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**Concerning the Early Medieval Hebrew *Pseudo-Sirach* (Improperly: *The Alphabet of Ben Sira*) — the *Life of Ben Sira* and Its Mutually Exclusive Sequels — and Two Early Modern Latin Translations**

**Abstract:** We introduce and summarise a humorous Hebrew literary work from the early Middle Ages, the *Life of Ben Sira* with two mutually exclusive sequels. We also survey translations that circulated among Jews, as well as two Latin translations made by early modern Christian Hebraists.  
**Key words:** Mock-sapiential literature, *Life of Ben Sira*, *The Alphabet of Ben Sira*, medieval Hebrew literature, Marcolf, the Marcolfian tradition, Paul Fagius, Johannes van den Driesche (Drusius).

**1. Widening a Genre: *Pseudo-Sirach*, along with the Marcolfian Tradition, as Mock-Sapiential Literature**

Western Europe’s tradition of humorous exchanges between the boorish yet smart peasant Marcolf and King Solomon belongs in a mock-sapiential genre. Apart from strictly speaking the Marcolfian tradition, we can arguably speak of a Marcolfian genre. Its defining feature is that the plot had a famous king of old faced with an

interlocutor, in what should be a debate about wisdom, but the interlocutor is irreverent: towards high-brow wisdom *and* the King (which is the case of Marcolf *vis-à-vis* King Solomon), or then focusing on the King as being the butt: which is what the child prodigy Ben Sira does to Nebuchadnezzar.

According to an early medieval text in Hebrew, probably from Caliphal Mesopotamia (in the eighth century, according to Eli Yassif),<sup>1</sup> Ben Sira — who bears the name of the eponymous author of the ancient book of wisdom, outside the Jewish biblical canon<sup>2</sup> but mentioned in the talmudic literature — was supposedly born to the prophet Jeremiah's daughter after she was accidentally inseminated at a public bath with her own father's semen. Hence the child's exceptional qualities, but also his socially marginal position owing to the circumstances of his birth — which in the case of Marcolf instead, is because of Marcolf's social class. Unlike the boorish, uneducated Marcolf, the child Ben Sira has received a full education by the time he is faced with Nebuchadnezzar, which is when he is aged seven, according to Version A of *Pseudo-Sirach*, but aged twenty according to the similar, almost only differently worded Version B. Version B became widespread in Italy and Islamic Mediterranean countries, whereas Version A used to be widespread in Central Europe.

## 2. A *Précis*

The baby Ben Sira, born by accidental insemination, speaks right away, and learns prodigiously. Ben Sira's first teacher never had a chance to teach him, as Ben Sira, at the tender age of one year, knew much better than the teacher: for the letters of the alphabet in turn,<sup>3</sup> Ben Sira was able to utter proverbs, and what is more, these suited the circumstances of the teacher, who only had daughters and no son, and who at the time was besotted with a lady neighbour.

Nebuchadnezzar's advisers are envious of the child prodigy, whose fame has reached them, and they plot his demise: they are confident he would be the loser, once the quiz him in the presence of Nebuchadnezzar. The King sends soldiers to fetch Ben Sira, but the child at first sends a letter instead, written on the scalp of a hare.<sup>4</sup> The motif of the irreverent interlocutor who introduces himself to the King by involving a hare is something we also find in a version of a tale about Marcolf, who gives King Solomon a hare, as it is a gift which is not a real gift (because the hare is going to run away).<sup>5</sup> Ben Sira's ulterior motive is apparently different: according to a rabbinic legendary tradition, Nebuchadnezzar, King of Babylon, had become angry at Zedekiah, King of

<sup>1</sup> Eli Yassif (ed.), *The Tales of Ben Sira in the Middle Ages: A Critical Text and Literary Studies* [in Hebrew], Jerusalem: The Magnes Press, 1984.

<sup>2</sup> It was only from 1896, when a leaf brought to England from Egypt by Agnes Lewis and Margaret Gibson was identified by Solomon Schechter as a fragment from the Hebrew text of *Ben Sira*, that fragments of some length of the Hebrew text of *Ben Sira* became known to scholarship. This gives an idea of the book of *Ben Sira* not only being extrabiblical for Judaism, but also having become extraneous to Jewish culture, whereas still in the Middle Ages, some Jews would read it.

<sup>3</sup> Some scholars have pointed out a somewhat similar occurrence of the motif of the child prodigy who knows better than his teacher, in *The Arabic Gospel of the Infancy of the Saviour*, but in the latter, it is the letters themselves and their shapes that are explained.

<sup>4</sup> See E. Nissan, "The Motif of the Hare as a Gift to a Ruler", in this volume: *Rivista di Studi Indo-Mediterranei*, 6).

<sup>5</sup> An alleged occurrence of Marcolf mockingly bringing a hare to King Solomon, an episode apparently blended with the folkloric motif of one who raises to the challenge of bringing a gift that is no gift, is mentioned by Lilian M. C. Randall, "Exempla as a Source of Gothic Marginal Illumination", *The Art Bulletin*, 39(2), 1957, pp. 97–107, on p. 106.

Judah, because the latter came to see him and surprised him in private while Nebuchadnezzar was eating a hare alive. Zedekiah promised he would not tell, but then embarrassed Nebuchadnezzar by making that incident known.

Once in the presence of Nebuchadnezzar, Ben Sira plays an atrocious prank on the King, and by so doing answers the question that the King's advisors required Ben Sira to answer. Ben Sira defeats the King's advisors who are absolutely terrified, and once the King asks him what their fate is to be, Ben Sira condemns them to death. Nebuchadnezzar, and in this he is true to his terrible fame (whereas in much of the plot he is a tolerant and tolerable chap instead), is so impressed with the death sentence that Ben Sira has passed upon his advisers, that he wants to enthrone him: Nebuchadnezzar offers to kill Zedekiah, and enthrone Ben Sira in Jerusalem in his stead. Ben Sira refuses. Why? Because he is only seven, the boy replies.

Nebuchadnezzar subjects Ben Sira to a series of questions. The first one is about how Ben Sira managed to make the scalp of the live hare into parchment. Ben Sira gives the recipe of a preparation which King Solomon had used for the depilation of the legs of the Queen of Sheba, who (notwithstanding nearly four centuries separating them) was Nebuchadnezzar's mother. That claim is a complex intertextual reference to disparate lore from rabbinic tradition, but in the economy of the plot, it is yet another opportunity for Ben Sira to embarrass Nebuchadnezzar, as in order to answer the King's question, he is telling him how making of Nebuchadnezzar's own mother a plaything had been one of Solomon's sexual exploits.

In due course, Nebuchadnezzar is so enchanted with Ben Sira's answers, that he wants him to marry his daughter. Ben Sira refuses, and insolently so. (Version A contains at this point a lengthy interpolated homily: some other author apparently enjoyed so much the carnivalesque situation of reversed roles, in which the champion of the Jews was belittling the champion of their enemies to his face so to speak, that he added an insolent but half baked homily, partly based on an allegory he misremembered and recycled from *Leviticus Rabbah*.)

Nebuchadnezzar is so angry, that he decides to cause Ben Sira to die, and he is unsuccessful at that because for some reason, he does not do it directly. When a multitude of advisors fails to come up with a suitable plan, Nebuchadnezzar has no qualms and has them all executed, but he nevertheless avoids doing the same to Ben Sira. According to a logic which Eli Yassif has reconstructed in his Hebrew critical edition, apparently the idea (somewhat botched as worked into the text of *Pseudo-Sirach*) was that Ben Sira would have to take part in several banquets, and always be served a particular food. There would be a constant turnover of the participants in the banquets, so they would not be harmed by that food, whereas Ben Sira would be harmed by its cumulated consumption.

Ben Sira manages to thwart the plan of the gullible Nebuchadnezzar, because Ben Sira insists that he is to prepare the food himself, and while doing so, he plays tricks. The King sees that that food is making Ben Sira healthier, so he has his own son be so fed, and the son dies. Next, Ben Sira is given the task of healing Nebuchadnezzar's daughter of her constant and unstoppable farting. (One wonders whether it was such an obviously unmarriageable daughter that the King had wishes Ben Sira to wed, earlier on.) Ben Sira's success in bringing about the princess's healing results from her good heart: Ben Sira tells her that the King her father is going to kill him and all other wisemen, unless three days from then they are going to fart non-stop at a meeting when the King is going to so examine them. She takes pity of Ben Sira, and tells him: "Don't worry. I'll do the farting for you". He instructs her to withhold her farting, so that there would be enough of it at the meeting with the King, after three

days. The day comes, and she no longer manages to produce farts. She is healed. From that point on, Nebuchadnezzar tries nothing else against Ben Sira: he asks questions, Ben Sira answers, and Nebuchadnezzar is satisfied, or should we rather say, he is dazzled.

### 3. Concerning the Two Mutually Exclusive Texts Accompanying the *Life of Ben Sira*

In a book in preparation, I provide an English translation of Version A, followed with the translation of a sequel, apparently by a different hand, but in the same vein. I also translate Version B, and an alternative sequel. There is a large commentary, that in 2016 is at an advanced stage of preparation. Two mutually exclusive texts appear together with what Eli Yassif has called *Toldot (Life)*, and which I have described thus far: either the sequel (let us call it *The Life's Sequel*) that continues the *Life* with further questions and answers, or what is properly called *The Alphabet of Ben Sira*, and is an unrelated literary work (that one is quite dissimilar from the Marcolfian genre): it consists of a sequence of proverbs ascribed to Ben Sira, each with an illustrative *tableau*, a narrative rather participating of the same genre of rabbinic homiletics. Confusingly, the entire *Pseudo-Sirach*, including the *Life*, is often called *The Alphabet of Ben Sira*.

The author of *The Life's Sequel* grasped in full the workings of humour in the *Life of Ben Sira*, in that its beginning is a splendidly humorous passage. It is followed with Nebuchadnezzar asking Ben Sira further questions, which Ben Sira answers to the King's unwavering satisfaction. In the beginning of *The Life's Sequel*, Ben Sira instructs the King about how to pay him with the weight in gold of the Giant Ox (the *rē'em*): let the King have a ship built as long as the Red Sea, then let him get the Giant Ox in, let him measure how far up the waterline gets, and then let him get the Giant Ox out, and load the ship with gold up to the waterline.

In *The Life's Sequel*, Ben Sira's answers to the questions he is asked are sometimes incomplete, apparently because copyists (or even the *Sequel's* author) considered them to be known to readers from other sources. An unintended irony of this is that Nebuchadnezzar is dazzled (and is eventually going to pay, once again, the weight of the Giant Ox in gold) by hearing answers that the originally intended audience of *The Life's Sequel* were expected to already know. In that respect, the answers in the *Life of Ben Sira* tend to be more interesting than in *The Life's Sequel*, albeit for entertainment purposes, a modern reader may find both parts interesting.

### 4. The Historical Audience

David Stern has remarked:

This work, which through the centuries has provoked reactions ranging from utter scorn as a thing of blasphemy to pious reverence as a halakhic [i.e., Jewish law] source, is perhaps the most unusual narrative text in all medieval Hebrew literature.<sup>6</sup>

<sup>6</sup> Quoted from p. 21 in the introduction to: David Stern and Mark Jay Mirsky (eds.), *Rabbinic Fantasies: Imaginative Narratives from Classical Hebrew Literature*, Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1990.

Norman Bronznick, in his introduction to his own translation of the version of *Pseudo-Sirach* which Moritz Steinschneider published in 1858, noted:<sup>7</sup>

“The Alphabet” was read as popular entertainment in most rabbinic communities throughout the Middle Ages. In some quarters, however, it enjoyed an unusual respectability. The famous thirteenth-century tosafist<sup>8</sup> Rabbi Peretz of Corbeil, France, used the account of Ben Sira’s conception as a source to demonstrate the halakhic permissibility of artificially inseminating a woman with her father’s sperm (as cited by the Taz in the *Shulhan Arukh*, Yoreh Deah<sup>9</sup> 195:7). Admittedly, this case was exceptional. As a rule, the work was treated in high rabbinic circles with deprecatory neglect — even while some scholars had no objections to savoring its contents.

## 5. A Summary of the Questions Ben Sira Is Asked in the *Life*

Let us summarise the questions to which Nebuchadnezzar subjects Ben Sira in the *Life*. Nebuchadnezzar subjects Ben Sira to a series of questions, which Ben Sira answers proficiently. While so doing, he angers Nebuchadnezzar, who determines to cause Ben Sira to die, and to have Ben Sira himself prescribe how, but withholding from him that he is the one who is condemned to die. In return for that advice, Nebuchadnezzar promises to pay Ben Sira his weight in gold (Version A), or the weight of the quite gigantic wild ox in gold (Version B). Ben Sira understands that he is the intended victim, so he prescribes something that would cause one to prosper in good health. Once Nebuchadnezzar realises this, he feeds that to his own son, who dies. Nebuchadnezzar threatens Ben Sira, so he would heal another, newborn son of his, just as he healed himself and Nebuchadnezzar. The tale of Adam’s first wife, Lilith, is inserted here. Ben Sira heals the baby by using an amulet.

The seventh question Nebuchadnezzar asks is why little children die at the age of eight days. (This is not the same as ancient lore about premature babies who are more likely to die if born after eight months, than if born after seven months.)<sup>10</sup> The ninth question is how to heal Nebuchadnezzar’s daughter, who keeps “sneezing” (but the next question make it likely that farting, which in rabbinic Hebrew is called by the euphemism “sneezing of below”, was intended).

The tenth question is about the reason there are two hairs per follicle all over the human body, except in the head, where there is one hair per follicle. The next two questions are about insects. The thirteenth question, about which I once published an article (about bull-riding), is about why an ox has no hair under his nose. The answer is that Joshua was so fat, that only an ox could carry him riding around Jericho. Joshua rewarded the ox with a kiss, which prevented oxen from having any hair growing between their nose and mouth.<sup>11</sup>

<sup>7</sup> On p. 168 of Stern and Mirsky, *Rabbinic Fantasies*.

<sup>8</sup> The Tosafists from medieval Franco-Germany were commentators of the *Babylonian Talmud*. Their glosses appear on pages of the *Babylonian Talmud*, opposite the earlier commentary by Rashi.

<sup>9</sup> This is the Ashkenazi version of the celebrated halakhic compendium, the *Shulhan Arukh* by Joseph Caro (published in 1565), as used by Sepharid and Oriental Jews. Both versions have been fundamental for halakhic discussions since the early modern period.

<sup>10</sup> Ann Ellis Hanson, “The Eight Months’ Child and the Etiquette of Birth: *Obsit Omen!*”, *Bulletin of the History of Medicine*, 61(4), 1987, pp. 589–602; P. W. van der Horst, “Seven Months’ Children in Jewish and Christian Literature from Antiquity”, *Ephemerides Theologicae Lovanienses*, 54 (1978), pp. 346–360.

<sup>11</sup> See E. Nissan, “On Joshua in Pseudo-Sirach”, *Journal for the Study of the Pseudepigrapha*, 20(3), 2011, pp. 163–218.

Question 14 is about the reason equines pass water precisely where their companions did, and why they snuff their own excreta. Question 15 is about why cats hunt mice. Question 16 is about the enmity of cats and dogs. Question 17 is about the reason the upper lip of a mouse appears to be sewn (Noah had to sew it up, after the cat ripped it open). Question 18 is about the reason the raven walks as though it was dancing. Question 19 is about why ravens' semen is emitted from their mouth. Question 20 is about incest and adultery among animals. Question 21 is why in the sea there are equivalents of earthly animals, except the fox. Question 22 is about the Phoenix. The last question, Q. 23, is about the eagle, and apparently (as per the text in Version B) there is an autobiographical reference by the author of *Pseudo-Sirach*. There is no mention of Nebuchadnezzar's period of madness (cf. *Daniel*).<sup>12</sup>

## 6. Translations of *Pseudo-Sirach*, and Their History

The present translation from medieval Hebrew of *Pseudo-Sirach* was done by using Eli Yassif's critical edition.<sup>13</sup> The Latin title *Pseudo-Sirach* was coined by Moritz

<sup>12</sup> Cf. M. Henze, *The Madness of King Nebuchadnezzar: The Ancient Near Eastern Origins and Early History of Interpretation of Daniel 4* (Supplements to the *Journal for the Study of Judaism*, 61), Leiden: Brill, 1999.

<sup>13</sup> Eli Yassif (ed.), *The Tales of Ben Sira in the Middle Ages: A Critical Text and Literary Studies* [in Hebrew], Jerusalem: The Magnes Press, 1984. Yassif provided a critical edition, on the same page, of Version A and Version B of the *Life (Toldot)* of Ben Sira. For a third, not as full version, see: A[braham] M[eir] Habermann, "Alpha Beta de-Ben Sira: Nusḥa Shlishit" [Hebrew: "The Alphabet of Ben Sira: A Third Version"], *Tarbiz* (Jerusalem), 27 (1958), pp. 64–77. Habermann (1901–1980) looms large in the scholarship concerning medieval Hebrew literature.

On *Pseudo-Sirach*, also see E. Yasif, "Pseudo Ben Sira and the "Wisdom Questions" Tradition in the Middle Ages", *Fabula*, 23 (1982), pp. 48–63; Ephraim Nissan, "On Nebuchadnezzar in Pseudo-Sirach", *Journal for the Study of the Pseudepigrapha*, 19(1), 2009, pp. 45–76; Idem, "On Joshua in Pseudo-Sirach", *Journal for the Study of the Pseudepigrapha*, 20(3), 2011, pp. 163–218 (the latter article is about how Ben Sira answers the question "Why does the ox not have hair under its nose?"; the bull-riding Joshua has various antecedents, and one of the most relevant is apparently a Persian myth about King Ferēdūn); Emile Marmorstein, "A Note on the *Alphabet of Ben Sira*", *Jewish Quarterly Review*. New Series, 41(3), 1951, pp. 303–306; B.C. Kirtley, "Remarks on the Origin and History of an 'Alphabet of Ben Sira' Fable", In: R. Patay, F.L. Utey, and Dov Noy (eds.), *Studies in Biblical and Jewish Folklore*, Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1960, pp. 29–37; Samuel Tobias Lachs, "The Alphabet of Ben Sira: A Study in Folk-Literature", *Graz College Annual of Jewish Studies* (Philadelphia), 2 (1973), pp. 9–28; David Stern, "The Alphabet of Ben Sira and the Early History of Parody in Jewish Literature", in: Hindy Najman and Judith H. Newman (eds.), *The Idea of Biblical Interpretation: Essays in Honor of James L. Kugel*, Leiden: Brill, 2004, pp. 423–448; Gili Orr, *The Medieval Alpha Beta deBen Sira I ("Rishona"): A Parody on Rabbinic Literature or a Midrashic Commentary on Ancient Proverbs?*, master's thesis in Hebrew Language and Culture, supervised by Resianne Smidt van Gelder-Fontaine, Universiteit van Amsterdam, Amsterdam, 2009 (<http://dare.uva.nl/document/142492>); Joseph Dan, "Ḥidat Alpha Beta de-Ben Sira" ["The Enigma of the Alphabet of Ben Sira"], in his book *Hissippur ha'ivri biYemei habbeinayim (Hebrew Tales in the Middle Ages)*, Jerusalem, 1974, pp. 69–78; Israël Lévi, "La Nativité de Ben Sira", *Revue des Études Juives*, 23 (1892), pp. 197–205; Idem, "Les deux Alphabets de Ben Sira", *Revue des Études Juives*, 53 (1907), pp. 62–66; Jacob Reifmann, "The Character of the Book Alpha Beta of Ben Sira" (Hebrew), in *HaKarmel*, 2, (1873), pp. 122–138; A. Epstein, "Alpha Beta de-Ben Sira" [in Hebrew], in *Miqdamoniyot ha-Yehudim* (Vienna, 1887), pp. 119–124. Cf. Louis Ginzberg, "Ben Sira, Alphabet of", in *Jewish Encyclopedia* (New York: Funk and Wagnalls, 1901–1906), Vol. 2 (1902), pp. 678–681 (individual entries, indeed that entire encyclopedia, are now accessible on the Web, at <http://www.jewishencyclopedia.com> whose alphabetic index ignores diacriticals, so it can be more useful when searching for an article whose title is known).

Steinschneider in the mid 19th century,<sup>14</sup> in order to differentiate the medieval tales of Ben Sira (Sirach) from *Sirach* from the Bible Apocrypha (which is not part of the Hebrew Bible). Yassif, *ibid.*, pp. 4–6, discussed how this work has been named. Yassif himself felt the name *Pseudo-Sirach* detracts from the autonomy of this work. By Charles D.D. Taylor (1840–1908), there exists *The Alphabet of Ben Sira*, which appeared in London (with no indication of the publisher) in 1904 and 1907. There exists a facsimile edition of an early print: *The Alphabet of Ben Sira: Facsimile of the Constantinople 1519 Edition* was published in London by the Valmadonna Trust Library in 1997.

*Pseudo-Sirach* is in Hebrew. Yiddish translations were made more than once. There exists a critical edition of a Judaeo-Spanish version of *Pseudo-Sirach* with a translation from Hebrew into Spanish by Elena Romero.<sup>15</sup> Her edition is on facing pages: the pages on the left contain the Judaeo-Spanish version, whereas the pages on the right contain the translation into Spanish of the Hebrew print from Venice, 1544. In the early modern period, *Pseudo-Sirach* was translated into Latin by Christian Hebraists. In fact, Latin translations of the Hebrew-language medieval *Ben Sira*, i.e., *Pseudo-Sirach*, were printed in the 16th century. I am aware of two such translations: one by Paul Fagius,<sup>16</sup> and a later one, by Drusius. Fagius (Rheinzabern, 1504 – Cambridge, 1549) — his original name was *Büchlein* — a Renaissance scholar of Biblical Hebrew.<sup>17</sup> From 1537, he was based in Isny in Bavaria, where he invited the Jewish grammarian and author Elia Levita (see below). “At seventy years of age, Levita left his wife and children and departed in 1540 for Isny, accepting the invitation of Paul Fagius to superintend his Hebrew printing-press there.”<sup>18</sup> They collaborated as authors, and established a Hebrew printing house.<sup>19</sup> Fagius’ academic career had him leave Isny shortly after he published his translation of *Pseudo-Sirach*: a professor in Strasbourg, then Heidelberg, then (to escape the Counter-Reformation)

<sup>14</sup> M. [Moritz, Moshe] Steinschneider’s edition of MS Leiden was entitled in Latin *Alphabetum Siracidis*. Berlin: Friedlaender, 1858. That book is in Hebrew. Steinschneider’s text of *Pseudo-Sirach* was reproduced in: Judah David Eisenstein (ed.), *Bibliotheca Midrashica* (= *Otsar Midrashim*), 2 vols., New York 1915, repr. Bnei-Brak 1990; i.e., *Ozar Midrashim: A Library of Two Hundred Minor Midrashim*, New York: J.D. Eisenstein, 1915.

<sup>15</sup> Elena Romero, *Andanzas y prodigios de Ben-Sirá: Edición crítica de las versiones judeoespañolas impresas y traducción del texto hebreo (Venecia 1544)*, Madrid: Consejo Superior de Investigaciones Científicas [CSIC], 2001. Also see: Eadem, “Versiones judeoespañolas del libro hebreo medieval de *Los relatos de Ben Sirá*” in *History and Creativity in the Sephardi and Oriental Jewish Communities*, Jerusalem, 1994, pp. 177–187; Eadem, “Una versión judeoespañola de *Los relatos de Ben-Sirá* según un manuscrito de la Guenizá de El Cairo”, *Sefarad*, 57 (1997), pp. 399–428; Eadem, “Una nueva versión manuscrita judeoespañola de *Los relatos de Ben-Sirá*”, *Sefarad*, 60 (2000), pp. 305–348; M. Schwab, “Version espagnole des Alphabets de Ben Sira”, *Revue des Études Juives*, 54 (1907), pp. 107–112; S. Poznanski, “La Version espagnole des Alphabets de Ben Sira”, *Revue des Études Juives*, 54 (1907), pp. 279–280.

<sup>16</sup> The British Library, as well the Special Collections at Cambridge, and the University of Leeds, each possess copy of the *Sententiae morales Ben Siraе, vetustissimi authoris Hebraei, qui a Iudaeis nepos Hieremiae prophetae fuisse creditus* (“moral proverbs of Ben Sira, a quite ancient Hebrew author, believed by the Jews to be the grandchild of the prophet Jeremiah”), with a concise commentary (“cum succincto commentario”) — moreover with *Tobias Hebraice, ut is adhuc hodie apud Iudaeos inuenitur* — *Pseudo-Sirach* being translated from Hebrew into Latin by Paul Fagius (“omnia ex Hebraeo in Latinum translate, in gratiam studiosorum linguae sanctae, per Pavlum Fagivm”), Isnae [i.e., in Isny im Allgäu, in Bavaria], 1542.

<sup>17</sup> A biography is: Richard Raubenheimer, *Paul Fagius aus Bergzabern: sein Leben und Wirken als Reformator und Gelehrter*, Grünstadt: Verein für pfälzische Kirchengeschichte, 1957.

<sup>18</sup> [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Elia\\_Levita](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Elia_Levita)

<sup>19</sup> They authored and published together, e.g., *Shemot Devarim* [literally: *Names for Things*], an Old Yiddish-Hebrew-Latin-German dictionary, in 1542.

in Cambridge in 1549, but in that same year he died there of the plague. His remains were exhumed and burned during Mary's Catholic restoration.<sup>20</sup>

The other translator of *Pseudo-Sirach* into Latin was Another translator of *Pseudo-Sirach* into Latin<sup>21</sup> was the Protestant divine, exegete, Hebraist, and Orientalist Johannes van den Driesche, or Drusius (Oudenarde, in Flanders, 1550 – Franeker, Friesland, 1616). At the time when Drusius' translation was printed in the town of Franeker in Friesland, he had been professor of Hebrew at the University of Franeker; he held that post from 1585 to his death. Between 1577 and 1585, Drusius was professor of Oriental languages at the University of Leiden. Arguably, it is a research desideratum to compare the two Latin translations, and to compare these to Version A and Version B of *Pseudo-Sirach*.

It is important that Fagius' translation of *Pseudo-Sirach* was from from his years of collaboration with Elia Levita (Neustadt near Nuremberg, 1469–1549), who is known in Hebrew as Eliyahu Baḥur, and Elye Bokher in Yiddish. In fact, Elia Levita wrote, among the other things, entertainment literature catering to the Jewish public: in 1507–1508, while in Padua, he wrote the *Bovo-Buch*, which was to become the most popular chivalric romance in Yiddish. The metre is one popular in the Italian Renaissance for chivalric romances: the *Bovo-Buch* comprises the 650 *ottava rima* stanzas (of eight lines each). His source of inspiration was the Italian *Buovo d'Altona*, itself based on the Anglo-Norman romance of Sir Bevis of Hampton.<sup>22</sup> What is more, Elia Levita also wrote texts of original humour in Old Yiddish.<sup>23</sup>

There already exists an English translation,<sup>24</sup> made by Norman Bronznick,<sup>25</sup> of Steinschneider's version of *Pseudo-Sirach*. While readable, that translation admittedly had no scholarly ambitions. It has brief endnotes.

<sup>20</sup> [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Paul\\_Fagius](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Paul_Fagius)

<sup>21</sup> In Oxford and Cambridge, as well as at the Wellcome Library and King's College in London, there are copies of the "Proverbs" by Ben Sira, "a quite ancient author believed to be the grandchild of the prophet Jeremiah", translated by Drusius with his commentary: *Prouerbia Ben-Sirae auctoris antiquissimi, qui creditur fuisse nepos Ieremiae prophetae: opera I. Drusii in Latinam linguam conuersa scholijsq[ue] aut potius commentario illustrate. Accessuerunt Adagiorum Ebraicorum decuria aliquot numquam antehaec editae*, Franekerae: Excudebat Aegidius Radaeus, ordinum Frisiae typographus, 1597.

<sup>22</sup> Cf. Claudia Rosenzweig, "From the Square and the Court to the Private Space. Some Remarks on the Yiddish Version of the Chivalric Poem *Bovo d'Antona*", *Zutot* 5.1 (2008), pp. 53–62; Eadem, "La letteratura yiddish in Italia. L'esempio del *Bovo de-Antona* di Elye Bocher", *Acme*, 50(3), 1997, pp. 159–189; Eadem, "*Kurtsvaylike literatur*. Il *Bovo d'Antona* e il romanzo cavalleresco in yiddish nell'Italia del Rinascimento", in *Florilegio filologico linguistico. Haninura de Bon Siman a Maria Luisa Mayer Modena*, edited by Claudia Rosenzweig, Anna Linda Callow, Vermondo Brugnattelli, and Francesco Aspesi, Milan: Cisalpino, 2008, pp. 169–188. There exists an English translation of the *Bovo-Buch*, namely: *Elia Levita Bachur's Bovo-Buch: A Translation of the Old Yiddish Edition of 1541 with Introduction and Notes* by Elia Levita Bachur, translated and notes by Jerry C. Smith, Fenestra Books, 2003. The humour of Eli Levita's occasionally Judaising the behaviour of the *dramatis personae* in the *Bovo-Buch* would not have been lost on his readers.

<sup>23</sup> See: Claudia Rosenzweig, "Rhymes to Sing and Rhymes to Hang Up: Some Remarks on a Lampoon in Yiddish by Elye Bokher (Venice 1514)", in: Shlomo Simonson and Joseph Shatzmiller (eds.), *The Italia Judaica Jubilee Conference* (Brill's Series in Jewish Studies, 48), Leiden: Brill, 2013, pp 143–165.

<sup>24</sup> T. Witton Davies, "Sirach, the Alphabet of", in: James Orr (ed., but †1913), *International Standard Bible Encyclopedia*, Chicago: Howard-Severance Co., 1915 (repr. Grand Rapids, Michigan: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1989) could still write: "The work has been translated into Latin, Yiddish (often), Judeo-Spanish, French and German, but never, so far, completely into English."

<sup>25</sup> Norman Bronznick (trans.), "The Alphabet of Ben Sira", Chapter 8 in: David Stern and Mark Jay Mirsky (eds.), *Rabbinic Fantasies: Imaginative Narratives from Classical Hebrew Literature*, Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1990, pp. 167–202. Those two editors intervened in

That English translation gives a reasonable idea of what *Pseudo-Sirach* is, whereas my own goal here, one quarter of century after Bronznick’s translation, has been to provide a translation of Version A of *Pseudo-Sirach*, to help readers to understand the full implications of notions occurring in the text, and also to let readers get a reasonable impression of the quaint organisation of the text.



Paul Fagius



Johannes van den Driesche (Drusius)

## 7. The Context of my Forthcoming Translation

My translation strives to be literal. The *Vita of Ben Sira* quite frequently resorts to the Hebrew adverb *miyyád* (literally, ‘from hand’), which I translate, as per its standard sense, as “immediately” or “right away”. I did not omit it, even though doing so would have resulted in more idiomatic English.

The following is an example of the stile of Bronznick’s translation of the *Pseudo-Sirach* version as published in Hebrew in 1858 by Steinschneider:<sup>26</sup>

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Bronznick’s translation, taking on board some insights from Eli Yassif’s critical edition that had recently appeared. Bronznick’s introduction explained: “The present translation is based upon the version first published by M. Steinschneider and reprinted in Eisenstein’s *Otsar Midrashim* (1915; reprint, Israel: no publisher, 1969), 1:43–50.”

<sup>26</sup> From pp. 171–172 in Stern and Mirsky, *Rabbinic Fantasies*. That is one of the sample passages from Bronznick’s translation which appear in a review by Josh Yuter, “The Alphabet of Ben Sira: A Not So Divine Comedy”, *Yutopia: The Online Home of Rabbi Josh Yuter*, 20 November 2003, at <http://www.joshyuter.com/2003/11/20/random-acts-of-scholarship/the-alphabet-of-ben-sira/> On that webpage, Yuter remarked that “this stuff is off the charts on the unintentional comedy scale”, and that “Ben Sira was born with a full set of teeth, the intelligence of an adult, and the personality of Stewie from Family Guy.” While exemplifying the questions Ben Sira is able to answer, Yuter listed this:

“My son,” said his mother to Ben Sira, “don’t speak for the evil eye may fix its power on you.”

“The evil eye has no authority over me. Besides, do not try to talk me out of doing what my father did. To me applies the proverb, ‘The ewe takes after the ewe, and the son follows the deeds of his father.’”

“Why do you interrupt me my son?” his mother asked.

“Because you know that I’m hungry, and you give me nothing to eat.”

“Here, take my breasts. Eat and drink.”

“I have no desire for your breasts. Go sift flour in a vessel, knead it into fine bread, and get fatty meat and aged wine – and you can eat with me.”

My own translation of that passage, but from Version A, is as follows (with footnotes omitted; in the original, “he told him” or “he told her” is acronymised as

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which is typical of the talmudic and related literature):

She told him: “My son, why aren’t you afraid of the evil eye?” He told her: “I shall grow [become great] more from being praised by people, and I shall not praise myself. As it is said: ‘Let somebody else praise you, not your own mouth’. Now do not make your speech to me long, until I shall have done like whatever my father did. And concerning me this proverb was said: ‘Ewe follows ewe; and a son, after your father shall be’”. [She retorted:] “Why are you preventing me from talking to you?” He told her: “Because I am hungry, and you are not letting me taste anything”. She told him: “Here you are, get teats, eat your food and drink your drink”. He told her: “Go and get clean bread, and fat meat, and old wine, and eat with me”.

The present context of publication of my own translation requires of course that the latter be accessible to a wide public, and therefore in a sense its aims are rather like Bronznick’s. I am grateful to Jan Ziolkowski for inviting me to do this translation, but within a few months, this project of mine mushroomed into a book-length text, consisting of: an introduction (standing at ninety pages on the day I have written the present introduction to my chapter); an appendix to the introduction, of twenty-four pages, about the most difficult passage to translate, namely, the list of thirty fruit-trees according to the various versions (e.g., Steinschneider’s text of Pseudo-Sirach has Arabic glosses for the fruits, whereas Version B have Italian terminology, often obsolete, and for some items, not easy to identify even for historical linguistics of Italian); a heavily annotated version of the same translation of Version A as given here, but which because of the notes and iconographic material stands at one hundred seventy pages at the time of my present writing; and a likewise heavily annotated translation of *The Life’s Sequel* (fifty-three pages at the time of writing). It is my hope that this full-fledged outcome of the project would appear as a book (catering to an audience of scholars) in the Benjamins books series *Topics in Humor Research*, of which I am the editor. Suffice it to say that the notes about the fruit names in the corresponding passage in the translation of Version A even contain some words in

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“Why were farts created? (Ben Sira also cured Nebuchadnezzar’s daughter who had a thousand every hour. And you thought *I* had a hard time dating)”.

Chinese ideograms, because I had to make use (among the other things) of Berthold Laufer's *Sino-Iranica*.<sup>27</sup>

## 8. An Array of Cultural Parallels

A possibly relevant literary model for the frame story of *Pseudo-Sirach*, such that a child answers the questions made to him by a king, is *King Khusro and His Page/Boy* (*Husraw ī Kawādān ud Rēdag-ē* or *Husrav ī Kavātān-u-ritak* or *Xusraw ud Redag*),<sup>28</sup> a Pahlavi booklet of questions and answers, apparently from the times of the Sasanian king Khusro II (r. 590–628 CE). The questions are made by a kingly character (called Khusro: Khusro I, r. 531–579 CE)<sup>29</sup> answered by a page, not humorously, but with the seriousness of a catechism. The page shows his preparedness, wisdom, and courage, and re-obtains his hierarchic rank. It is a book about the education of the youth of the Persian aristocracy, indeed, it has been claimed, a “manifesto” of aristocratic education, and it describe lore from material culture and how the young within the nobility spent their life. For example, there is a chapter of questions and answers in gastronomy.<sup>30</sup> In the case of *King Khusro and His Page*, there is no antagonism, other than the boy is being tested. There is no defiance of the kind we find in *Pseudo-Sirach*, or in the Marcolfian tradition. Importantly, unlike in the Old French *Book of Sidrach*,<sup>31</sup> we do not have here a wiseman whose goal (like the Christian sage Sidrach, whose very name suggests Sirach, i.e., the ancient Ben Sira) is to provide informative questions that would make the King, who is questioning him, see the light.

That kind of approach has much to do not only with the format of a Christian medieval or later catechism, but also of some scholarly treatises from the Middle Ages and early modern period, in which a teacher teaches a pupil, or then think of Plato's works (e.g., *Cratylus*, on language), in which Socrates is the questioner, and at the same time is teaching, as though he was the one being questioned and providing direct answers. It is far from being the case that in *King Khusro and His Page*, the exchanges are always boring like when a teacher tests a pupil.<sup>32</sup>

<sup>27</sup> Berthold Laufer, *Sino-Iranica: Chinese Contributions to the History of Civilization in Ancient Iran*. Publications of the Field Museum of Natural History. Anthropological Series, Vol. 15, No. 3 (1919), pp. i, iii–iv, 185–597, 599–630 [www.jstor.org/stable/29782155](http://www.jstor.org/stable/29782155)

<sup>28</sup> Samra Azarnouche (ed.), *Husraw ī Kawādān ud Rēdag-ē / Khosrow fils de Kawad et un page* (Cahiers de Studia Iranica, 49), Paris: Association pour l'avancement des études iraniennes, 2013; J.M. Unvala (ed.), *Husrav ī Kavātān u ritak / The Pahlavi Text “King Husrav and his Boy”*, published with its Transcription, translation and copious notes, Dissertation, Paris, n.d.

<sup>29</sup> Khusro I “represents the epitome of the philosopher-king in Sasanian and Near Eastern history. There is so much that has been attributed to him that it is quite difficult to discern fact from fiction. But certainly he was able to capture the imagination of the people of that region even after the fall of the Sasanians and the coming of Islam. Khusro I's reforms and changes to the empire were to become a blue-print for Kings and Caliphs and Sultans alike.” — p. 29 in: Touraj Daryaee, *Sasanian Persia: The Rise and Fall of an Empire* (International Library of Iranian Studies, 11), London: I.B. Tauris, 2009.

<sup>30</sup> Moshe Beer, *The Babylonian Amoraim: Aspects of Economic Life*, 2nd edn. (Hebrew), Ramat-Gan, Israel: Bar-Ilan University Press, 1982, on p. 317, made brief use of the chapter on gastronomy while attempting to reconstruct the material culture of the rabbinical class in Mesopotamia in the period which saw the formation of the *Babylonian Talmud*.

<sup>31</sup> A recent edition is by Ernstpeter Ruhe, *Sydrac le philosophe, Le livre de la fontaine de toutes sciences*, Wiesbaden: Reichert, 2000 (Wissensliteratur im Mittelalter, 34). It was reviewed by J.-Ch. Lemaire in *Scriptorium*, 59, 2005(2), bulletin codicologique n° 668.

<sup>32</sup> Daryaee, *Sasanian Persia*, p. 50: “From the textual and the material evidence the court life and the life of the nobility was extravagant and pleasurable. In the Middle Persian text *Khusro and the Page* (*Xusrō ud Redag*), the various foods, drinks, desserts and games in which the nobility engaged are spelled

In fact, one of the things that emerge from this project (as well as from earlier scholarship, especially by Eli Yassif) is that there is no dearth of Iranic lore relevant for *Pseudo-Sirach*. This must be because in Caliphal Mesopotamia, a Jewish author would have had access to some such lore through the conduit of Arabic texts by Muslim authors, or then because *the Life of Ben Sira* and *The Life's Sequel* are densely interspersed with elements that have an antecedent in the *Babylonian Talmud*, itself written at a time when Mesopotamia was under Persian, Zoroastrian rule.<sup>33</sup>

For example, a prophet's semen floating in the water and eventually inseminating a maiden is a motif well known from Zoroastrian eschatology. Even sacred representations presently performed in Iran include one about a child prodigy, Shams Tabrīzī, who is born to the famous medieval scholar Jalāluddīn Rūmī's disabled daughter, made pregnant because on a day when she was at home alone (the rest of the family were enjoying themselves in the countryside), she attempted suicide by drinking liquid from a bottle. Her father had said that it contained poison. It contained the blood of the daring mystic Manṣūr Ḥallāj,<sup>34</sup> one who historically was executed indeed, but who according to the story (contrary to history) had been condemned to death by the Mulla al-Rūmī, because Ḥallāj was uttering the famous phrase, "*Ana al-Ḥaqq*" (I am the Truth), and it was taken to mean that he was claiming that he was the same as the Deity. Hallaj's blood spills to the ground, it graphically forms Hallaj's own words, "*Ana al-Ḥaqq*." "This deeply disturbs the Mulla. He collects the blood from the ground, puts it in a bottle, and tells his family that it is a strong poison."<sup>35</sup>

Another example of Iranic connection, this time, however, through the *Babylonian Talmud*, is when one of the questions and answers in *The Life's Sequel* is about kinds of fire. The classification of kinds of fire in the answer is lifted from the *Babylonian Talmud*, tractate *Yoma*, 21b (and Ben Sira's answer concludes with a word that apparently means the croup, diphtheria, also a fairly conspicuous theme in talmudic literature), but the classification of fire in *Yoma* 21b in turn is a Judaized version of a Zoroastrian classification of kinds of fire, which appears in *Yasna* 17:11.

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out. We have already mentioned the important court activity of feasting (*bazm*), in which the courtiers gathered, ate, drank, and made merry. [...] Juggling and other performances such as rope-dancing (*rasan wāzīg*), chain-playing (*zanjīr-wāzīg*), pole-climbing (*dār-wāzīg*), snakecharming (*mār-wāzīg*), hoop-springing (*čambar-wāzīg*), arrow-playing (*īr-wāzīg*), cup-juggling (*tās-wāzīg*), rope-walking (*wandag-wāzīg*), air-playing (*andarwāy-wāzīg*), pole-and-shield-playing (*mēx ud sparwāzīg*), armor-playing (*zēr-wāzīg*), ball-playing (*gōy-wāzīg*), javelin-playing (*sil-wāzīg*), dagger-playing (*šamsēr-wāzīg*), club-playing (*warz-wāzīg*), bottle-juggling (*šī šag-wāzīg*), and monkey-playing (*kabīg-wāzīg*) performed before the court, while the cook (*xwahīgaw*) stood attentively beside the fire and the food, covering his mouth so as not to contaminate the royal feast." Cf., on banquet imagery, Rika Gyselen, "Une scène de banquet dans la glyptique sassanide", *Proceedings of the Second European Conference of Iranian Studies held in Bamberg, 30th September to 4th October 1991, by the Societas Iranologica Europaea*, Rome : IsMEO, 1995, pp. 245–254.

<sup>33</sup> For a discussion of similarities in some cultural aspects which can be detected in the *Babylonian Talmud* and in Middle Persian literature, see e.g. in some of the articles in Uri Gabbay and Shai Secunda (eds.), *Encounters by the Rivers of Babylon: Scholarly Conversations Between Jews, Iranians, and Babylonians in Antiquity*, Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2014.

<sup>34</sup> The heterodox, martyred Persian mystic Manṣūr al-Ḥallāj (whose father was a cotton-carder, a *ḥallāj* in Arabic, whereas his grandfather was a Zoroastrian) was born around 858 (244 AH), and was put to death in Baghdad on 26 March 922 (309 AH). Annemarie Schimmel, *Das Ḥallāj-Motiv in der modernen islamischen Literatur. Die Welt des Islams*, new series, 23/24, 165–181, (<http://www.jstor.org/stable/1570670>) discussed al-Ḥallāj as a motif in modern Islamic literatures.

<sup>35</sup> Iraj Anvar, "Peripheral *ta'ziyeh*: The Transformation of *ta'ziyeh* from Muharram Mourning Ritual to Secular and Comical Theatre", *TDR [The Drama Review]*, 49(4), Special Issue on *ta'ziyeh* (Winter, 2005), pp. 61–67. The quotation is from p. 64.

It is important to realise that sometimes, *Pseudo-Sirach* may be demanding for fuller comprehension, if you are to identify not only Scriptural references, but also the intertextual references to the talmudic and midrashic literature. For sure, it is not as demanding as identifying the talmudic references in *Tractate America*, a talmudic parody by Gerson Rosenzweig (1892), a work I have analysed elsewhere,<sup>36</sup> and which is a satire of immigrant life in New York City around 1890, written and (in the regular rather than the chapbook edition) even typeset like a talmudic page. As late as 1929, Gerson Kiss published his talmudic parody *Massekhet Prohibishon (Tractate Prohibition)*, “in which he depicted humorously in talmudic style the many and diverse maneuvers carried out in order to circumvent the laws of prohibition, as well as the mishaps occurring due to the consumption of noxious drinks”.<sup>37</sup>

At any rate, it is relevant to consider *Pseudo-Sirach* also, to some extent, from the perspective of religious parodies.<sup>38</sup> (This is quite plainly essential for a proper understanding of the grafted homily which appears under the letters *Dalet* and *He* in Version A of the *Life* in *Pseudo-Sirach*, and which I annotate accordingly in my own

<sup>36</sup> Concerning the pseudo-talmudic pastiche *Tractate America (Masseikhes Amerike)* by Gerson Rosenzweig (1892), a satire of immigrant life in New York, my papers: Ephraim Nissan, “The Sweat of the (Low) Brow: New York Immigrant Life in Gerson Rosenzweig’s Satire. Facets of his Talmudic Parody *Tractate America*” (under the pre-headline: “2011: The Sesquicentennial of the Birth of America’s Top Hebrew Humorist”), *Israeli Journal of Humor Research*, 1(2), 2012, pp. 29–85; Idem, “Conniving with the Learned: Gerson Rosenzweig’s Humour on New York Communal Life, in his Talmudic Parody *Tractate America*” (under the pre-headline: “2014: The Centennial of the Demise of Gerson Rosenzweig”), *International Studies in Humour*, 3(1), 2014, pp. 15–93; Idem, “The COLUMBUS Model” (2 parts), *International Journal of Computing Anticipatory Systems*, 12 (Liège, Belgium, 2002), pp. 105–120 & 121–136 (with an analysis in diagrams of the first page).

Also see Section 8, “A Case Study Across Media, Visual vs. Literary: Beard’s 1885 Cartoon “Columbia’s Unwelcome Guests”, vs. Mock-Parroting of the Canard in Gerson Rosenzweig’s 1892 Satire *Tractate America*”, on pp. 226–231 in: E. Nissan, “Exploring Two Histories of American Political Cartoons. With a Digression: Late-19th-Century Treatments of the Theme “Immigrants from Europe’s Gutters” as Conveyed Visually, vs. Its Mocking by Parroting in Immigrant Literature (*Tractate America*)”, *International Studies in Humour*, 2(1), 2013, pp. 178–244.

<sup>37</sup> [www.printingthetalmud.org/flashpaper/67.pdf](http://www.printingthetalmud.org/flashpaper/67.pdf) “67. Massekhet Prohibishon — Printing the Talmud”, on p. 300 in *Printing the Talmud: From Bomberg to Schottenstein*, New York: Yeshiva University Museum, online exhibit; <http://www.printingthetalmud.org/home.html> (accessed on 27 February 2014). An example follows; like in the *Talmud*, the *mishnah* is the norm, and the *gemara* is the talmudic elaboration about it.

MISHNAH. How does one hide the drinks? One hides them in the walls and under the floor, in pits, ditches, and caves, in toilets, bathrooms, and any place out of reach of the city guardians. GEMARA. The rabbis have taught: The pious men of olden days used to hide the drinks in the walls and under the floor and in pits, bushes, and caves, but pious men of recent times have decided once and for all that there is no hope of storing them, so they immediately store them in their stomachs.

<sup>38</sup> Is *Pseudo-Sirach* a parody? It is indeed a travesty of wisdom literature. The sense of *parody* has been widened in literary studies in recent decades. See: Simon Dentith, *Parody: The New Critical Idiom*, London: Routledge, 2000; Margaret A. Rose, *Parody / Meta-Fiction: An Analysis of Parody as a Critical Mirror to the Writing and Reception of Fiction*, London: Croom Helm, 1979; Winfried Freund, *Die Literarische Parodie*. Stuttgart, Germany: Metzler, 1981.

A classic about parodies in the narrower sense, the way they appear in Jewish texts, is: Israel Davidson, *Parody in Jewish Literature*, New York: Columbia University Press, 1907; reprinted, New York: AMS Press, 1966. Not as obvious is the classification of some rabbinic texts as parody, in the following: James A. Diamond, “King David of the Sages: Rabbinic Rehabilitation or Ironic Parody?”, *Prooftexts*, 27 (2007), pp. 373–426; Holger Michael Zellentin, *Rabbinic Parodies of Jewish and Christian Literature* (Texts and Studies in Ancient Judaism, 139), Tübingen, Germany: Mohr Siebeck, 2011.

translation.) In the conclusions of her dissertation, Gili Orr<sup>39</sup> has pointed out (contrary to how Joseph Dan<sup>40</sup> understood the attitude of the author of *Pseudo-Sirach*):

Research has shown that medieval religious parodies,<sup>41</sup> in the Christian world as well as in the Jewish one, were not written by outcasts out of hate or resentment of religion. Rather, these parodists were mostly mainstream scholars of theology or Talmud, some of whom were high ranking members of their respective religious communities. In the Christian world and perhaps also in the Jewish one, these parodies were not intended primarily, if at all, for lay consumption. Appreciating and enjoying the Christian parodies require [*sic*] familiarity with Scripture, theology and the Church, as Bayless observes, while some of the Jewish parodies require familiarity with the Talmud and other Rabbinical texts, as Stern<sup>42</sup> stresses in the case of *Toldot* [i.e., of *Pseudo-Sirach*].<sup>43</sup>

Of course, Medieval Hebrew literature also contained works structured as a debate, in which questioning is as wisdom and learning, rather than as wisdom and spurning, which is the case of the Marcolfian tradition. Let us consider an example. The medieval northern French or English Hebrew fabulist Berechiah ha-Nakdan authored, as well as his well-known collection of fables (*Mishle Shualim*, literally *Fox*

<sup>39</sup> On p. 98 in Gili Orr, *The Medieval Alpha Beta deBen Sira I ("Rishona"): A Parody on Rabbinic Literature or a Midrashic Commentary on Ancient Proverbs?* master's thesis in Hebrew Language and Culture, supervised by Resianne Smidt van Gelder-Fontaine, Universiteit van Amsterdam, 2009 (<http://dare.uva.nl/document/142492>).

<sup>40</sup> Joseph Dan, "Hidat Alpha Beta de-Ben Sira" ["The Enigma of the Alphabet of Ben Sira"], in his book *Hissippur ha'ivri biYemei habbeinayim (Hebrew Tales in the Middle Ages)*, Jerusalem, 1974, pp. 69–78.

<sup>41</sup> It is also useful to consider the Christian medieval Latin and then humanistic Renaissance tradition of parody. See: Martha Bayless, *Parody in the Middle Ages: The Latin Tradition* (Ann Arbor, Michigan, 1996); Sander L. Gilman, *The Parodic Sermon in European Perspective: Aspects of Liturgical Parody from the Middle Ages to the Twentieth Century* (Wiesbaden: Franz Steiner, 1974, and Philadelphia: Coronet Books, 1974); Antonio Corsaro and Paolo Procaccioli (eds.), *Cum notibus et comentariibus. L'esegesi parodistica e giocosa del Cinquecento*, Seminario di Letteratura italiana, Viterbo, 23–24 novembre 2001, published in the series "Cinquecento: Studi" as Vol. 5, in Manziana (in the province of Rome): Vecchiarelli, 2002.

Sander Gilman has also written about parody in other contexts: Idem, "Parody and Parallel: Heine, Nietzsche and the Classical World", in: James O'Flaherty (ed.), *Nietzsche and the Classical Tradition* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1976), pp. 199–213, of which a revised and expanded version is found in: S.L. Gilman, *Inscribing the Other* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1991); Idem, "Incipit Parodia: The Function of Parody in the Poetry of Friedrich Nietzsche", *Nietzsche-Studien*, 4 (1975), pp. 52–74; Idem, *Nietzschean Parody: An Introduction to Reading Nietzsche* (Bonn: Bouvier, 1976; Toyko: Seido Sha, 1997; second, augmented edition: Aurora, Colorado: The Davies Group, 2001; Idem, "'Very Little Faust...' — Parodies of German Drama on the 19th-Century British Stage", *Arcadia*, 8 (1973), pp. 18–44.

<sup>42</sup> David Stern, "The Alphabet of Ben Sira and the Early History of Parody in Jewish Literature", in: Hindy Najman and Judith H. Newman (eds.), *The Idea of Biblical Interpretation: Essays in Honor of James L. Kugel*, Leiden: Brill, 2004, pp. 423–448.

<sup>43</sup> Gili Orr, on p. 99 of her 2009 dissertation, also claimed: "Yassif's analysis presents [*Pseudo-Sirach*] as a rather insignificant contribution to Hebrew literature", and Orr goes on to explain that *Pseudo-Sirach*'s "strong dependency on ancient texts is regarded by Yassif as a sign of backwardness, as though the author is stuck in an earlier stage of development of the Jewish literature." Orr strongly disagrees with that evaluation: "The present study demonstrated that this close imitation of Rabbinical style and of some specific texts was done with deliberate distortions, in the service of parody." Note the dating she proposes, that is later than Yassif's. Orr writes: "Such use of ancient material and style at that period (eleventh or twelfth century) shows sophistication and innovation rather than conservative traditionalism. While the author's attack on the methods and ideas of some of his predecessors seems to have stayed within the acceptable boundaries of a conflict for the sake of the Truth [???], he still managed to invent a new, systematic and amusing way of doing so."

*Fables*),<sup>44</sup> also the book<sup>45</sup> *Uncle and Nephew* (entitled in Hebrew *Dodi ve-Nekhdi*, i.e., “My uncle” and “My nephew”. The word *Nekhdi* is a possessive form of the Hebrew noun *nékhed* ‘grandson’, but here it means ‘nephew’, because of the influence of French *neveu* or Latin *nepos* — cf. Italian *nipote* — for both ‘grandson’ and ‘nephew’).

The book *Uncle and Nephew* is in question-and-answer format, like a Christian catechism, and is actually a reworking a Christian work in the natural sciences, *the Quaestiones naturales* by Adelard or Athelard of Bath.<sup>46</sup> Some of the questions would seem awkward to a modern person, sometimes not unlike the questions that in *Pseudo-Sirach*, Nebuchadnezzar asks Ben Sira, but here no humour is intended. The questions and answers are deadpan serious, like in the Old French *Book of Sidrach* (where the name of the wiseman Sirach is etymologically related to *Sirach*).

As opposed to the comic Marcolfian tradition (and the Italian-language epigon Bertoldo, a peasant facing King Alboin), we also find non-comic counterparts. “Whereas the colloquies” of Hadrian and Epictetus, or of Pippin and the schoolman Alcuin (pseudepigraphic lists of brief questions and answers) “represent wisdom and learning, *S&M* [i.e., *Solomon and Marcolf*] could be more fairly called wisdom and spurning, as Jan Ziolkowski states on p. 26 in his book *Solomon and Marcolf*.<sup>47</sup>

As to further non-comic counterparts: specularly to the pagan Saturn facing the monotheist Solomon, we vice versa find a pagan king questioning a wiseman who is a believer, in the *Book of Sidrach*,<sup>48</sup> a medieval French encyclopaedia, by an anonymous lay author in the second half of the thirteenth century, and that was popular well into the Renaissance (at least 63 manuscripts containing the French text are known). In *Pseudo Ben Sira*, Nebuchadnezzar, too, is seeking knowledge from Ben Sira, but that cunning child prodigy, like the anonymous author, is often bent on amusing grotesquely, even though some other times the aim appear to be the contrivance of an aetiology *per se*, or the fable value.

In the *Book of Sidrach*, the questions are peculiar, and the answers provided are even more peculiar; in this respect, there is a similarity to *Pseudo-Sirach*. The French encyclopaedia, also known by the title *Livre de la fontaine de toutes les sciences*, is in the form of a dialogue between the Christian scholar Sidrac (a philosopher from Edinburgh) and King Boctus of Bactriana (*Au tens dou roi Boctus, au Levant roi*

<sup>44</sup> One of his sources was the French fable collection *Ysopets* by Marie de France (late twelfth century). Concerning cultural contact as being reflected in that Hebrew text, see e.g. Marc Michael Epstein, “The Elephant and the Law: The Medieval Jewish Minority Adapts a Christian Motif”, *The Art Bulletin*, 76(3), 1994, pp. 465–478; Idem, “‘The Ways of Truth Are Curtailed and Hidden’: A Medieval Hebrew Fable as a Vehicle for Covert Polemic”, *Prooftexts*, 14(3), 1994, pp. 205–231.

<sup>45</sup> Hermann Gollancz, *Dodi ve-Nekhdi (Uncle & Nephew): The Work of Berachya Hanakdan, now edited from MSS at Munich and Oxford, with an English translation, introduction etc.* Oxford University Press, 1920. <http://www.seforimonline.org/seforimdb/pdf/273.pdf>

<sup>46</sup> Gollancz, *Dodi ve-Nekhdi*, p. i: “What invests this work with an enhanced interest, is the fact that it is not an original thesis, but it reposes more or less upon the work of that prolific writer, *Adelardus Bathoniensis*, Adelard or Athelard of Bath, to which has been given the name “*Quaestiones naturales*.” Adelard’s work was in Latin. Gollancz wondered whether a French version had ever existed, but at present it is known that among the Jews of medieval England, some knew Latin.

<sup>47</sup> Jan M. Ziolkowski, *Solomon and Marcolf*. (Harvard Series in Medieval Latin, 1.) Department of the Classics, Harvard University. Distributed by Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts. 2008.

<sup>48</sup> A recent edition is by Ernstpeter Ruhe, *Sydrac le philosophe, Le livre de la fontaine de toutes sciences*, Wiesbaden: Reichert, 2000 (Wissensliteratur im Mittelalter, 34). It was reviewed by J.-Ch. Lemaire in *Scriptorium*, 59, 2005(2), bulletin codicologique n° 668.

*d'une grant province...*); the subjects include religion, ethics, medicine, law, government, and astrology.<sup>49</sup>

That the name *Sidrach* has to do with Sirach (i.e., Ben Sira) was already suggested, e.g., by Adolfo Bartoli.<sup>50</sup> It is important to realise however that *Sidrach* is a form of *Shadrach*, the Babylonian name that Hananiah was given (*Daniel* 1:7). The name also occurs in the early modern English onomasticon, having been borne by the Lincolnshire-born Independent minister Sidrach Simpson (c. 1600–1655), one of the Five Dissenting Brethren, and one of the leaders of the Independent faction in the Westminster Assembly; Master of Pembroke Hall, Cambridge in 1650, eventually Oliver Cromwell had him imprisoned for aggressive preaching.

Ben Sira is convoked by Nebuchadnezzar, because of what the latter has heard about the former's cleverness. As for Marcolf,<sup>51</sup> "Solomon has heard that Marcolf is well equipped with words and clever (*verbosus et callidus*), despite being rustic and foul (*rusticus et turpis*), and the king announces that the two of them will engage in an *altercatio* or disputation (*altricio*, [...]). Solomon will take the role of master and pose questions that Marcolf must answer ("Ego te interrogabo, tu vero subsequens responde michi," [...])." Ben Sira, too, must answer questions: by the King's advisers, first, and then by the King himself.

The main feature that places Ben Sira in stark contrast to Marcolf, is that Ben Sira (notwithstanding his being a child aged seven, and notwithstanding the problematic circumstances of his birth and having been raised by a single mother who admittedly was anxious as to how she was going to eke a living), has studied the entire curriculum one could expect of a learned Jew (in the early middle Ages, not in Jeremiah's days!), and that his prodigious cognition is explicitly ascribed to his being the son of a prophet. He is facing a King whom Jewish tradition has deep misgivings. In contrast, Marcolf is a clever peasant, in a society that had extremely low expectations of peasants, and he faces a King of old whom culture reveres.

Nobody else would dare to do to Solomon what Marcolf, or his Russian quasi-parallel, the centaur Kitovras,<sup>52</sup> or then his own parallel from a tale in the *Babylonian Talmud*:

<sup>49</sup> A recent edition is by Ernstpeter Ruhe, *Sydrac le philosophe, Le livre de la fontaine de toutes sciences* (Wissensliteratur im Mittelalter, 34), Wiesbaden: Reichert, 2000. It was reviewed by J.-Ch. Lemaire in *Scriptorium*, 59, 2005(2), bulletin codicologique n° 668.

<sup>50</sup> In the introduction to Adolfo Bartoli's edition of the *Libro di Sidrach: Testo inedito del secolo XIV, Parte prima (Testo)*, Bologna: Presso Gaetano Romagnoli, 1868.

<sup>51</sup> The quotation is from p. 347 in: Nancy Mason Bradbury, "Rival Wisdom in the Latin *Dialogue of Solomon and Marcolf*", *Speculum*, 83(2), 2008, pp. 331–365.

<sup>52</sup> The occurrence of centaurs as early as ancient Mesopotamian art and as late as fiction by John Updike is the subject of Elizabeth Atwood Lawrence, "The Centaur: Its History and Meaning in Human Culture", *Journal of Popular Culture*, 27(4), 1994, pp. 57–68. Elsewhere, in Sec. 9, "The Russian *Solomon and Kitovras*: Which Jewish Background, if Any?", in: E. Nissan, "A Wily Peasant (Marcolf, Bertoldo), a Child Prodigy (Ben Sira), a Centaur (Kitovras), a Wiseman (Sidrach), or the Chaldaean Prince Saturn? Considerations about Marcolf and the Marcolfian Tradition, with Hypotheses about the Genesis of the Character Kitovras" (review essay), *International Studies in Humour*, 3(1), 2014, pp. 108–150 (a much extended version of a review which appeared in *Fabula*, 53(1/2), 2012, pp. 165–169), I maintained:

I would like to suggest that the background was Byzantine, and that depending on which hypothesis, out of the following two, one retains, that may have been a Jewish conduit later than in the Hellenistic period. According to my first hypothesis, it is quite possible there was some Jewish influence, because whereas the body features of a centaur are not relevant for the character of Kitovras, in Jewish midrashic texts there is mention of the centaurs (*Qintōrin*) born in the generation of Enosh before the Deluge, but *Qintōrin* is written *qntōwryn* like the plural noun *qintōurin*, i.e., 'scoffing', 'provocation'. Solomon's

the archdemon Ashmedai (Asmodaeus). In the Marcolfian tradition, it is King Solomon, the epitome of elite wisdom, we come across, while not King Solomon who rules even over the demons. A major exception to this is the Russian tradition about the centaur Kitovras in his dealings with King Solomon.<sup>53</sup> In a parallel story from the *Babylonian Talmud*, a very similar story is told about the archdemon Asmodaeus. Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, in his novel *Cancer Ward*,<sup>54</sup> tells the story of Kitovras, who breaks a rib in the attempt to avoid destroying a widow's house. That episode also appears in the in *Babylonian Talmud*, tractate *Gittin* 68a–68b.

What Ben Sira dares to do with Nebuchadnezzar is not overly dissimilar — Marcolf and Ben Sira share an extraordinary panache — but what Ben Sira does to Nebuchadnezzar is something germane to something Daniel's companions, according to rabbinic homiletics, dared to do before being thrown into the fiery furnace. They insult Nebuchadnezzar to his face, and his physiological reactions conform with puns about his name. In a passage in *Leviticus Rabbah* 33:6, the question is asked: why does the verse which relates the three's refusal, mention Nebuchadnezzar as “King Nebuchadnezzar”, whereas either “the King” or “Nebuchadnezzar” would have sufficed? The answer given is that the three companions (the ones who were to survive the fiery fire) had told him — so the homily maintains — that for matters like taxation, he is the King and they would comply with his order, but when it comes to matters of worship, he is Nebuchadnezzar, and when it comes to an order for them to become renegades to their faith, they would not comply any more than they would do, if faced with a dog (“you and a dog are equal”): he could as well “bark (*nebaḥ*) like a dog, be blown up (*nepaḥ*) [distended] like a pitcher (*kad*), and chirp (*neṣar*) like a cricket. He [Nebuchadnezzar] immediately barked like a dog, was blown up like a pitcher, and chirped like a cricket”. Which is how angry or almost apoplectic you could imagine a despotic king to become, on being challenged in the quite impertinent way described. (This way, the *omen* implied by the *nomen* became actualised once the person had been told how the name is to be interpreted.) Then, in the rest of the homily,<sup>55</sup> a verse from *Ecclesiastes* is cited in support. Clearly, such cultural antecedents are not without importance for *Pseudo-Sirach*.

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antagonist is more likely to be characterised as a scoffer, rather than a centaur. Marcolf certainly is a scoffer.

Let us turn to the second hypothesis. In the description of the beasts or zoomorphic demons of the desolation in *Isaiah* 13:21–22, the Hebrew plural noun *'iyyim* (now understood as ‘jackals’, but ‘cats’ in the pseudo-Jonathan Aramaic translation and thus in Rashi's medieval gloss) was translated into Greek as *onokentauroi* in the Septuagint, meaning demons in the shape of such centaurs whose body is asinine rather than equine. As in legend, King Solomon is associated with demons whom he dominates, couldn't it be that *ki(n)tovras* originally was such an *onokentauros*? If this is the case indeed, then there need be no later Jewish influence on *Solomon and Kitovras* than the Septuagint.

Except, that is, there is a parallel story in the *Babylonian Talmud*, tractate *Gittin* 68a–68b.

<sup>53</sup> See E. Nissan, “A Wily Peasant (Marcolf, Bertoldo), a Child Prodigy (Ben Sira), a Centaur (Kitovras), a Wiseman (Sidrach), or the Chaldaean Prince Saturn? Considerations about Marcolf and the Marcolfian Tradition, with Hypotheses about the Genesis of the Character Kitovras”, *International Studies in Humour*, 3(1), 2014, pp. 108–150.

<sup>54</sup> Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, in his novel *Cancer Ward*, The Bodley Head, 1968; London: Vintage, 2003. See on p. 441 in the Vintage edition of 2003.

<sup>55</sup> The passage is in Aramaic, which is close enough to Hebrew for the verbs for ‘to bark’ and ‘to blow up’ to occur with respectively identical lexical roots in both languages. There exists an Aramaic verb *neṣar* for ‘to chirr’, ‘to chirp’. It is applied to the cricket (which is itself called in Tannaitic Hebrew

**Ṣarṣúr**, Modern Hebrew *tsratsár*). In Tannaitic Hebrew that verb occurs once, and then as denoting

## 9. Envoi

*Pseudo-Sirach* differs from the Marcolfian tradition in that *Pseudo-Sirach* does not need a wise king (the wisest king, King Solomon) who would be challenged by an irreverent interlocutor. The irreverent interlocutor, the child prodigy Ben Sira, possesses all the knowledge that is going to be displayed in *Pseudo-Sirach*, and he is the champion of his nation and religion *vis-à-vis* a national enemy, Nebuchadnezzar. The latter's character in *Pseudo-Sirach* only needs enough intellect for him to ask questions, and to be benign enough to oblige by letting himself be manipulated for the solace and delight of a readership who identifies with Ben Sira, and who well before coming across *Pseudo-Sirach* got the schooling that gave it an intense dislike for Nebuchadnezzar.

Nevertheless, it is part of the humour of *Pseudo-Sirach* that Nebuchadnezzar is tame, passive enough for Ben Sira to play pranks on him or insult him. Such a fantasy has something about it of the role reversal so dear to some categories of people during the (West and Central European) Middle Ages, as reflected in the tradition of the *charivari*. It is something that in literary studies is famously called a Bakhtinian carnival. It is the world upside down. In Jewish culture, indeed in sacred history, the Book of Esther is a major example of that.

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making sounds as associated with another animal kind, pigs (the participle in that sense occurs in the *Mekhila de-Rabbi Ishmael*, but then not in all versions: it does occur in the Lauterbach edition), within a sentence addressing a character used to eat pork: “Pigs are grunting from between your teeth”, i.e., it is known you eat them.

There are tacit matches involved, too, in the homily about Nebuchadnezzar. The initial part of the personal name *Nevukhadnézar* matches the Hebrew phrase *nafúah ke-khád* “blown-up / distended / pot-bellied like a pitcher”, as well as the mixed Hebrew and Aramaic phrase (but you could make it fully Aramaic) *navóah ke-“ had [kalba]*”, i.e., “to bark like [Aramaic:] ‘one dog’.” In fact, *had kalba* is how the text of the homily is wording its equating Nebuchadnezzar to a dog. Incidentally, rabbinic texts, especially in homiletics, sometimes acronymised *Nebuchad-Nezzar* into *N.N.* — נ"נ — which by chance in European cultures is the acronym for *Nullius Nominis*, “nameless”, “of no name” (or, according to the usual interpretation in Italian, *non noto*, “not known”), which is a bureaucratic indication of unknown paternity.

See E. Nissan, “On the Report of Isaac de Lattes Concerning the Death of the Apostate in Taormina”. In: Giuliana Musotto e Luciana Pepi (eds.), *Il bagno ebraico di Siracusa e la sacralità delle acque nelle culture mediterranee: atti del seminario di studio (Siracusa, 2–4 maggio 2011)* (Machina Philosophorum: testi e studi dalle culture euromediterranee, 42), Palermo, Sicily: Officina di Studi Medievali, 2014, pp. 237–266 (+ abstract on pp. 345–346).