Talmudic Transgressions

Engaging the Work of Daniel Boyarin

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“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:

מה [ירמיהו] עשה ספר באלפא ביתא ויש שם דברים קשים עד שיסתרו אותם בני אדם. אף אני אעשה ספר באלפא ביתא ויהיו שם דברים קשים עד שיסתרוהו בני אדם.³

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.”

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 *דבן סירה ביתא אלפא*, *The Alphabet of Ben Sira*;⁴ 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.⁵ 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.⁶ 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.

says to Ben Sira: ⁷“רבי נשתנו עליך סדרי בראשית” That is: you are unnatural, for rather than being my student, you are my teacher. Ben Sira replies to this:

אין חדש תחת השמש (קהלת א:ט) שהרי ירמיהו כך עשה: לימד לברוך בן נריה ספר איכה. הוא אומר אלה ואומר חוזר ואומר לו איכה ישבה (איכה א:א). וב בבכה תבכה. וכן כולו.⁸

This exchange mirrors the interaction that has just concluded between Ben Sira and the *melammed*, where the *melammed* challenges Ben Sira by saying “Say *aleph*,” and Ben Sira responds by quoting an aphorism. For example, for *aleph* he responds with: ⁹אל תתן דאגה בלבך כי אנשים גבורים הורג דאגה. Again, the comparison is made between Ben Sira’s situation and textual production, on the one hand, and his father’s production of the Book of Lamentations, on the other. This repeated comparison between Ben Sira and Jeremiah highlights the disparity between their compositions, really driving home the transgressive implications of Ben Sira’s comparison of himself to Jeremiah; Jeremiah’s Book of Lamentations was composed in response to the destruction of Jerusalem and the enslavement and exile of Judah, while Ben Sira’s composition comes during a competition with a wicked *melammed*. The competition itself, the process of compiling Ben Sira’s “book” of aphorisms, is comedic, as each time Ben Sira cites an aphorism, the *melammed* applies it to himself, and reveals his moral failings.¹⁰ While the aphorisms prove to be difficult for the *melammed*, its subject—the “matters so difficult” that it addresses—can hardly be compared to the destruction of Jerusalem and exile. Moreover, as previously noted, Lamentations is part of the Jewish biblical canon, the inspired word of God, whereas Ben Sira’s writings were not viewed as Jewish scripture, certainly not at the time of the writing of the *Toldot*.¹¹ Also, in terms of length there is no comparison between the two, for the Book of Lamentations runs through the Hebrew alphabet a total of six times,¹² whereas Ben Sira is only challenged to

7 Yassif, *The Tales*, 211: “My master, the order of creation has been changed for you.”

8 Yassif, *The Tales*, 211–12. “There is nothing new beneath the sun (Eccl. 1:9), for Jeremiah did this [as well]. He taught Baruch Ben Neriah the Book of Lamentations. He [Baruch] said to him ‘say *aleph*’, and he responded with ‘*Alas! Lonely . . .*’ (Lam. 1:1). ‘And bet’: ‘*Bitterly she weeps . . .*’ (Lam. 1:2). And so all of it.”

9 Yassif, *The Tales*, 203: “Do not let worry enter your heart, for worry kills brave men.”

10 In response to the first aphorism quoted above, he becomes fearful, and states: “I have no worries in the world, except that my wife is ugly.” See Yassif, *The Tales*, 203.

11 I will return to the status of the writings of Ben Sira later in this paper.

12 Chapters 1, 2 and 4 of Lamentations each run through the Hebrew alphabet once, and chapter 3 runs through it three times. Chapter 5 does not contain an acrostic of the

run through the Hebrew alphabet once. (Thus, if this "challenge" counts as his literary accomplishment, it falls far short of his father's.) While Ben Sira repeatedly asserts the equivalence between his composition and his father's, then, these repeated assertions only serve to draw attention to how unequal they are. The comparison between Ben Sira and Jeremiah destabilizes the borders between central and peripheral items in the medieval Hebrew literary canon.¹³ It is possible that the author of the *Toldot* has gone out of his way to make Jeremiah the father of Ben Sira, in order to be able to make this comparison; but even if other considerations have led to that choice, and the comparison between Lamentations and Ben Sira's composition is merely an unintended development, the comparison nonetheless destabilizes the canonical borders. As I will show below, the character of Ben Sira is a particularly useful tool for creating such a destabilizing text, because his work, the *Wisdom of Ben Sira*, already occupies a questionable place in Hebrew literary tradition.

Although the Hellenistic-era *Wisdom of Ben Sira* ended up not being accepted as canonical scripture by Jews, it was known and popular, in one form or another, in the Middle Ages, as attested by the various collections of aphorisms and works derived from it, which I have mentioned above. Despite this popularity, any texts attributed to Ben Sira would have a complicated status within the canon of medieval Jewish texts, stemming from rabbinic attitudes to his works. Both the Babylonian and Palestinian Talmuds interpret Rabbi Akiba's opinion in the Mishnah that "one who reads from external books does not have a share in the World to Come," as applying to the Books [*sic.*] of Ben Sira.¹⁴ The comparison that Ben Sira makes between his textual production and that of his father Jeremiah becomes even more fraught: not only should his texts have a lesser status within the canon than the biblical book, perhaps they should not be a part of the canon at all. The choice of writing a pseudo-biography of

Hebrew alphabet, but it consists of twenty-two verses, the number of letters in the Hebrew alphabet.

- 13 Yassif has noted that there is a parallel between some elements of the conception and birth of Ben Sira in the *Toldot* and a tradition about the conception and birth of Jeremiah in *Pesiqta Rabbati*, which he offers as the source for the story about Ben Sira's conception. However, this explanation only works once the author has made a connection between Jeremiah and Ben Sira, but does not explain why the connection was made in the first place.
- 14 In the Babylonian Talmud, b. Sanhedrin 100b, a teaching is cited that says that R. Akiba's statement applies to "the books of the heretics," and Rav Yosef adds that it applies also to the books of Ben Sira. In the Palestinian Talmud, y. Sanhedrin 101, Rabbi Akiba's term "external books" is explained as including the Books of Ben Sira.

Ben Sira seems designed specifically to raise the subject of the canon, for his name is tied directly to earlier discussions of the canon.¹⁵

The author of the *Toldot* shows awareness of, and implicitly engages with, the talmudic discussion of the problematic nature of Ben Sira's writings. He directly connects to this tradition, for all the aphorisms that Ben Sira cites in his answers to the *melammed's* prompts are drawn from the discussion in the Babylonian Talmud regarding the status of the Books of Ben Sira. Moreover, Eli Yassif shows that they are carefully chosen from a specific spot in this debate. After the Talmud cites Rav Yosef's expansion of Rabbi Akiba's statement to include the Book of Ben Sira, Abbaye challenges him to explain what is problematic about the content of the Book of Ben Sira.¹⁶ Abbaye lists several aphorisms that might be seen as problematic, and dismisses them by explaining that they are not. (Nonetheless, it becomes apparent that Rav Yosef disagrees with him, and still sees them as problematic.) The Talmud then lists three aphorisms that both Rav Yosef and Abbaye agree are problematic; then finally, Rav Yosef lists aphorisms from the Book of Ben Sira that he agrees are good, and may be taught. Eli Yassif shows that the original aphorisms that Ben Sira tells the *melammed* in the *Toldot* are mostly based on ones that are deemed permissible by the figures in this talmudic discussion, or at least by Abbaye.¹⁷ There is an example in the *Toldot* that is not on the approved list, and uses some words from the forbidden or problematic aphorisms; but it is a drastic modification of the original, not a quotation.¹⁸ Yassif concludes that the author of the *Toldot*

15 The larger context of Rabbi Akiba's comments quoted above is precisely the borders of the canon—which texts are forbidden, which are permitted, and what status they have.

16 Even this marks the complex status of Ben Sira's writings: Rabbi Akiba's statement seems to be about a category of books that are forbidden because of their status as external books; when Rav Yosef states that this includes the Book of Ben Sira, it seems that he is making a claim about its ontological status, which has nothing to do with its content. Through the debate with Abbaye, not only does the reason for its problematic status change, but even its blanket "forbidden" status is challenged—some of it is permitted, and might even be positive.

17 Yassif shows, based on the manuscript tradition, that the original version of the *Toldot* only included aphorisms for the first half of the Hebrew alphabet, and that the exchange concluded thus: "And so he [Ben Sira] traded words with him [the *melammed*] until he [Ben Sira] fulfilled about him [the teacher] [the] twenty-two chapters of the alphabet." Later traditions add aphorisms for the second part of the alphabet. It is only the earlier layer that draws its aphorisms from the Ben Sira materials in the Talmud, whereas the later ones, which are different in different recessions of the *Toldot*, are not based on talmudic materials.

18 This is the aphorism for the letter *zayin*, which reads thus in the *Toldot*: זלדקן ועבדקן לא: תלעג מהן כי לא תדע מה נגור ערליך. "Do not mock a thin-bearded man or a thick-bearded

has been careful to utilize only Ben Sira materials that are deemed permissible by at least one of the talmudic sages, and thus that there is no "literary or moral deviation" in his use of these materials, and the author is accepting "the moral norms that arise from the argument between these Amoraim."¹⁹ So, ostensibly, the author is following the norms of Jewish tradition, where later generations do not contradict previous ones. At the same time, the way the aphorisms are used in the text serve as a critique of this tradition, for they demonstrate Ben Sira's superiority over the *melammed*, and expose the *melammed's* moral failings. Just as the earlier references to Jeremiah's composition serve to destabilize the border between scripture and non-scripture in the Hebrew canon, this use of material derived from rabbinic sources serves, albeit differently, to raise questions about the relationship between contemporary (medieval) authorship and the authority of the rabbinic canon. This, I argue, is a central concern of the *Toldot*, and becomes apparent through close attention to the beginning of this text.

In order to understand not only how the opening of the *Toldot* subverts the influence of rabbinic textual authority, but also what might be at stake in this move, we need to understand the role that rabbinic texts played in Hebrew literature at the time of the composition of the *Toldot*.²⁰ Rina Drory describes the state of Hebrew literature at the time, saying that there were two canonical models for writing Hebrew prose during this period, *halaka* and *midrash*.²¹ Contemporary authors not only composed their texts following these rabbinic models, but often attributed their works to earlier rabbinic figures. "A classical model dominated, whose norms and items had been fixed hundreds of years

one, since you do not know what has been fated for you." This is based on the following aphorism in the Talmud (which is listed as one of the problematic ones): זלדקן קורטמן: עבדקן סכסכן. "A thin-bearded man is very wise; a thick-bearded one is a fool." Yassif notes that unlike the other cases, where the aphorisms maintain the original sense of the talmudic source, this one is completely different, and cannot be seen as a quotation of the problematic aphorism.

- 19 See Yassif, *The Tales*, 43. The term "Amoraim" refers to talmudic scholars of the post-Mishnaic period, that is, from approximately the year 215 to 500 CE.
- 20 Yassif dates its composition to the final decades of the ninth century, or the beginning of the tenth century. See Yassif, *The Tales*, 19–27 for a detailed discussion of why he reaches this conclusion.
- 21 See Rina Drory, *Models and Contacts: Arabic Literature and its Impact on Medieval Jewish Culture* (Leiden: Brill, 2000), 132–34. Yassif argues that there are two traditions of transmission of the *Toldot*, an Ashkenazic one and an Italian one. There are some minor differences between the two, but they do not affect my overall argument, so, for the sake of simplicity, I will focus on the Italian version.

earlier. Its literary ideal was strict adherence to classical forms, dedicating most of its creative energies to their perpetuation. Accordingly, compositions in the classical model were presented as works of the classical rabbinic period and every effort was made to conceal their contemporaneity.”²²

As a (pseudo)biography of an ancient character, the *Toldot Ben Sira* does not really fit either of these models. However, this is not immediately apparent from the opening of the text, which befits the opening of a work of midrash:

עושה גדולות עד אין חקר ונפלאות עד אין מספר (איוב ט:י). אם נאמר עושה גדולות
למה נאמר ונפלאות עד אין מספר? אלא כיצד פירשו חכמים? עושה גדולות כנגד כל
יצירות שבעולם. ונפלאות עד אין מספר כנגד שלשה שנוצרו ולא שכבו הורתן עם
אדם. ואילו הן: רבי זירא ורב פפא ובן סירא.²³

Not only has the author begun his text with an opening designed to make it appear to belong to one of the canonical prose models available to him, but he has also gone out of his way to suggest that he is quoting an earlier source, as suggested by the words “but how have the sages interpreted it?” In short, this opening seems to fulfill the norms of medieval Hebrew writing described by Drory. Just as the author’s choice of quotations of aphorisms attributed to Ben Sira is, on one level, respectful to the rabbinic model, but on another subverts it, so here, too, his choice to open the *Toldot* with a midrashic-type opening seems to follow canonical norms, but soon it becomes clear that it will be subverting them.

Indeed, while this specific midrash on the verse from Job is not one found in rabbinic sources, it is a possible one, for rabbinic midrashim do note the difficulty in this verse.²⁴ Further on in the opening passage, we see a further attempt to present the *Toldot* as following the canonical rules, namely the inclusion of the two rabbinic figures Rav Pappa and Rabbi Zeira. They are not from the same era as Ben Sira, whether the fictional one created by the *Toldot* (the time of Jeremiah) nor the historical one accepted by scholars (Hellenistic times); nor do they play any role in the rest of the narrative. Thus, it seems that

²² Drory, *Models*, 134.

²³ Yassif, *The Tales*, 197. “[God] performs great deeds that cannot be fathomed, and wondrous things without number (Job 9:10). If Scripture says *great deeds*, why does it also say *and wondrous things without number*? But how have the Sages interpreted it? *Who performs great deeds* stands for all creations in the world; *and wondrous things without number* stands for three who were created without their mother’s sleeping with any man. And these are they: Rabbi Zeira, Rav Pappa, and Ben Sira.”

²⁴ An example can be found in Midrash Tanḥuma (Warsaw version) on Pequdei, section 3.

the author mentions them only to add a rabbinic presence. However, as we look more closely at this opening, we can detect cracks in the façade. The very efforts being made to conceal the contemporaneity of the work reveal that in fact it does not belong to the rabbinic period. The opening continues:

ואמרו על רבי זירא ורב פפא שמימיהן לא סחו סיחת חולין. ולא ישנו בבית המדרש
לא שינת קבע ולא שינת עראי ולא קידמן אדם לבית המדרש ולא מצאן אדם יושבין
ושותקין אלא יושבין ושונין. ולא כינו שם לחביריהם ולא ביטלו קידוש היום ולא
עלתה עמהם קללת חביריהם על מיטתו [sic.] ולא הסתכלו בצלם דמות אדם רשע
לקיים מה שנאמר להנחיל אוהביו [sic.] יש ואוצרותיהם אמלא (משלי ח: כא)²⁵

These practices, whether as a list or separately, are used to describe several rabbinic figures in rabbinic texts, but not the specific two rabbis mentioned here. It is not entirely clear what the point is of the inclusion of this list of practices here in the *Toldot*: is it the result of the unusual birth of these rabbis, or the cause of it? (That is, did God make sure that they would be conceived in a special way because he knew that they would lead exemplary lives?) Eli Yassif notes that in the rabbinic sources, these practices are said to lead to long life, but in our text there is no mention that either of these rabbis enjoyed a long life.²⁶ Moreover, it is not completely clear what the prooftext from Proverbs is doing. Is it suggesting that their practices were their reward—and if so, was it a reward for their unusual birth, or for something else? Alternatively, were their practices what showed that they were “those who love” God—and if so, what was the “substance” and “treasure” that they received, as per the verse?²⁷ One of the rabbis who is described as leading a life that in some elements is similar to Rav Pappa and Rabbi Zeira is Rabbi Yoḥanan ben Zakkai and this is stated

25 Yassif, *The Tales*, 198. “They said about Rabbi Zeira and Rav Pappa that they never had a profane conversation. Nor did they ever sleep in the academy, either for regular sleep or for a nap, nor did anyone come to the academy earlier than they, and one never found them sitting quietly, but always sitting in study. They never called their companions by a derogatory name, and they never failed to recite *Qiddush* on the Holy Day, nor were they honored by the disgrace of their companions, nor went to bed cursing their companions, nor did they look upon the likeness of a wicked person—so that it came true of them what is written: *I endow those who love me with substance; I will fill their treasures* (Prov 8:21).”

26 Yassif, *The Tales*, 198 n. 6.

27 At b. Sanhedrin 100a Rav Dimi transmits, in the name of Rava Bar Mari, a tradition of interpreting this verse from Proverbs as discussing the reward the righteous will receive in the future. Specifically the word “ש” “substance,” which in *Gematriah* has the numerical value of 310, indicates the number of worlds each righteous person will be given. I thank James Redfield for pointing this text out to me.

in a formula similar to the one used by the author of *Toldot*. This description, which is found in the Babylonian Talmud, Sukkah 28a, begins the same way as the one in the *Toldot*: “They said about Rabbi Yoḥanan ben Zakkai that he never had a profane conversation,” and although there are many differences between the rest of the description, there is also some more overlap—significantly it is also said about Rabbi Yoḥanan ben Zakkai: “Nor did he ever sleep in the academy, either for regular sleep or for a nap, nor did anyone come to the academy earlier than him, and one never found him sitting quietly, but always sitting in study”—although not in the same order as it appears in the *Toldot*. However, the verse from Proverbs is not used as a proof text at the end of this description of Rabbi Yoḥanan ben Zakkai. But it does appear later on this page, at the end of another description of him:

אמרו עליו על רבן יוחנן בן זכאי שלא הניח מקרא ומשנה, תלמוד, הלכות ואגדות,
דקדוקי תורה ודקדוקי סופרים, קלים וחמורים וגזרות שוות, תקופות וגימטריאות,
שיחת מלאכי השרת ושיחת שדים ושיחת דקלים, משלות כובסין, משלות שועלים,
דבר גדול ודבר קטן. דבר גדול מעשה מרכבה, דבר קטן הויות דאביי ורבא. לקיים
מה שנאמר להנחיל אהבי יש ואצרתיהם אמלא.
(משלי ח:כא)²⁸

Here it makes sense to use the verse from Proverbs—the “substance” and “treasure” Rabbi Yoḥanan ben Zakkai receives is the complete mastery of all possible subjects. This list of subjects mastered by him corresponds exactly to the list of subjects mastered by Ben Sira later in the *Toldot*.²⁹

It seems that the author is drawing from the two descriptions in tractate Sukkah, both to describe the qualities of Rav Pappa and Rabbi Zeira, and as the basis for the list of subjects mastered by the young Ben Sira.³⁰ But the author is not faithful to his rabbinic source: both by applying it to describe other rabbis than those it is applied to in the Talmud, and by switching the place of the verse from Proverbs so that it becomes a confusing proof-text. When we

28 “They said of Rabbi Yoḥanan Ben Zakkai that he did not leave [unstudied] Scripture, Mishnah, Gemara, Halaka, Aggada, details of the Torah, details of the Scribes, inferences *a minori ad maius*, analogies, calendrical computations, gematrias, the speech of the Ministering Angels, the speech of spirits, the speech of palm-trees, fullers parables, and fox fables, great matters or small matters. ‘Great matters’ mean the Ma’aseh merkabah, ‘small matters’ the discussions of Abaye and Rabba; in order to fulfill what is said, *That I may cause those that love me to inherit substance, and that I may fill their treasures.*”

29 See Yassif, *The Tales*, 212–13.

30 In one version he masters them by the age of seven, in another by the age of twenty.

keep in mind that neither the list of practices nor the verse from Proverbs is necessary for the narrative of the *Toldot* (for the story, and even the midrash on Job, would make perfect sense without them), these coincidences seem like deliberate choices; that is, the author is creating a series of not-quite-proper uses of rabbinic sources, in order to subvert, perhaps subtly, the imperative to make his text seem rabbinic.

One continues to have the sense that the author is subverting the convention when one looks at Yehudah Leib Zlotnik's theory for why the author has chosen Rav Pappa as one of the three individuals born of virgin conception.³¹ Zlotnik offers a quasi-rabbinic source for this: in the Babylonian Talmud, b. Ta'anit 24b, there seems to be a reference to Rav Pappa by his mother's name, Bar Ushparti; the *Arukh* (an eleventh-century lexicon of rabbinic language) deduces from this that the identity of Rav Pappa's father was unknown. According to Zlotnik's theory, this was a common tradition already at the time of the author of the *Toldot*, who therefore chose to include Rav Pappa in his list of three people born of virgin mothers. Scholars have viewed Zlotnik's theory as flawed because there are many other rabbinic sources that provide quite a bit of information about Rav Pappa's father.³² I propose accepting both observations—Rav Pappa might have been chosen because there was a theory that his father was unknown, allowing the author of the *Toldot* to connect to a rabbinic tradition. At the same time, the fact that there are other rabbinic traditions that contradict this allows him to "break" with rabbinic tradition and authority as well. Or, perhaps more precisely, another way to break with the contemporary practice of writing in the rabbinic mode, even as it appears that it is being maintained.

Far from masking the contemporaneity of the *Toldot*, these rabbinic references actually expose a rift between the medieval text and its model. The reference to Rav Pappa exposes the difference between the *Arukh's* tradition about his father's anonymity, on the one hand, and the many other rabbinic sources about the father, on the other. In this light, other elements of the opening emerge as indications that the *Toldot* is not a sincere attempt to pass as a rabbinic text: the fact that the verse from Job mentions that God's wondrous deeds are without number, but the midrash gives us a precise number for

31 He also suggests that Rabbi Zeira might have been chosen because his name resembles the word for semen, *zera*, which will play a significant role in the story of Ben Sira's conception. This may or may not be the case, but it does not affect my argument either way. Yassif discusses Zlotnik's view in *The Tales*, 197 n. 7.

32 Yassif, *The Tales*, 197 n. 7. For an example of a rabbinic story about Rav Pappa's father see b. Bava Meti'a 28b.

them, namely three; the fact that the verse is not commonly associated with birth in rabbinic texts; and the fact that the list of positive actions describing Rabbi Zeira and Rav Pappa is not connected to them in the Talmud. All these point to the fact that this is not an “authentic” rabbinic composition.

Perhaps the most significant gap between our expectations and what we find out regards the manner of conception of these three men. We are told that these three figures are described as “wonders,” because they were conceived by their mothers without intercourse with any man; yet rather than being a miracle, the explanation for this turns out to be quite mundane:

והאיך לידתן אמן בלא בעל אמרו הלכו לבית המרחץ ונכנסה בנקבתן ערן סיד הוי
ונתעברו ומהן נולדו³³

From the initial midrashic reading of the verse in Job, we would expect the conception and birth of these rabbis to be supernatural. In fact, though they are unusual, they would hardly seem to qualify as so unusual as to set them apart from all other conceptions and births ever.

This brings us back to perhaps the most difficult episode in the *Toldot*, the story of how Jeremiah begets Ben Sira. We are told:

פעם אחת הלך ירמיהו הנביא לבית המרחץ וראה כולם בבית המרחץ שהיו מוציין
שכבת זרע ביד. מיד רצה לברוח ולא עזבו אותו... נטלו אותו ואמרו לו מפני מה ראית
אותנו ועכשיו לך ועשה כן גם אתה.³⁴

Although Jeremiah tries to convince them to let him go, and swears by God that he will not tell anyone what he saw, they insist he must masturbate as well and threaten him:

33 Yassif, *The Tales*, 198. “How did their mothers give birth to them without a husband? They said: they went to the bathhouse and Jewish seed entered their vagina, and they became pregnant, and from that they were born.” The Hebrew words here translated as Jewish seed, ערן סיד הוי, have been shown, by Yassif and others to be simply a corruption of ערו סידוהי, which is “זרע יהודים” (Jewish seed) written backwards. Indeed, the Ashkenazi recension has simply “Jewish seed” written forwards. This same textual phenomenon repeats when the *Toldot* discusses the case of Ben Sira’s mother.

34 Yassif, *The Tales*, 198–99: “One time Jeremiah went to the bath house and he saw everyone in the bath house masturbating. At once he wanted to run away, but they did not let him... They took him and said to him: why have you seen us? Now you must do the same as well!”

אם אתה עושה כמונו מוטב ואם לאו נעשה בך מעשה סדום.³⁵

Jeremiah does as they insist, and it is from his semen that Ben Sira's mother conceives. As the text continues:

מיד שמר הקב"ה אותה טיפה עד שבאת בתו של ירמיהו ונכנס ערן בקיבתה.³⁶

So Ben Sira's mother is the daughter of Jeremiah, who conceived him from semen left in the bathhouse by her father. This episode has been very troubling for many scholars, and some have even suggested that it is the work of apostate Jews, who want to portray Judaism in a bad light.³⁷ Yassif argues that the story is not necessarily intended to be scandalous, or reflect negatively on Jeremiah, his daughter or their son; the extreme near-rape aspect of the story, where the men at the bathhouse force Jeremiah to masturbate there, is needed to justify why the respected prophet would leave behind his semen. Even if we accept all this, the event still seems a far cry from being a wondrous deed that sets apart Ben Sira's conception from normal conceptions. Moreover, the story does suggest that there is something unseemly in Jeremiah's daughter conceiving from her father's semen: Ben Sira explains³⁸ why he calls himself "Ben Sira," son of Sira, and not "Ben Yirmeyahu," son of Jeremiah: *גנאי הוא לומר ירמיהו בא על בתו*. Thus, the manner of his conception is at least a bit shameful, not wondrous. The only trace of the miraculous here is the mention that God kept the semen until Jeremiah's daughter came to the bathhouse and became pregnant from it. Again, there is a space between what is promised by the initial midrash on the verse from Job, a wondrous birth and the explanation of how it comes about. This gap, taken with all the other elements that do not quite add up, points to the fact that the author of the *Toldot* is undoing the convention of following rabbinic models of writing—even though it seems, superficially, that that is exactly what he is doing.

35 Yassif, *The Tales*, 199: "If you do as we do, fine; but if not, we will sodomize you!"

36 Yassif, *The Tales*, 199. "At once the Holy One, blessed be He, preserved that drop, till the daughter of Jeremiah came and the seed entered her womb." The Hebrew word here translated as seed is *ערן*, which, as Yassif and others have argued, is a corruption of *ערז*, which is the word *זרע*, "seed," written backwards. Indeed, the Ashkenazic recension of the *Toldot* has *זרע*.

37 See Yassif, *The Tales*, 32–39, for a summary of the various theories about the sources for this episode and its ideological thrust. As we have noted earlier, Yassif argues for a simpler connection between Jeremiah and Ben Sira, and in this connection the ideological element becomes more neutral.

38 Yassif, *The Tales*, 200: "It would be a disgrace to say 'Jeremiah copulated with his daughter.'"

In this paper, we have seen how the *Toldot Ben Sira* disrupts the relationships between literary layers in the medieval Hebrew canon through its choice of subject, Ben Sira; in its choice of genre, biography; and finally, in the way its author manipulates the convention of writing in the style of a rabbinic model. As part of this project, the relationships between father and son and between teacher and student become symbols for the relationship between contemporary texts (and their authors) and earlier ones.