importance ascribed by his contemporaries to the Hebrew language as well.

2. THE PRE-EMINENCE OF THE HEBREW TEXT

It is within this context that the reflections of the grandson of Ben Sira about the difficulties of his own translation project in particular as well as the difficulties of translating from Hebrew into Greek in general should be interpreted. In lines 15-20 of the prologue he writes as follows:¹⁹

Παρακέκλησθε οὖν μετ' εὐνοίας καὶ προσοχῆς τὴν ἀνάγνωσιν ποιεῖσθαι καὶ συγγνώμην ἔχειν ἐφ' οἷς ἂν δοκῶμεν τῶν κατὰ τὴν ἑρμηνείαν πεφιλοποιημένων τισὶν τῶν λέξεων ἀδυναμεῖν. ("You are invited, therefore, to give a reading with goodwill and attention, and to have forbearance for those things where we may seem to lack ability in certain phrases, despite having labored diligently in the translation.")

Obviously, this passage, especially the last three lines (18-20), refers to possible criticism with regard to the good quality of the text which is in front of the reader. The question is only in which regard the of the text may be questioned: regarding the right rendering of the Hebrew original into the Greek language or regarding the right use of the Greek language? In other words, does the grandson of Ben Sira excuse himself for possibly not translating the original Hebrew correctly into Greek, or rather for not meeting the standards of good Greek?

The first understanding, although often followed,²⁰ seems to be difficult to accept, since we cannot assume that the readers of the Greek Book of Ben Sira had access to the Hebrew original and were able to compare the former with the latter.²¹

The second understanding has been recently elaborated by Benjamin Wright: "[...] the grandson in this passage appears to be asking the reader to

¹⁹ The English text of the prologue follows the translation of Benjamin Wright for the "New English Translation of the Septuagint" (NETS), see B.G. Wright, "Why a Prologue? Ben Sira's Grandson and his Greek Translation," in *Emanuel. Studies in Hebrew Bible, Septuagint and Dead Sea Scrolls in Honor of Emanuel Tov* (eds. S. Paul, et al., VTSup 94, Leiden: Brill 2003) 637.

²⁰ E.g., this understanding forms the basis for the German translation of Georg Sauer: "Laßt euch nun ermahnen, [...] Nachsicht zu haben dort, wo es scheinen könnte, daß wir trotz fleißigen Bemühens bei der Übersetzung in gewissen Fällen nicht ganz den richtigen Sinn getroffen haben." (Sauer, *Jesus Sirach [Ben Sira]* [JSHRZ 3, Gütersloh: Gütersloher Verlagshaus 1981] 505). Compare Wright, "Why a Prologue," 637.

²¹ Generally speaking, the knowledge of Hebrew in Hellenistic Egyptian Jewry seems to have been rather poor, and the Prologue itself seems to support the view that the readers did not know Hebrew, since it says (lines 34f) that the translation has been made "for those living abroad who wish to gain learning", supposing that without translation they would not have been able to read Ben Sira's book, see B.G. Wright, "Access to the Source: Cicero, Ben Sira, the Septuagint and their Audiences," *JSJ* 34 (2003) 14 and compare the explanations of lines 23f of the prologue given below.

forgive any perceived inability of his *in the way he expresses things in Greek.*"²² In his interpretation, Wright stresses the understanding of the word ἔρμηνεία as "expression" over against "translation" or "interpretation." It should be added, however, that an ἔρμηνεία always stands in close connection with the message to be expressed. The term ἔρμηνεία refers to an expression insofar as it is related to a certain content, be it by way of translation, by way of interpretation, or by way of mediating a certain thought in speech or writing. Thus, although ἔρμηνεία in the prologue does indeed refer to the Greek text which lies in front of the reader, this text is clearly conceived as the result of a translation (or interpretation) of the original Hebrew. Most obviously, the translator asks the reader to forgive possible weaknesses of the Greek text which follows the prologue. At the same time, however, he seems to remind him that he had been committed not only to the rules of Greek language and style, but, as a translator, had been obliged to the original as well.

In the following two lines (21-22), the grandson of Ben Sira further develops this argument:

οὐ γὰρ ἰσοδυναμεῖ αὐτὰ ἐν ἑαυτοῖς Ἑβραϊστὶ λεγόμενα καὶ ὅταν μεταχθῆ εἰς ἑτέραν
γλώσσαν ("For those things originally in Hebrew do not have the same force when
rendered into another language.")

This sentence has been understood as a critical view towards translation in general. For instance, Alexander di Lella in his commentary to Ben Sira explains the text as follows:

[T]he grandson articulates the anguish of translators throughout history: how to render one language into another in an idiomatic and accurate way and to capture at least some of the elegance of the original.²³

The passage in question, however, is not a general statement about translation, but is rather a statement about the translation of Hebrew texts, or more specifically: It is a statement about the fundamental difference between a Hebrew text and its translation. According to the grandson of Ben Sira, there is no ἰσοδυναμία "equal force" between the two. Since this argument appears in the context of the grandson's apology for his Greek translation, it is obvious that he believes the Greek to have *less* force than the original Hebrew. It is, therefore, not he as the translator who is "lacking ability" (line 20: ἀδυναμεῖν), but it is the Greek language when used in the translation of a Hebrew text that lacks ability. In order to firmly establish this link, the grandson uses the wordplay between δοκῶμεν...ἀδυναμεῖν "we may seem to lack ability" (line 20) and the immediately following οὐ γὰρ ἰσοδυναμεῖ... "for [they, i.e. the Hebrew original and the Greek translation] do not have the same force" (line 21).

²² Wright, "Why a Prologue," 639 (italics quoted from the original).

²³ P.W. Skehan and A.A. Di Lella, *The Wisdom of Ben Sira* (AB 39, New York: Doubleday 1987) 134.

Wagner in his analysis of the *hapax legomena* in the Book of Ben Sira successfully demonstrated that the meaning of ἰσοδυναμεῖν cannot be restricted to either the semantic or the stylistic dimension. Rather, it means “to have equal effective force in terms of content and form.”²⁴ Thus, according to the grandson of Ben Sira, the translation of a Hebrew text into another language *a priori* does have less effective force on the reader than the Hebrew original.²⁵

What the translator seems to promote here is the view that the content of a given Hebrew text cannot be separated from its being composed in the Hebrew language, since the message is inseparably intertwined with the Hebrew language itself. This view is reminiscent of the semiotic theory of language as advocated in Plato’s *Kratylos* by Kratylos and Sokrates. According to this theory, a very close connection exists between the phonetic appearance of a given word and the thing—or rather the idea of the thing—the word refers to.²⁶ Plato’s *Kratylos*, and specifically the part about etymology in which this theory of language as a naturalistic imitation of the world is developed in detail, was a favourite reading in the Hellenistic period²⁷ and deeply influenced the theory of language current among the Stoics.²⁸

Of course, we cannot know whether or not the grandson of Ben Sira was aware of Plato’s *Kratylos* or the philosophy of the Stoa, be it due to direct or indirect influence. We especially do not know, whether or not the grandson of Ben Sira would have been prepared to extend his view to texts in other languages as well, since the text of the prologue refers to Hebrew texts only. It seems, however, not impossible or even improbable that he was aware of the Platonic and Stoic theories of language,²⁹ and at least he seems to argue in a similar way.

What is certain, however, is that the translator’s theory of mutual dependency of the content and the language of a given Hebrew text fits well with the contemporary views of Hebrew as a sacred language. Due to this high status of the Hebrew language, a text written in Hebrew must have been regarded as in itself more important than a Greek text. The prologue to the

²⁴ “Der Hauptakzent der Aussage liegt bei ἰσοδυναμεῖν zweifellos auf der δύναμις d.h. der (inhaltlichen und ästhetischen) Wirkkraft eines Textes auf seinen Leser,” C. Wagner, *Die Septuaginta-Hapaxlegomena im Buch Ben Sira. Untersuchungen zur Wortwahl und Wortbildung unter besonderer Berücksichtigung des textkritischen und übersetzungstechnischen Aspekts* (BZAW 282, Berlin: de Gruyter 1999) 125.

²⁵ Compare G. Stemberger, “Hermeneutik der Jüdischen Bibel,” in C. Dohmen and G. Stemberger, *Hermeneutik der Jüdischen Bibel und des Alten Testaments* (Stuttgart: Kohlhammer 1996) 52.

²⁶ See M. Kraus, “Platon (428/27-348/47 v. Chr.),” in *Klassiker der Sprachphilosophie: von Platon bis Noam Chomsky* (ed. T. Borsche, München: C.H. Beck 1996) 24-26.

²⁷ See Kraus, “Platon,” 31.

²⁸ According to the Stoics, a given utterance is not just a reference to a certain thing, but it rather bears the thing in itself, cp. „Stoa (Beginn ca. 300 v. Chr.),” in *Klassiker der Sprachphilosophie*, 59.

²⁹ As to Ben Sira himself, influence of the Stoa seems probable, see R. Pautrel, “Ben Sira et le Stoïcisme,” *RSR* 51 (1963) 535-49.

Book of Ben Sira, however, adds a further detail to the pre-eminence of Hebrew: Although a Hebrew text is not exactly untranslatable, it loses a lot of its power during translation. Any translation of a Hebrew text is much less important and less meaningful than the Hebrew original, and it will never have the same impact on the reader. Of course, this is quite different from the view of Aristeas, as we will later see.

3. THE EMERGENCE OF THE ORIGINAL

It seems that this view is closely connected to yet another development: The emergence of the concept of an authoritative "original text." Most obviously, if no translation will succeed to entirely reproduce a given Hebrew text, the Hebrew version always owning a significantly higher rank of authority than the translation, it will be the original against which the translation has to be held and which remains more important anyway.

In lines 23-24, immediately following the passage quoted above, the grandson of Ben Sira brings the Biblical books as an example for the difference between original and translation:

οὐ μόνον δὲ ταῦτα ἀλλὰ καὶ αὐτὸς ὁ νόμος καὶ αἱ προφητεῖαι καὶ τὰ λοιπὰ τῶν βιβλίων οὐ μικρὰν ἔχει τὴν διαφορὰν ἐν ἑαυτοῖς λεγόμενα ("That is true not only for this book, but also the Law itself, the Prophets, and the rest of the books differ no little in the original.")

The way the Hebrew original is introduced at the end of the argument shows that the comparison proceeds from the Greek and not from the Hebrew version of the Law, the Prophecies and the remaining books. This proves, that the grandson of Ben Sira believed his Greek readers to be familiar with the Greek version of these books, but ignorant of the Hebrew text. In light of the preceding lines the "no little difference" obviously refers to the effective force on the reader, supposing that the Greek versions have less of it than the Hebrew original. Thus, the grandson of Ben Sira claims that the reader who really wants to know what is written in these books would have to read the Hebrew original.³⁰

This attitude towards translations seems to have been by no means self-evident in the second half of the 2nd century BCE. The *Letter of Aristeas*, trying to answer the very same question about the authority of the translation, even contradicts the prologue in claiming equal authority for both the Hebrew and the Greek versions of the Torah.³¹ On the other hand, the coincidence that both the *Letter of Aristeas* and the prologue to the Book of Ben Sira

³⁰ Compare Boccaccini's conclusion that for the grandson of Ben Sira, the original Hebrew had primacy "over any translation, whose worth is limited to a didactic role," G. Boccaccini, *Middle Judaism: Jewish Thought, 300 B.C.E. to 200 C.E.* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press 1991) 162.

³¹ See H. Orlinsky, "The Septuagint as Holy Writ and the Philosophy of the Translators," *HUCA* 46(1975) 96-97.

deal with the subject of the original and its authority suggests that this question was being virulent at that time.

Although the grandson of Ben Sira and the *Letter of Aristeas* do not touch the question of the original in general, but rather focus on the original of a translation, the contemporary discussion of the problem does not seem to have been restricted to that field. This conclusion may be drawn if we look on the concepts of the “Heavenly Tablets” and primordial writing contained in the *Book of Jubilees*. As García Martínez has demonstrated, the Heavenly Tablets referred to in this book time and again were ascribed different functions. Most importantly, the Heavenly Tablets are said to record prescriptions running parallel to the text of the Torah³² along with prescriptions not contained in the Torah.³³ In terms of their function, the latter should be compared to the Rabbinic concept of Oral Torah (תורה שבעל פה), as Florentino García Martínez suggests:

The H[eavenly] T[ablets] constitute a hermeneutical recourse which permits the presentation of the “correct” interpretation of the Law, adapting it to the changing situations of life.³⁴

In difference to תורה שבעל פה, however, the prescriptions of the Heavenly Tablets are essentially in writing, as has been pointed out by Hindy Najman.³⁵ It seems, therefore, that the expression “Heavenly Tablets” refers to the concept of a pre-existent written Torah, comprising both the Law as submitted to Moses on Mount Sinai as well as additional written prescriptions. Therefore, the Torah written on the Heavenly Tablets is the “original” as against the Sinaitic Torah known to the reader, and the latter may be interpreted, expanded and possibly even modified with reference to the former, the pre-existent Torah.³⁶

Obviously, the concept of the original facilitates and even creates a critical distance with regard to the actual text which lies in front of the reader. This distance seems to have been something new in the 2nd century BCE,³⁷ and at least it is, to the best of my knowledge, unknown to the books

³² F. García Martínez, “The Heavenly Tablets in the Book of Jubilees,” in *Studies in the Book of Jubilees* (eds. M. Albani, et al., TSAJ 65, Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck 1997) 243–46.

³³ García Martínez, “The Heavenly Tablets,” 251–58.

³⁴ García Martínez, “The Heavenly Tablets,” 258.

³⁵ H. Najman, “Interpretation as Primordial Writing: Jubilees and Its Authority Conferring Strategies,” *JSJ* 30 (1999) 410.

³⁶ The concept of a pre-existent Torah is well known in Rabbinic Judaism, e.g. *SifDev* 37: קדם מפעליו מאז תורה לפי שחביבה מכל נבראת קודם לכל שנאמר [משלי ח כב]: קדם מפי ר' קניי ר' אשיה דרבו. see N.M. Samuelson and G. Stemmerger, “Schöpfer/Schöpfung, IV. Judentum,” in *TRE* 30: 292.

³⁷ According to Albert Pietersma and Benjamin Wright III, the intention of the Septuagint translators was from the very beginning “bringing the reader to the original,” which would imply that already these Greek translators denied their translation any independence from the original, see Wright, “Access,” 24. However, the fact that the Greek translations include numerous exegetical elements, actualizations

of the Hebrew bible. Thus for instance, although the Ten Commandments had been revealed to Moses, the Torah itself suggests that the actual text of the Ten Commandments in Exod 20 and Deut 5 is identical with this early revelation. In other passages, the distance between the reader and the text even seems to be purposefully levelled out. A good example for the latter device is Deut 28:58:

אם לא תשמר לעשות את כל דברי התורה הזאת הכתובים בספר הזה ("If you do not diligently observe all the words of this law that are written in *this book* [...].")

Most obviously, the reader of this passage is supposed to connect the deictic reference "in this book" (בספר הזה) with the book he currently holds in his hands, thus ignoring any possible distance. By contrast to the concept of the "original" versus the actual text, this concept found in Deuteronomy may be called the concept of "ritual presence" of the text,³⁸ the text being present in the course of reading.

The concept of the "original text" seems to be unattested in Judaism prior to the 2nd century BCE. Therefore, the evidence of the prologue to the Book of Ben Sira, the *Letter of Aristeas* and the *Book of Jubilees* suggests that it has been developed as an innovation in the second half of the 2nd century BC. Although the focus of the prologue to Ben Sira and the *Letter of Aristeas*, on the one hand, and of the Book of Jubilees, on the other, seems to be quite different—the latter being focused on the pre-existent Torah, the former on the *Vorlage* of a translation—the essence seems basically identical: The emergence of a distinction between the "original" (or "ideal") and the "actual" text.

As to this distinction, the prologue to the Book of Ben Sira even seems to provide an illuminating Greek terminology which may give the modern reader more insights: The "original" of the translation is called τὰ ἐν ἑαυτοῖς λεγόμενα, which may be literally translated as "the things said in themselves". Since "things" refers to the content, the expression "in themselves" obviously refers to the form, supposing that the "original" is where the content finds its appropriate form and both, content and form, create an ideal union.

The possible counterpart of the terminus τὰ ἐν ἑαυτοῖς λεγόμενα "ideal text" may be found in line 29 of the Book of Ben Sira, although it is not used with regard to a text, but with regard to the measure of Jewish education in Egypt: The grandson of Ben Sira writes as follows (lines 25-29):

as well as adaptations to the world of the translators, seems to stand against this claim, although the perspective of "Übersetzung als Vollendung der Auslegung" as proposed by Martin Rösel with regard to Genesis-LXX, seems to be too extreme in the opposite direction: *Übersetzung als Vollendung der Auslegung. Studien zur Genesis-Septuaginta* (BZAW 223, Berlin: de Gruyter 1994).

³⁸ Compare J.W. Watts, "Ritual Legitimacy and Scriptural Authority," *JBL* 124 (2005) 410-12.

I arrived in Egypt in the thirty-eighth year of the reign of King Euergetes, and during my stay I came across the similarity (ἰσότητος) of a good deal of instruction.

The meaning of the word ἰσότητος is much disputed and not entirely clear. It seems me, however, that Wagner has successfully demonstrated that ἰσότητος should be understood as "similarity."³⁹

Thus, the grandson of Ben Sira expresses his surprise that the Jewish education in Egypt is very similar to the standards he is used to, that is in Palestine, although it is not and will not be identical. It seems to me that this term ἰσότητος is the counterpart to the "original" or "ideal" and similarly could have said with regard to a text, all the more so since the Jewish education in Egypt has been based on a translation.

According to the grandson of Ben Sira, Jewish education in Egypt is only an ἰσότητος, because it is based on an ἰσότητος.

CONCLUSION

In 2nd century BC Judaism, Hebrew and Aramaic were commonly recognized as different languages, the former being a national and a religious identity marker of highest importance. When referring to the Hebrew language and the translation of Hebrew texts, the prologue to the Book of Ben Sira most probably proceeds from this notion of the Hebrew language. The translator adds, however, a further thought: A Hebrew text, when translated, has less effect on the reader than the original. The reason is that the ideal union between form and content which characterizes the original has been destroyed. The theory of language which stands behind this theory of translation has parallels in the theories of language as developed in Plato's *Kratylos* and among the Stoics.

The prologue's reflections about the restricted translatability of Hebrew texts should be seen in the context of the concept of the "ideal text" versus the "actual text," which seems to have been an innovation in 2nd century BCE Judaism.

This concept of the "ideal text," it seems to me, was an important step towards the creation of the concept of "canon," leading to the stabilization of the wording of Hebrew texts from the 1st century BCE onwards.

³⁹ "[...D]as substantivierte Adjektiv ἰσότητος (bezeichnet) in positiver Konnotation eine relativierende Ähnlichkeit (nicht jedoch Gleichheit bzw. -rangigkeit!) gegenüber einem Original [...]" Wagner, *Die Septuaginta-Hapaxlegomena*, 120.