

# The Self-Referential Coda to *Avot* and the Egyptian-Israelite Literary Tradition of Wisdom<sup>1</sup>

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It has often been noted that Mishnah *Avot* is heir to aspects of the biblical tradition of Wisdom. A further element of this inheritance is studied here: the tradition of ending a Wisdom book with a self-referential coda, commenting on the value of the text just completed. A philological study of the end of *Avot* opens this study, and the results of that study allow us to situate the coda to *Avot* in the context of other codas in the Mishnah, especially tractates *Neziqin* and *Kelim*. The paper then moves to situate the conclusion to *Avot* in the heritage of the conclusions of earlier Jewish books of Wisdom – Ben Sira, Qohelet, and Proverbs, as well as other biblical books that show the imprint of Wisdom, such as Hosea.

Moving backwards a further step, then, the tradition of self-referential codas is traced in Wisdom literature prior to biblical times and outside the biblical tradition. Here the Egyptian Wisdom tradition looks largest, especially the Late Egyptian texts such as the Wisdom of Amenemope. It has been known since the beginning of the twentieth century that there are close connections between Ancient Egyptian and Ancient Israelite Wisdom literature. This paper argues that the connections between Egyptian and biblical wisdom, on the one hand, and biblical and rabbinic wisdom, on the other hand, were tenacious enough that the history of at least one literary feature, the self-referential coda, can be traced from New Kingdom Egypt into the Mishnah. It is also argued that rather than showing contacts that ceased long ago, Wisdom in the Hellenistic and Roman times was still a cosmopolitan and international endeavor, and therefore the later traditions in Egypt, such as Ankhsheshonqy and P. Insinger, and in Israel, such as Ben Sira, continued to show mutual influences and commonalities.

## Introduction

The biblical Wisdom tradition found in books such as Proverbs and Qohelet stretches both backwards and forwards in time. It has roots in Egyptian

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<sup>1</sup> A proposal for this paper was read and critiqued by Richard Steiner a number of years ago, and his guidance was helpful in formulating the topic with greater precision. Since then, versions of the paper were presented at the Yeshiva University Symposium on the Dead Sea Scrolls and Ancient Judaism, at the invitation of Dr. Ari Mermelstein, to whom I am grateful for the opportunity, and at the departmental colloquia of the Bible departments of the Hebrew University and Ben Gurion University. The comments and questions of attendees at all of these presentations are gratefully acknowledged here. Michael V. Fox read a draft of the paper at a late stage, and I am indebted to him for identifying some of the weaker parts of the argument here and suggesting ways of strengthening them.

culture, and possibly in Mesopotamian culture as well, and continues into later Jewish texts. In post-biblical times, the Wisdom tradition continues with books such as Ben Sira, around 200 B. C. E., and the Mishnaic tractate *Avot*, edited around 200 C. E.

Scholars such as Ezra Zion Melammed, Isaac Gottlieb, and Myron Lerner have drawn attention to the ways in which *Avot* is heir to the Wisdom tradition.<sup>2</sup> Amram Tropper devotes the better part of a chapter of his book on *Avot* to documenting and investigating the ways in which *Avot* belongs to the Wisdom tradition, as well as the ways in which it modifies those traditions.<sup>3</sup> In his *Introduction to the Literature of the Bible*, Alexander Rofé includes a chapter on *Avot* in the section on wisdom literature, in which he, too, points to the points of continuity, as well as innovation, in this rabbinic text.<sup>4</sup> Ishay Rosen-Zvi, too, has studied the ways in which the rabbis modified the wisdom tradition in *Avot*.<sup>5</sup>

The features of *Avot* that have been identified as typical of wisdom include numerical sayings, the juxtaposition of an idea and its opposite, proverbs, riddles, brief dialogues, and metaphors; more importantly, many of the topics treated in *Avot* overlap with “wisdom” topics. Most generally, the macro-structure of *Avot*, in which wise sayings on different topics are collected into an anthology, is comparable to earlier texts; James Kugel calls *Avot* “something of a self-conscious throwback, an attempt to resurrect one last time the old wisdom anthology genre.”<sup>6</sup> One major difference is the association of specific names with the individual sayings; while there is something of a precedent for this in the collections of proverbs of various kings and others at the end of Proverbs, the rabbinic penchant for attributions of every statement to

2 E. Z. Melammed, “גוסח, מספר ומשקל במס' אבות,” *Torah she-be-'al Peh* 4 (1962): 141–66, 145 and 152; I. B. Gottlieb, “Pirque Abot and Biblical Wisdom,” *VT* 40 (1990): 152–64; M. B. Lerner, “The Tractate Avot,” in *The Literature of the Sages, First Part: Oral Tora, Halakha, Mishna, Tosefta, Talmud, External Tractates* (ed. S. Safrai; Assen: Van Gorcum and Philadelphia: Fortress, 1987), 263–81, 267–68.

3 A. Tropper, *Wisdom, Politics, and Historiography: Tractate Avot in the Context of the Graeco-Roman Near East* (Oxford Oriental Monographs; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 57–87. Other scholarship on *Avot* has emphasized the contemporary connections of the book, such as Greco-Roman and early Christian literature with many of the same genres, themes, and emphases; this is reflected in the second half of Tropper’s book, for example (*Wisdom, Politics, and Historiography*, 117–251). See also N. R. M. De Lange’s review of Tropper in *JTS* 56 (2005): 633–38.

4 A. Rofé, *מבוא לספרות המקרא* (Jerusalem: Carmel, 2006), 416–18.

5 I. Rosen-Zvi, “The Wisdom Tradition in Rabbinic Literature and Mishnah Avot,” in *Rethinking the Boundaries of Sapiential Traditions in Ancient Judaism* (Third International Symposium on Jewish and Christian Literature from the Hellenistic and Roman Period; Leiden: Brill, 2016), 172–90, esp. 184–87.

6 J. Kugel, “Wisdom and the Anthological Temper,” *Prooftexts* 17 (1997): 9–32, 26. According to Kugel (30), “the true rabbinic continuation of the biblical wisdom tradition is not so much Mishnah *Abot* as the *Mekhilta deR. Ishmael* or *Genesis Rabbah*, those anthologies of pithy explanations of individual, isolated verses from Scripture.” Therefore, Kugel’s sentence quoted above ends, “at a time when the very nature of wisdom in Israel had changed radically.”



ject; the two clauses differ only in the *binyan* (stem) of the verb. According to the reading in MS Kaufmann, the first verb is in the G-stem (*binyan qal*), and the second verb is in the D-stem (*binyan pi'el*).<sup>9</sup> Hanoch Yalon reviewed the examples from BH and MH of *qal-pi'el* (הפוך-הפך).<sup>10</sup> These include וְהִמָּהּ חֲכָמִים מְחַכְּמִים (Prov 30:24), and one can add, וַיְרִיחוּ סִגְרָת וּמִסְגָּרָת (Jos 6:1) in the Bible, and phrases such as כפול ומכופל, גדוש ומגודש, and מכובדים and מכובדים in Rabbinic texts, as well as בטלים ומבוטלים in liturgical texts.<sup>11</sup> In fact, as Yalon observes, *Midrash Tehillim* even has the phrase הופך ומהפך. All this is to say that the combination of the *qal* and the *pi'el* forms of the verb is not reducible to the meaning of the verb in the *qal* plus the meaning of the verb in the *pi'el*.<sup>12</sup> Instead, the repetition, with change of *binyan*, serves to create an emphatic phrase.

2. The critical apparatus published by Sharvit readily shows that there is great uniformity among the witnesses through the words בה והפך בה והפך, but great diversity after those words, until the words שאין לך מידה טובה ממנה, where again there is great uniformity in the readings. Additionally, the words בה והפך בה והפך, as well as שאין לך מידה טובה ממנה, appear to be in Hebrew,<sup>13</sup> whereas all the witnesses show phrases between those two that are in Aramaic – in the case of the text presented here, וְבָה תִּיהְיֶי דְכּוּלָּהּ בְּדָ, וְכוּלְדָּ בְּהָ וּמְנָה לָא תְזוּעַ. This suggests that the original form of the saying may simply have been הַפֵּךְ בְּהָ וְהַפֵּךְ בְּהָ, שאין לך מידה טובה ממנה, and that this was then expanded in different ways. With regard to the content of the line, as well, this produces a far simpler, and therefore more plausible, concluding line.

Returning to our central point, to what does the pronoun refer in the phrases, “turn it over and turn it over (and be in it, for all of it is in you and all of you is in it, and from it you shall not move,) for there is no greater *middah* than it”? The conventional view, found in both medieval and modern scholars, is that the referent is “Torah.” While this is possible – despite Torah not having been mentioned – Yoel Elitzur argued persuasively that the referent is the *middah* itself.<sup>14</sup> Furthermore, he argues, *middah* is the Hebrew semantic equivalent of

9 Ms. Parma A (De Rossi 138) apparently has this the other way around: הפך בה והפוך בה. AdRN A 12 – הופכה והפכה (*qal-pi'el*).

10 H. Yalon, מבוא לניקוד המשנה (Jerusalem: Bialik, 1964), 95–98. See also Sharvit, לשונה לשונה, 268–69.

11 Yalon also includes בשל מבשל (Exod 12:9), but this is different.

12 The verb in the *qal* means “to turn,” although the collocation with the preposition ב- “in, with,” is exceptional. The *pi'el* does sometimes bear the meaning “to turn” in Amoraic Hebrew (cf. *b. Hul.* 13 [היפך בהן]; *b. Hul.* 56b–57a; and elsewhere), but also sometimes means “to examine” (*b. Qid.* 59a [עני המהפך בחררה]).

13 The language of בה והפך בה והפך is actually difficult to prove, so this is nothing more than a presumption.

14 The usual understanding is that “it” is Torah. For a review of classical interpretations of the Mishnah (all of which take the referent of the pronoun in בָּהּ וְהַפֵּךְ בָּהּ וְהַפֵּךְ בָּהּ to be “Torah”),

Aramaic *mekhilta* “tractate.” This use of מידה is found in a number of rabbinic texts:

כמדת רבי אליעזר, כשרה, וכמידת רבי יהושוע, פסולה

According to the law (*middah*) of R. Eliezer, it is valid; according to the law of R. Joshua, it is invalid (*m. Men.* 3:4).

וכן אמר ר"ש לתלמידיו בניי שנו מדותי שמדותי תרומות מתרומות מידותיו של ר"ע

So said R. Shimon to his students: “My sons, study my *middot*, for my *middot* are the best of the best of R. Akiva’s *middot*” (*b. Git.* 67a).

אמר רבי עקיבה, רואה אני את דברי רבי אליעזר מדברי רבי יהושוע, שרבי אליעזר השווה את מידתו, ורבי יהושוע חלק

R. Akiva said, I prefer the view of R. Eliezer over the words of R. Joshua, for R. Eliezer’s teachings are consistent [that everything goes towards the upkeep], whereas R. Joshua differentiates [that parts of his single act of consecration goes for different purposes] (*m. Sheq.* 4:7).

In all of these texts, and a few others, מידה clearly refers to “a halakhic ruling or text.” As Elitzur observes, the lexical point regarding *middah* was noted by Rashi already in his commentary on the passage in *Gittin* just cited.<sup>15</sup> He also suggests that the semantic development was that מידה, like its Aramaic semantic equivalent מכילתא, originally meant “a vessel to contain materials,” and then developed the meaning “a text to contain (legal) materials.”<sup>16</sup>

Elitzur concludes, therefore, “It seems to me that Ben Bag Bag and Ben He He are not referring to the study of Torah generally, but to the tractate *Avot*.”<sup>17</sup> Accordingly, Ben Bagbag’s advice is not that the student should never cease studying Torah generally speaking, but that he should never cease studying tractate *Avot* itself: “Turn it over and turn it over...for there is no better text than it!”

According to this interpretation, which is philologically convincing, the tractate ends with a self-referential statement, commenting on the text being concluded. The remainder of this paper will argue that this is a literarily compelling suggestion, as well, since there is a long tradition of Wisdom texts ending with a self-referential comment on the value of the text.

see Elitzur, “מידה” בלשון חז”ל והמשנה האחרונה במסכת אבות, 19–21. Gottlieb, “Pirke Abot and Biblical Wisdom,” 161, too, takes the referent to be “Torah.”

15 Rashi on *b. Git.* 67a s. v. שנו מדותי; see Elitzur, “מידה” בלשון חז”ל, 24.

16 Compare the word *מסכת*, which originally meant something woven, but came to mean a text woven of disparate materials.

17 Elitzur, “מידה” בלשון חז”ל, 27. For more on the various forms of Ben Hehe’s aphorism in AdRN A and B and *b. Hag.* 9b, see Kister, עיונים, 191–93.

## Avot, or the Mishnah as a whole?

Before proceeding, however, it should be noted that there is a further possibility to consider, building on the analysis to this point but adding another facet to the discussion. As is well known, the tractates of the Mishnah are divided into “orders,” and there are six of these orders. In all known versions of the Mishnah, from antiquity through today, the orders are arranged in a particular order: *zəra’im*, *mō’ed*, *nāšim*, *nəzīqīn*, *qodāšīn*, *ṭəhārōt*. One rabbinic text, however, presents an order of the orders of Mishnah that differs from the familiar one:<sup>18</sup> a passage in *Midrash Tehillim* (19:14) cites R. Tanḥuma as referring to the orders *nāšim*, *zəra’im*, *ṭəhārōt*, *mō’ed*, *qodāšīn*, *nəzīqīn*:

ר' תנחומא פתר ליה בשיתא סדרי משנה:  
 תורת ה' תמימה: זה סדר נשים...  
 עדות ה' נאמנה: זה סדר זרעים...  
 יראת ה' טהורה: זה סדר טהרות...  
 פקודי ה' ישירים משמחי לב: זה סדר מועד...  
 מצות ה' ברה מאירת עינים: זו סדר קדשים...  
 משפטי ה' אמת: זו סדר נזיקין...

R. Tanḥuma applied [the verse] to the six orders of the Mishnah:

“The teaching of the Lord is perfect”: this is the order *nāšim*...

“The testimony of the Lord is faithful”: this is the order *zəra’im*...

“the fear of the Lord is pure”: this is the order *ṭəhārōt*...

“the commandments of the Lord are straight, making the heart happy”:

this is the order *mō’ed*...

“The command of the Lord is pure, enlightening the eyes”: this is the order *qodāšīn*...

“the statutes of the Lord are true”: this is the order *nəzīqīn*...

There are two good reasons for thinking that this reflects the order of the *sədārim* known to R. Tanḥuma. First, in order to produce this order, R. Tanḥuma had to rearrange the biblical text; the clauses quoted from Psalm 19:8–10 are, in order, 1, 2, 5, 3, 4, 6.

(1) תורת ה' תמימה משיבת נפש / (2) עדות ה' נאמנה מחכימת פתי.

(3) פקודי ה' ישירים משמחי לב / (4) מצות ה' ברה מאירת עינים.

(5) יראת ה' טהורה עומדת לעד / (6) משפטי ה' אמת צדקו יחדו.

Second, as was developed by Menahem Kahana, the supposition that the order was *nāšim*, *zəra’im*, *ṭəhārōt*, *mō’ed*, *qodāšīn*, *nəzīqīn* allows us to see some very striking aspects of the organization of the Mishnah. As is known, the Mishnah originally contained 60 tractates.<sup>19</sup> These 60 tractates were arranged in uneven

18 Epstein, *מבוא לנוסח המשנה* (Jerusalem: Magnes, 1948), 980–81; Albeck, Introduction to his commentary on *Mo’ed*, p. 3; Kahana, “המשנה וסדר סדריה,” *Tarbiz* 76 (2007): 29–40.

19 There are 63 today, but all of *nəzīqīn* was originally one (now divided into *Baba Qamma*, *Baba Meši’a*, and *Baba Batra*) and *Sanhedrin* and *Makkot* were originally joined.

*sədārīm*, but these *sədārīm*, according to R. Tanḥuma's order, are arranged into two halves, each with thirty tractates. Even more strikingly, the order is chiasmic with regard to the number of tractates in each *seḏer*: 7–11–12–12–11–7.

What is of primary interest for us here is the possibility that *Neziqin* was originally the last *seḏer* of the Mishnah. This raises the possibility of *Avot* being at the end of the Mishnah as a whole. In our current order, it must be conceded that anyway, *Avot* is not the last tractate within *Neziqin*. For the most part, the tractates within each *seḏer* are arranged in order by size, based on the number of chapters, from the most to the fewest, so *Avot*'s 5 chapters come before *Horayot*, with three. But it is possible that *Avot* was originally something of an epilogue to *Neziqin*, and perhaps to the Mishnah in general. In MS Munich 95, in fact, *Avot* is copied at the end of the MS, just before the so-called "Minor Tractates" (which were not part of the Mishnah at all).<sup>20</sup>

This opens a different possibility: perhaps rather than recommending the intensive study of *Avot* itself, Ben Bagbag is commending the study of the Mishnah, our Mishnah, the Mishnah of R. Judah ha-Nasi, whose authority in tannaitic times was of course not uncontested. The concluding, self-referential coda here is, then: "Study it – the entire Mishnah – repeatedly, for there is no better text than it."<sup>21</sup>

This should have implications for our understanding of the place of *Avot* within the Mishnah as a whole. Devora Steinmetz suggests that thematically, *Avot* needed to be seen as a meta-comment on the entire enterprise of the Mishnah; she argues that both *Eduyyot* and *Avot* grapple with the problem of the multiplicity of opinions within the rabbinic community. While *Eduyyot* highlights the example of Aqavka ben Mehalalel, who testified four laws and was excommunicated for his failure to retract some of his teachings, *Avot* actually includes the same Aqavya, at the very beginning of the third chapter. Steinmetz suggests that "each of these tractates might be seen as a kind of epilogue to the Mishnah as a whole. ... *m. Eduyyot* ... highlights the problems of rupture, fragmentation, and exclusion. *M. Avot* responds by constructing an alternative vision of community and Torah that denies a place to rupture, fragmentation, and exclusion."<sup>22</sup> On the other hand, Adiel Schremer argues that "tractate *Avot* does not stem from the rabbinic circles in Palestine who produced the Mishnah, but rather reflects the teaching of a different school

20 A. Guttman, "Tractate Abot: Its Place in Rabbinic Literature," *JQR* 41 (1950): 181–93, 185–86, suggests that *Avot* was originally at the end of the Mishnah as a whole, and was then moved to the end of *Neziqin* when the practice became to study only four *sedarim*. This is rejected by Tropper, *Wisdom, Politics, and Historiography*, 92–93.

21 Similarly, Tropper, *Wisdom, Politics, and Historiography*, 105–06, argues, "the contents of *Avot*, which extol the study of Torah, were not intended simply to encourage the study of rabbinic Torah traditions, but were specifically designed to trigger the study and observance of the Mishnah in particular."

22 D. Steinmetz, "Distancing and Bringing Near: A New Look at Mishnah Tractates *Eduyyot* and *Abot*," *HUCA* 73 (2002): 49–96, 90–91.

that was most probably associated with R. Eliezer.”<sup>23</sup> Schremer implicitly rejects the notion that the Mishnah can be viewed as an ideological whole. Against this view is the fact that the Mishnah is a literary whole; this suggests that the same should be true regarding ideology, as well.<sup>24</sup>

One further point should be noted before expanding the horizons of this discussion beyond *Avot*. The identity of the rabbi quoted here, Ben Bagbag, is shrouded in mystery. It is often assumed that he was a sage of the early first century C.E. While it is possible that Ben Bagbag lived later than is usually supposed, but although the evidence is slight, it is relatively convincing.<sup>25</sup> The historical Ben Bagbag could not, therefore, have commented on the Mishnah in *Avot*, or on the entire Mishnah.<sup>26</sup> One would have to posit, then, that the line originally referred to some other text, but was re-purposed for the conclusion to *Avot*, or for the conclusion to the Mishnah as a whole.<sup>27</sup>

### Concluding self-referential statements in the Mishnah

Whether or not the conclusion to *Avot* is the conclusion to the Mishnah as a whole, this statement of Ben Bagbag’s should be situated among other self-referential codas within the Mishnah. Two other tractates of the Mishnah end with self-referential lines of praise. One, which differs in important ways from the coda to *Avot*, is at the end of *Kelim*: אמר רבי יוסי, אשריך כלים, שנכנסתה. “R. Yose said: ‘Praiseworthy are you, *Kelim*, for you

23 A. Schremer, “*Avot* Reconsidered: Rethinking Rabbinic Judaism,” *JQR* 105 (2015): 287–311, 297.

24 For further criticisms of Schremer’s views, see Rosen-Zvi, “The Wisdom Tradition in Rabbinic Literature,” 188–89.

25 There is a tradition of Ben He-he asking Hillel the Elder a question (*b. Hag.* 9b), and assuming that Ben Bagbag and Ben He He were contemporaries – or even the same people (so the [unsigned article in] the Jewish Encyclopedia, s.v. Ben Bag-Bag) – they may have been contemporaries, or disciples, of Hillel. It should also be noted that most of Ben Bagbag’s teachings relate to the Temple and sacrifices; he is involved, for example, in discussions about the paschal sacrifice (Mekhilta de-Rabbi Shim’on b. Yoḥai to Exodus 12:4 and parallels). There is also a rabbi Yoḥanan b. Bagbag, who corresponded with R. Judah b. Bathyra of Nisibis. Unfortunately, it is not known if this Yoḥanan is the same as the Ben Bagbag in our mishnah.

26 On the literary deployment of anachronism in *Avot*, see Tropper, *Wisdom, Politics, and Historiography*, 38 n. 53.

27 Elsewhere in *Avot*, and throughout rabbinic literature, proverbs are regularly repurposed and thereby reinterpreted. For instance, Hillel’s use of the metaphor of the “crown” (1:12) is said to be drawn from rules protecting the royal accoutrements from illicit use (Y. Fränkel, *דרכי האגדה והמדרש* [Jerusalem: Yad la-Talmud, 1991], 400; G. Stemberger, “Los Dichos Arameos de Hillel en el Tratado Abot,” *MEAH* 53 [2004]: 387–405, 401). Outside of *Avot*, see, for instance, the imagery and terminology from the restrictions on trespassing on Persian royal territory borrowed by the rabbis and applied to the religious sphere in the story of the “four who entered the orchard,” as elucidated by M. E. Subtelný, “The Tale of the Four Sages who Entered the ‘Pardes’: A Talmudic Enigma from a Persian Perspective,” *JSQ* 11 (2004): 3–58.

entered in impurity and exited in purity!”<sup>28</sup> The reference is to Mishnah *Kelim* 1:1, which begins by enumerating “the principles of impurity,” and Mishnah *Kelim* 30:4, whose last ruling is that a certain type of glass funnel is “pure” (i. e., not susceptible to impurity). This coda is different from that at the end of *Avot* in that rather than addressing the learner about the text, R. Yose addresses the text: “Praiseworthy are *you*, *Kelim!*”<sup>29</sup>

More directly comparable to our case is the end of tractate *Neziqin*: אמר רבי ישמעאל, הרוצה להחכים, יעסוק בדיני ממונות, שאין מקצוע בתורה גדול מהן, שהן כמעייין נוביע “R. Ishmael said, ‘One who wishes to become wise should deal with civil law, for there is no occupation in Torah greater than them – for they are like a welling spring.’”<sup>30</sup> Here, as in *Avot* 5:22, a sage is cited at the end of the book reflecting on the value of the book just completed. R. Ishmael advises immersion in civil law, the broad topic of the 30 chapters of Tractate *Neziqin*; Ben Bagbag recommended engagement in *Avot*, or in the entire Mishnah.

### Egyptian precedents

The type of self-referential coda that we saw in the Mishnah, in *Avot* and *Neziqin*, is much more closely paralleled in wisdom literature from ancient Egypt. One example is in the Middle Kingdom Instructions of Merikare, which ends:

Do not neglect my speech  
For it lays down all the laws of kingship,  
Instruct yourself, so that you may rise up as a man,  
And may equal me with none to accuse you....  
Behold, I have told you the best of my thoughts;  
May you conduct yourself in accordance with what is laid out before you.<sup>31</sup>

A similar notion, embedded within a narrative frame, is found in the epilogue to the Instruction for Kagemeni:

Then the vizier had his children summoned, after he had comprehended the manner of mankind. And he ended up by saying to them: “As to all that is written in this papyrus scroll, heed it just as I have said it to you: do not go beyond what has been or-

28 *M. Kel.* 30:4, pointed out by Elitzur, “מִידָה בְּלִשׁוֹן חִזְלִי,” 27.

29 The semiotics of texts addressing their readers was insightfully discussed by S. L. Sanders, *The Invention of Hebrew* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2009).

30 Tractate *Neziqin*, originally 30 chapters long was later divided into three sections: *Baba Qamma* (lit., “First Gate”), *Baba Meṣi’a* (lit., “Middle Gate”), and *Baba Batra* (lit., “Last Gate”). This mishnah is, therefore, currently found in *m. Baba Batra* 10:8. The connection to *Avot* was noted by Shlomo Naeh *apud* Elitzur, “מִידָה בְּלִשׁוֹן חִזְלִי,” 27. The mishnah actually ends, “and one who wishes to deal with civil law should apprentice himself to Ben Nanas.”

31 See M. Lichtheim, *Ancient Egyptian Literature, 1: The Old and Middle Kingdoms* (forward by A. Loprieno; Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006), 107, and W. K. Simpson, *The Literature of Ancient Egypt: An Anthology of Stories, Instructions, Stelae, Autobiographies, and Poetry* (3<sup>d</sup> edition; New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003), 165.

dained.” And they placed themselves on their bellies, and they read it out just as it was written. And it was more beautiful in their hearts than anything in this entire land. So they proceeded to live accordingly.<sup>32</sup>

The closest parallel to the coda to *Avot*, though, in is the New Kingdom Instructions of Amenemope. Chapter 30, the last chapter in the text, reads:

Look to these thirty chapters (*ptr-n=k t3y-30 n-hw.t*)  
 They inform, they educate;  
 They are the foremost of all books (*st-n-h3wty n-šfd-nb*),  
 They make the ignorant wise.  
 If they are read to the ignorant,  
 He is cleansed through them.  
 Fill yourself with them, put them in your heart,  
 And get people to interpret them.<sup>33</sup>

As in *Avot* 5:22, this text concludes with a self-reflective coda, asserting the greatness of the book just concluded and urging its thorough and repeated study.

The question that will occupy us for the remainder of the paper is how a literary tradition known from Ramesside Egypt could have reached rabbinic circles in Roman Palestine, 1500 years later. It is worth mentioning, though, that although there are codas to some of the classics of Mesopotamian literature, these do not praise the text and recommend its study, but rather assert the divine authorship or approval of the text.<sup>34</sup> This, then, can be added to the

32 Simpson, *The Literature of Ancient Egypt*, 150. For the idiomatic last clause, *wn=in 'h'=sn hms=sn hft(w)*, literally, “they stood and sat accordingly,” see R. J. Williams, “Some Egyptianisms in the Old Testament,” in *Studies in Honor of John A. Wilson* (Studies in Ancient Oriental Civilization 35; Chicago: University of Chicago Oriental Institute, 1969), 93–98, 94–95 (noting biblical parallels involving ישב/קום in Lam 3:63 and Ps 139:2), and Lichtheim, *Ancient Egyptian Literature, Volume 1*, 61 n. 10.

33 M. Lichtheim, *Ancient Egyptian Literature, Volume 2: The New Kingdom* (forward by H. W. Fischer-Elfert; Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006), 162, and Simpson, *The Literature of Ancient Egypt*, 243. For the text, with philological commentary, see V. P. M. Laisney, *L'Enseignement d'Amenemope* (Studia Pohl: Series Major 19; Rome: Pontifical Biblical Institute, 2007), 228–30, and the hieroglyphic transcription on pp. 362–63.

34 See K. van der Toorn, *Scribal Culture and the Making of the Hebrew Bible* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2007), 39–42, and M. S. Smith, *The Priestly Vision of Genesis 1* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2010), 146–47. For example, the end of Atra-ḥasis refers to the myth as a “song,” and commands its recitation: “You, the counsellor of the gods, at [your] decree I set battle in motion. For your praise let the Igigi hear this song (*an-ni-a-am za-ma-ra*) and extol your greatness to one another. I have sung of the flood to all the peoples. Hear it (*ši-me-a*)!” See W. G. Lambert and A. R. Millard, *Atra-ḥasis: The Babylonian Story of the Flood* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1969), 104–05. It does not, however, refer to the greatness of the text itself or the need to study it, but to the utility of its public recitation: it is a fitting way to offer praise to the gods. The Creation myth that begins *Enuma eliš* ends: “They [the names of Marduk] must be grasped: the “first one” (i. e., the god) should reveal, the wise and knowledgeable should ponder them together, the master should repeat, and make the pupil understand. The shepherd (i. e., the king), the herdsman, should pay attention.” See B. R. Foster, *Before the Muses: An Anthology of Akkadian Literature* (3<sup>d</sup> ed.; Bethesda, Md.:

list of phenomena found in ancient Egypt and later Jewish culture, without parallel in Mesopotamia.<sup>35</sup>

## Route 1: Through the biblical world

The first possible route of transmission from Ramesside Egypt to Roman Palestine is through biblical Israel. In this scheme, the leap from Egyptian culture to Israelite/Jewish culture was made early, presumably at some point in the Iron Age. The wisdom tradition then may have persisted within this culture for many centuries.

The best support for this scheme is the fact that Amenemope was almost certainly known in Iron Age Israel, in light of the many parallels in themes,

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CDL, 2005), 484. On p. 19, Foster discusses the fact that this text asserts something of its own authorship and authority. Here there is comment on the greatness of the foregoing text, but that text is limited to the names of Marduk, it appears, which have mythical or mystical properties. I am indebted to Dr. Shalom Holtz for his reference to this topic, and the specific reference to Foster.

In much earlier literature from Mesopotamia, one does occasionally find the motif of the instructor lauding his own words. Thus, for instance, the third-millennium Sumerian Instructions of Šuruppak begin:

My son, let me give you instructions: you should pay attention!

Ziudsura, let me speak a word to you: you should pay attention!

Do not neglect my instructions!

Do not transgress the words I speak!

The instructions of an old man are precious; you should comply with them!

These lines were first published in S. N. Kramer, "Gilgamesh and the Land of the Living," *Journal of Cuneiform Studies* 1 (1947): 3–46, 33 n. 208; see also W. G. Lambert, *Babylonian Wisdom Literature* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975; reprint Winona Lake, Ind.: Eisenbrauns, 1996), 93; full text in B. Alster, *The Instructions of Šuruppak* (Copenhagen Studies in Assyriology 10; Akademisk Forlag: Copenhagen 1974), and see <http://etcsl.orinst.ox.ac.uk/section5/tr561.htm>.

As this is at the beginning of the text rather than its end, however, it is not quite comparable to *Avot*, and could hardly have served as the source for the later tradition of ending wisdom texts in this manner. (There are, however, other ways in which *Avot* may profitably be compared to Mesopotamian literature; see for instance the comments of W. G. Lambert, "Enmeduranki and Related Matters," *Journal of Cuneiform Studies* 21 [1967]: 126–38, 127, comparing *Avot's* conception of transmission of Torah to Enmeduranki's concept of transmission of kingship.)

Self-referentiality is found in abundance in the Qur'ān; see 2:2 and 3:7 for two well-known examples out of many. Here no genetic connection need be sought, although one is possible.

- 35 Alexander Rofé studied another example, the "do not say" formula, with a similar distribution; he noted there that there are "no instances...in Mesopotamian Wisdom, either Sumerian or Akkadian"; see Rofé, "המלאך בקהלת ה', הלאור נוסחת ויכוח חכמתית," *Eretz Israel* 14 (1978): 105–10 and "The Wisdom Formula 'Do Not Say...' and the Angel in Qohelet 5.5," in *Reading from Right to Left: Essays on the Hebrew Bible in Honour of David J. A. Clines* (eds. J. C. Exum and H. G. M. Williamson; JSOT Sup 373; London: Sheffield Academic Press, 2003), 364–76, 366.

structure, and arrangement between Prov 22:17–23:11 and the Egyptian text.<sup>36</sup> Some have even suggested reading Amenemope's name in Prov 22:19, reading *יִמְנַמְאֶפֶת הַיְהוָה מְבַרְכֵהוּ בְּהוֹדוֹתָיִךְ* (in place of *הַיְהוָה אֱמֵן-אֱמֵן*), translating, "In order that your trust may be with the Lord, Amen-em-opet has informed you."<sup>37</sup> Putting aside conjectural emendations, however, there are deep similarities between the Egyptian text and this section of the biblical text. Since the Egyptian text is considered, for good reason, to be Ramesside in origin, the influence could only go in one direction. The parallels have been collected and arranged in numerous publications, and need not be repeated in full here.<sup>38</sup> These range from the seemingly mundane – "Do not move the ancient boundary stone, nor encroach on the fields of the fatherless" (Prov 23:10) / "Do not displace the marker on the boundaries of the fields, nor attack the borders of a widow" (126, 129 7/12–7/15 6.1, 6.4) – to the theologically significant – "If you say, "Behold, we did not know," does not he who weighs hearts understand?" (Prov 24:12) / "Do not say, "I have done no wrong": [Thoth] sits by the balance" (377, 336 19/18, 17/22 18.1, 16.22).<sup>39</sup>

There are two basic possibilities as to when this Egyptian text could have easily made its way to the scribal circles in Jerusalem.<sup>40</sup> The first is the time of Solomon, the alleged author of at least the beginning of the book of Proverbs (1:1), when, according to biblical testimony, there were close contacts with the Egyptian royal court (1 Kgs 3:1; 7:8; 9:16). In a celebrated article, Albrecht Alt associated an early form of the book of Proverbs with this time.<sup>41</sup> The second possibility, also suggested by the book itself, is the court of Hezekiah in the late eighth century; Prov 25:1 reads, "These, too, are the proverbs of Solomon which were transmitted by Hezekiah's men." Deep Egyptian influence is seen in Hezekiah's royal seal and in a number of Isaiah's prophecies (e. g., chapters

36 Recent discussions, with references to the copious literature that has emerged on this subject since 1924, may be found in J. A. Emerton, "The Teaching of Amenemope and Proverbs XXII 17–XXIV 22: Further Reflections on a Long-standing Problem," *VT* 51 (2001): 431–65; N. Shupak, "The Instruction of Amenemope and Proverbs 22:17–24:22," in *Seeking Out the Wisdom of the Ancients: Essays Offered to Honor Michael V. Fox on the Occasion of his Sixty-Fifth Birthday* (eds. R. L. Troxel, K. G. Freibel, and D. R. Magary; Winona Lake, Ind.: Eisenbrauns, 2006), 203–20; and Laisney, *L'Enseignement d'Amenemope*, 239–46; See also the long history of scholarship in J. R. Black, *The Instruction of Amenemope: A Critical Edition and Commentary, Prolegomenon and Prologue* (Ph.D. dissertation: University of Wisconsin, 2002), 294–396.

37 For one example, see G. Rendsburg, "Hebrew Philological Notes (II)," *Hebrew Studies* 42 (2001): 187–95, 194–95.

38 See especially M. V. Fox, "From Amenemope to Proverbs: Editorial Art in Proverbs 22,17–23,11," *ZAW* 126 (2014): 76–91, as well as Black, *The Instruction of Amenemope*, 560–67.

39 For the phrase "he who weighs hearts" in this biblical text, and its Egyptian background, see N. Shupak, "מטבעות-לשון ורישומים מצריים בחוכמה המקראית," *Tarbiz* 54 (1985): 475–83.

40 My thanks to Israel Knohl for encouraging me to include some thoughts on this, and for emphasizing the plausibility of the Hezekian date of transmission.

41 A. Alt, "Die Weisheit Salomos," *Theologische Literaturzeitung* 76 (1951): 139–44, tr. by D. A. Knight as "Solomonic Wisdom," in *Studies in Ancient Israelite Wisdom* (ed. J. L. Crenshaw; New York: Ktav, 1976), 102–12.

9 and 19), and the close political relationship that then existed is evidenced by others of Isaiah's prophecies, which criticize this relationship, such as Isa 30–31, as well as the story of Sennacherib's campaign, which both reports the Judean reliance on Egypt (through the speech of Rabšaqeh) and mentions the arrival of the Egyptian force led by Taharqa.

Conceivably, the transfer of Amenemope to Israelite circles could have been the result of a single event, in which a copy of Amenemope wound up in Jerusalem, in Hebrew translation, and Israelites assimilated the ideas of this text. Indeed, Michael Fox has tried to reconstruct in detail how the author of Prov 22–23 drew from Amenemope.<sup>42</sup> This may indeed have occurred. Yet it is also probable that the Egyptian wisdom tradition had a more sustained effect on Israelite traditions than would have occurred in the hands of just one scribe or school. The evidence for this is that the effects of Amenemope can be found both in parts of Proverbs outside of 22–24,<sup>43</sup> and in texts much later than Proverbs.<sup>44</sup>

### Echoes of the wisdom “self-referential coda” in biblical texts

If the tradition of ending a wisdom text with a self-referential coda was indeed transmitted to Israelite circles in the Iron Age, we would expect to find reflexes of this tradition in the biblical wisdom texts that have reached us. Indeed, there is a clear example of a self-referential coda at the end of Hosea: **מִי הַחֵם וַיִּבֶן אֵלָהּ נְבוֹן וַיִּדְעֵם** “Whoever is wise will study these words, the prudent one will know them” (14:10). This is usually, and with good reason, assumed to be an example of the influence of Wisdom traditions on the book of Hosea.<sup>45</sup> Like classical “Wisdom” writers, Hosea “was greatly interested in the connection between thought and action and, above all, was convinced that wrong perceptions of reality, of the way things were, would lead inevitably to the demise and ruin of his people and nation.”<sup>46</sup> Motivated by the core beliefs about the world as motivated all seekers of wisdom, Hosea enjoined his readers to study his words if they wished to grow wise.

In Proverbs itself, there are a number of sincere self-referential statements. But interestingly, these are found at the beginnings, rather than the ends, of the proverb collections. For instance, the preacher exhorts in the very first chapter, **יִשְׁמַע חֵם וַיִּוְסֶף לָקוּחַ וְנְבוֹן תִּתְבַּלֹּזֹת יִקְנֶה**: “Let the wise man hear, and

42 M. V. Fox, “The Formation of Proverbs 22:17–23:11,” *Die Welt des Orients* 38 (2008): 22–37.

43 As Ronnie Goldstein noted (p. c.), for instance, Prov 15 seems to echo many of the themes of Amenemope, especially chapters 3, 9–10, and 27–28.

44 For this, see the concluding section below.

45 See C. L. Seow, “Hosea 14:10 and the Foolish People Motif,” *CBQ* 44 (1982): 212–24.

46 A. A. Macintosh, “Hosea and the Wisdom Tradition: Dependence and Independence,” in *Wisdom in Ancient Israel: Essays in Honour of J. A. Emerton* (eds. J. Day, R. P. Gordon, and H. G. M. Williamson; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 124–32, 125.

increase knowledge; the man of understanding may attain wise counsels.”<sup>47</sup> More relevantly, later in the book, at the beginning of the section identified by modern scholars as the “Words of the Wise,” and which has obvious and deep connections to Egyptian Wisdom literature (on which, see below), we read the following exhortation: *הַט אָזְנְךָ וּשְׁמַע דְּבַרֵי חֲכָמִים, וְלִבְךָ תִּשְׁתִּי לְדַעְתִּי. כִּי נָעִים כִּי תִשְׁתִּי עַל שְׂפָתֶיךָ* “Incline your ear and hear the words of the wise; apply your heart to my knowledge – for it is pleasant, when you keep them in your belly, they shall be firmly together on your lips.”<sup>48</sup>

Finally, we turn to Qohelet. Here the epilogue is in a different voice than the bulk of the book, and it is far from high praise for the book: *דְּבַרֵי חֲכָמִים כְּדֹרְבָנוֹת וּכְמִשְׁמֵרוֹת נְטוּעִים בְּעֵלֵי אֲסֻפּוֹת נִתְּנוּ מִרְעָה אֶחָד. וַיִּתֵּר מִהֶמָּה בְּנֵי הַזְּהָר כְּעֹשֵׂי סִפְרֵים הַרְבֵּה אֵין קֶץ וְלֹהֵג הַרְבֵּה יִגְעַת בְּשָׂר* “The words of the wise are like goads, and the masters of collections are like fixed nails, stuck in by a shepherd. And more: beware, my son, of them; the making of books is without end, and much studying is a wearying of the flesh” (12:11–12). It is possible that an ironic, sardonic coda that threatens to undermine the value of the foregoing “wisdom” may be par for the course in Qohelet.<sup>49</sup> However, the ending of Qohelet is not all that different from the epilogues to other books of wisdom, and it therefore forms an integral part of our story.

In my view, following the arguments of Michael Fox, the coda to Qohelet is integral to the book itself.<sup>50</sup> The voice of the author of the book is not that of Qohelet himself, but of a wisdom teacher, who addresses himself to his “son,” and quotes from Qohelet extensively.<sup>51</sup> The end of the book is the place where he most allows his own voice to be heard, and he quite purposefully distances himself, respectfully, from all that Qohelet has said. In Fox’s translation:

Now, furthermore, Qohelet was a wise-man. He constantly taught the people knowledge, and weighing and investigating he composed many sayings. Qohelet sought to find fine words and to write the most honest words of truth.<sup>52</sup>

47 Prov 1:5–6.

48 Prov 22:17–18.

49 I find compelling the suggestion that *קהלת* means “arguer,” thus coloring the book as combative from the beginning. E. Ullendorff, “The Meaning of *קהלת*,” *VT* 12 (1962) 215, notes that Syriac *קהליא*, Arabic *קהל*, and BH *קהל* in Neh 5:7 (–*את-החרים ואָת-*) all mean “to argue, to argue, to argue” all mean “to argue,” thus yielding *קהלת* “the arguer.” Kugel, “Wisdom and the Anthological Temper,” 32 n. 17 adds Num 16:3 (–*רב-לכם*) and Job 30:28 (–*אֶל-אֱהֵל מוֹעֵד*) to the BH examples.

50 M. V. Fox, “Frame-Narrative and Composition in the Book of Qohelet,” *HUCA* 48 (1977): 83–106.

51 This is in keeping with Kugel’s observation that “any sage was an anthologist, any wisdom book a *bouquet de pensées* gathered from here and there”; see Kugel, “Wisdom and the Anthological Temper,” 18 and *passim*.

52 Fox, “Frame-Narrative,” 96. See also *idem*, *Ecclesiastes* (JPS Bible Commentary; Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 2004), 83–84.

As Fox observes, this says less than it could: “He sought, but did he find? ... The frame-narrator certainly does not deny that Qohelet succeeded in his attempt to find fine words and to write the truth, but neither does he commit himself as to the success of this attempt.”<sup>53</sup> The author of Qohelet thus concludes his book with a coda that reflects back on the merits – and in this case, the possible faults – with the book just concluded.<sup>54</sup>

Fox also observes that this type of “third-person retrospective frame-narrative” – a variation on what we have been calling a self-referential coda – has parallels in a number of Egyptian texts.<sup>55</sup> Recall, for instance, the conclusion of Kagemeni, in which the narrator summarizes by praising the wisdom just transmitted (“As to all that is written in this papyrus scroll, heed it just as I have said it to you”), followed by a narrative statement of its acceptance (“And it was more beautiful in their hearts than anything in this entire land. So they proceeded to live accordingly.”).

Thus, one plausible scenario has aspects of the wisdom tradition being transmitted to scribal circles in Jerusalem in the Iron Age, perhaps in the late eighth century. One of these aspects is the self-referential coda, in which the texts comment on their own value. The best examples, where the statement is genuinely complimentary and found at the end of the text, are the conclusions to the Mishnaic tractates *Avot*, *Kelim*, and *Neziqin*, as well as the Wisdom-in-

53 Fox, “Frame-Narrative,” 101.

54 An alternative understanding of the end of Qohelet results from a possibility that has been raised by various scholars over the years, that Qohelet was at one time the last book in the Hebrew Bible. The coda to Qohelet would then (potentially) be a coda not just to this book, but to the Hebrew Bible as a whole. This claim was cited orally in the name of David Flusser by Alexander Rofé and in the name of Reuven Margalioṭ by Israel Knohl. Since there is no evidence for this view, however, I will not pursue it here.

55 Fox, “Frame-Narrative,” 92–94; he gives the examples of the Instruction for Kagemeni, Prophecy of Neferti, Complaint of Ipuwer, Onchsheshonqy, Deuteronomy, and Tobit. This insight was further developed by C. L. Seow, “‘Beyond them, My Son, Be Warned’: The Epilogue of Qohelet Revisited,” in *Wisdom, You Are My Sister: Studies in Honor of Roland E. Murphy, O. Carm., on the Occasion of His Eightieth Birthday* (ed. M. L. Barré; CBQMS 29; Washington, DC: Catholic Biblical Association of America, 1997), 125–41. Seow thinks that the author has more deference to Qohelet’s wisdom than Fox believes. Literarily, however, the analysis is the same. This is not the place for a full discussion of alternative readings of Qohelet’s epilogue, which I believe need to be rejected in favor of the reading proposed by Fox and Seow, presented above. G. H. Wilson, “The Words of the Wise’: The Intent and Significance of Qohelet 12:9–14,” *JBL* 103 (1984): 175–92, argues for a “canon consciousness” evident in the epilogue, suggesting that the *דברי חכמים* refer to Qohelet together with Proverbs, and warning that nothing else ought to be considered. This type of understanding is properly rejected by Seow, “‘Beyond them, My Son, Be Warned.’” M. A. Shields, *The End of Wisdom: A Reappraisal of the Historical and Canonical Function of Ecclesiastes* (Winnona Lake, Ind.: Eisenbrauns, 2006), argues that the purpose of the epilogue is to exemplify Wisdom by reference to Qohelet, and then argue that it leads to the conclusion that if this is what Wisdom is, it offers little in the way of hope (see especially 106–09). His suggestion regarding the syntax of the verse (in “Re-examining the Warning of Eccl. XII 12,” *VT* 50 [2000]: 123–27) is unconvincing; *נזהר* needs *מן* before the complement.

fluenced book of Hosea.<sup>56</sup> Variations on the theme are found in biblical books of Proverbs (where the statements are not at the end) and Qohelet (where the conclusion is not full-fledged praise).

## Route 2: Demotic wisdom and the end of Ben Sira

An alternative hypothesis is that the relevant aspects of the wisdom tradition entered Jewish society much later, in Hellenistic or Roman times. To explore this, it is worth looking at the end of Ben Sira, composed in the early 2<sup>nd</sup> century B. C. E. in Judea, and its intellectual context.<sup>57</sup> The first half (but not the second) of the last chapter of the book, chapter 51, is preserved in the Psalms Scroll from Qumran, giving us a reliable witness to the original text for that section.<sup>58</sup> The second half is preserved in MS B from the Cairo Geniza, but there is good reason to think that the text here is not the original Hebrew, but a later version either retroverted from the Syriac, or at least affected by it.<sup>59</sup>

56 Baruch J. Schwartz raised the possibility (orally) that the book of Deuteronomy – also known to have been influenced by Wisdom traditions (see esp. M. Weinfeld, *Deuteronomy and the Deuteronomistic School* [Oxford: Clarendon, 1973], 244–319) – reflects this tradition in its twice-iterated injunction “not to add or subtract” from the words taught (4:2 and 13:1). Weinfeld himself finds that these lines are more closely comparable to Mesopotamian and Greek treaties than to Egyptian wisdom, but also develops the sapiential background; see especially pp. 261–64.

57 I am indebted to Binyamin Goldstein for recommending a more serious engagement with Ben Sira in this context.

58 It is often suggested that the book is the product of a number of redactional stages. What is now 51:13–30 is commonly held to have been the original ending, however, even if the book consisted only of 1:1–23:27+51:13–30; see J. Corley, “Searching for Structure and Redaction in Ben Sira: An Investigation of Beginnings and Endings,” in *The Wisdom of Ben Sira: Studies on Tradition, Redaction, and Theology* (eds. A. Passaro and G. Bellia; Deuterocanonical and Cognate Literature 1; Berlin: De Gruyter, 2008), 21–47.

59 M. Kister, “לפירושו של ספר בן סירא,” *Tarbiz* 59 (1990): 303–78, 304 n. 2: “To my mind there is no doubt, for example, that 51:13–30 is a back-translation from the Syriac.” W. T. van Peursen, “Sirach 51:13–30 in Hebrew and Syriac,” in *Hamlet on a Hill: Semitic and Greek Studies Presented to Professor T. Muraoka on the Occasion of His Sixty-Fifth Birthday* (eds. M. F. J. Baasten and W. Th. van Peursen; Leuven: Peeters, 2003), 357–74: “We think that in the case of Sir 51:13–30 in the Geniza manuscript B, the retroversion theory can stand the test. We have noted a number of textual and linguistic phenomena that do not allow for a satisfactory explanation, unless we assume that they are a retroversion from the Syriac. ... It is more likely that the text in ms B is the product of inner-Hebrew textual transmission after the retroversion from Syriac” (373–74). Peursen elsewhere argues that the linguistic evidence for the retroversion theory is quite thin for the rest of Ben Sira; see W. T. van Peursen, “The Alleged Retroversions from Syriac in the Hebrew Text of Ben Sira Revisited: Linguistic Perspectives,” in *Kleine Untersuchungen zur Sprachen des Alten Testaments und seiner Umwelt* (ed. R. G. Lehmann; 2 vols.; Waltrop: Spenner, 2001), 2.47–95. He is indubitably correct that “Mishnaic” Hebrew is not problematic within Ben Sira. For some of the examples, though, his defenses of the grammaticality of the Hebrew are not entirely compelling, and there appear to be constructions that are not at home in any form of ancient

It has also long been debated whether Ben Sira himself wrote this poem; the presence of the poem in the Psalms Scroll suggests that some viewed it as a composition by David by the first century B. C. E. Some modern scholars think the poem was written by Ben Sira, others are convinced it was not, and others are agnostic.<sup>60</sup> I myself am both agnostic and apathetic. It is clear that the poem speaks to many of the themes that are central to Ben Sira, and also that it is originally part of the book. Whether the poem was original to the book or not is not all that interesting a question for my purposes. It will be recalled that Ben Bagbag himself was likely an earlier sage whose maxim was repurposed by the editor of *Avot* as a self-referential coda to the tractate or the entire Mishnah. The origins of the text and its purpose in its current context are different questions, and it is the latter that is crucial for this paper.

A reasonable guess as to the original form of the end of the poem, following for the most part the work of Eric Reymond, is the following:

סורו אלי פתיים	ולינו בבית מוסר
עד מתי תחסרון מן אילו	ונפשכם תצמאה מאד
פי פתחתי ובה דברתי	קנו לכם בלא כסף
צואריכם בעלה הביאו	ומשאה תשא נפשכם
קרובה היא למבקשיה	ונותן נפשו מוצא אתה
ראו בעיניכם כי קטן הייתי	ועמדתי בה ומצאתיה
שמעו רבים למודי בנערותי	וכסף זוהב קנו בי
תשמח נפשכם בלקחי	ולא תבושו בשירתי
פעלו פעלתכם באמונה	ויתן שכרכם בעתו <sup>61</sup>

Hebrew. See Peursen, "The Alleged Retroversions," 48–50 and nn. 2–10 for further references to views on this question.

60 For references to many modern views, see E.D. Reymond, "Sirach 51:13–30 and 11Q5 (= 11QPS<sup>a</sup>) 21.11–22.1," *RevQ* 90 (2007): 207–31, esp. 208 and nn. 2–4. A revised version of the article appears in *idem*, *New Idioms within Old: Poetry and Parallelism in the Non-Masoretic Poems of 11Q5 (= 11QPS<sup>a</sup>)* (SBL EJL 31; Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2011), 21–50.

61 The text as reconstructed by Reymond is:

סורי אלי נבלים / ולינו בבית מוסר  
עד מתי תחסרו מאילו / ונפשכם צמאה מאד  
פתחתי פי ודברתי בה / קנו לכם בלא כסף  
צואריכם הביאו בעלה / ותשא נפשכם משאה  
ראו בעיניכם / כי מעט עמלתי / ומצאתי הרבה  
שמעו מוסר כמעט / וכסף זוהב תקנה בה  
תשמח נפשכם בחסדה / ואל תבושו בתהלתה  
[פעלו פעלכם בעתו / ותתן] שכרכם בעתו.

The text of the end of Ben Sira 51, as preserved in the Geniza ms., is as follows:

ולינו בבית מדרשי	פנו אלי סכלים
ונפשכם צמאה מאד תהיה	עד מתי תחסרון מן אילו ואילו
קנו לכם חכמה בלא כסף	פי פתחתי ודברתי בה
ומשאה תשא נפשכם	וצואריכם בעלה הביאו
ונותן נפשו מוצא אתה	קרובה היא למבקשיה
ועמדתי בה ומצאתיה	ראו בעיניכם כי קטן הייתי
וכסף זוהב תקנו בי	רבים שמעו למודי בנערותי
ולא תבושו בשירתי	תשמח נפשי בישבתי
והוא נותן לכם שכרכם בעתו	מעשיכם עשו בצדקה

Turn toward me, fools	And stay over in my house of instruction
How long will you remain bereft of these?	With your souls thirsting mightily
My mouth opened, and I spoke through it	You can acquire, without pay!
Bring your necks in its yoke	And bear its burden on your throats
It is close for those who seek it	And he who gives his soul finds it
You can see with your own eyes that I was small	Yet I reached it and found it.
Many heard of my studies when I was young	And acquired silver and gold through me.
Your soul shall rejoice at my lesson	And not be ashamed at my song.
Do your work faithfully	That He may reward you promptly.

As is clear, this concluding section of the text appeals to the disciples to pay careful attention to the foregoing wisdom dispensed by Ben Sira and thus constitutes a self-referential coda of a sort.<sup>62</sup> It should also be clear that the very idea of ending a book of wisdom with an alphabetic acrostic is a tradition found also in Proverbs, where 31:10–31 (the so-called “paean to a woman of valor”) seals that book.<sup>63</sup>

In one way, however, Ben Sira differs qualitatively from what is found in *Avot*: rather than praising the text just concluded, the coda praises Wisdom herself, and the sage – in this case, Ben Sira – who has found her. This is not only a feature of the text’s conclusion; earlier, Ben Sira explicitly said that he has learned more than he could say: “I have seen much in my travels, and learned more than I could ever say” (34:12). So rather than the text being held up as the container (*middah*) for all worthwhile wisdom, Ben Sira as a person is praised as having achieved wisdom, and thereby showing the way for others to follow.<sup>64</sup> Indeed, this agrees with another major aspect of Ben Sira’s conception of Wisdom: even more than in texts such as Proverbs, and certainly more than in *Avot* or the Egyptian texts to be seen below, Wisdom in Ben Sira

62 For this theme, see the comments of S. Manfredi, “The True Sage or the Servant of the Lord (Sir 51:13–30 Gr),” in *The Wisdom of Ben Sira: Studies on Tradition, Redaction, and Theology* (ed. A. Passaro and G. Bellia; Deuterocanonical and Cognate Literature Studies 1; Berlin: Walter De Gruyter, 2008), 173–95, 175. There is some eroticism in the text, but this is mostly in the first half, rather than the second. See M. Turner, “No Small Theological Difference: The Eroticism of the Hebrew Text of Ben Sira 51.13–30,” in *Where the Wild Ox Roams: Biblical Essays in Honour of Norman C. Habel* (eds. A. H. Cadwallader with P. L. Trudinger; Hebrew Bible Monographs 59; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2013), 243–54, among other commentators, for this aspect.

63 See A. Demsky, “A Proto-Canaanite Abecedary Dating from the Period of the Judges and Its Implications for the History of the Alphabet,” *Tel Aviv* 4 (1977): 14–27, 17, for this connection, and V. A. Hurowitz, “The Seventh Pillar – Reconsidering the Literary Structure and Unity of Proverbs 31,” *ZAW* 113 (2001): 209–18, for the structure of Prov 31 and its place within the book.

64 For the “sage as exemplar,” with much that that entails, in Ben Sira, see B. G. Wright, “Ben Sira on the Sage as Exemplar,” in *Praise Israel for Wisdom and Instruction: Essays on Ben Sira and Wisdom, the Letter of Aristeas and the Septuagint* (JSJSup 131; Leiden: Brill, 2008), 165–82. See also Manfredi, “The True Sage or the Servant of the Lord,” 194, for the connection between Ben Sira and Jeremiah in this regard.

is conceptualized anthropomorphically, or, better, gunaikomorphically.<sup>65</sup> She cannot be captured in any text; she must be met, encountered, and personally acquired.<sup>66</sup>

What is most important for our purposes is that there are clear connections between Ben Sira and Egyptian (especially Demotic) wisdom literature.<sup>67</sup> The closest connections are to Papyrus Insinger.<sup>68</sup> The connections can be seen, firstly, in the small details. Both give 100 as the “ideal lifetime.” In earlier Egyptian literature, this varies between 100, 110, and 120, with 110 being the most common. Ben Sira writes, “What are mortals? What are they worth? What is good in them, and what is evil? The number of their days seems great if it reaches a hundred years. Like a drop of water from the sea and a grain of sand, so are these few years among the days of eternity” (18:8–10).<sup>69</sup> Both

- 65 See A. Mermelstein, *Creation, Covenant, and the Beginnings of Judaism: Reconceiving Historical Time in the Second Temple Period* (JSJSup 168; Leiden: Brill, 2014), 52–87.
- 66 See also C. V. Camp, *Ben Sira and the Men Who Handle Books: Gender and the Rise of Canon-Consciousness* (Hebrew Bible Monographs 50; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2013), esp. 137–72, who also argues that Ben Sira cannot textualize his wisdom, and insists that it is personal, inherent in the Sage. She connects this to the developing canon, which may be gratuitous, however.
- 67 Some of the themes in Ben Sira, such as the valorization of the scribal trade at the expense of other professions in chapters 38–39, have long histories in the wisdom literature of ancient Egypt. See, among others, C. Rollston, “Ben Sira 38:24–39:11 and the *Egyptian Satire of the Trades*: A Reconsideration,” *JBL* 120 (2001): 131–39, who makes the important point that there was a long Egyptian literary tradition of lauding scribalism at the expense of other professions, of which the *Satire* is the best but not the only example. Note also L. L. Grabbe, “Scribes, Writing, and Epigraphy in the Second Temple Period,” in “*See, I Will Bring a Scroll Recounting What Befell Me*” (Ps 40:8): *Epigraphy and Daily Life from the Bible to the Talmud, Dedicated to the Memory of Professor Hanan Eshel* (eds. E. Eshel and Y. Levin; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2014), 105–21, 115–17. However, the tradition of Middle Egyptian literature, including the *Satire of the Trades*, seems to have ended long before the Hellenistic period, and therefore direct influence is unlikely. See J. F. Quack, “The Interaction of Egyptian and Aramaic Literature,” in *Judah and the Judeans in the Achaemenid Age: Negotiating Identity in an International Context* (eds. O. Lipschits, G. N. Knoppers, and M. Oeming; Winona Lake, Ind.: Eisenbrauns, 2011), 375–401, 392–93. For a more direct claim of influence, see B. Couroyer, “Un Égyptianisme dans Ben Sira IV, 11,” *RB* 82 (1975): 206–17.
- 68 The most important discussions are by Sanders, Lichtheim, and Goff: J. T. Sanders, *Ben Sira and Demotic Wisdom* (SBLMS 28; Chico, Calif.: Scholars Press, 1983); *idem*, “Concerning Ben Sira and Demotic Wisdom: A Response to Matthew J. Goff,” *JSJ* 38 (2007): 297–306; M. Lichtheim, *Late Egyptian Wisdom Literature in the International Context: A Study of Demotic Instructions* (Orbis Biblicus et Orientalis; Freiburg Schweiz: Universitätsverlag; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1983); M. J. Goff, “Hellenistic Instruction in Palestine and Egypt: Ben Sira and Papyrus Insinger,” *JSJ* 36 (2005): 147–72; *idem*, “Ben Sira and Papyrus Insinger,” in *Early Christian Literature and Intertextuality, Volume 1: Thematic Studies* (eds. C. A. Evans and H. D. Zacharias; Library of New Testament Studies; Studies in Scripture in Early Judaism and Christianity 14; London: T & T Clark, 2009), 54–64.
- 69 See Lichtheim, *Late Egyptian Wisdom*, 154–55. Lichtheim notes that P. Insinger begins to divide the lifespan into decades, but does not complete this. The major (short) work on the subject, F. Boll, *Die Lebensalter. Ein Beitrag zur antiken Ethologie und zur Geschichte der Zahlen. Mit einem Anhang über die Schrift von der Siebenzahl* (Leipzig and Berlin: B. G.

texts “point to the bee as something small that can accomplish a lot (Sir 11:3; Insing. 25.2).”<sup>70</sup> The connections can also be seen in larger themes: both texts preach that evil is divine in origin, and always just; neither tries very hard to justify these complicated claims, and both apparently simply take them as matters of faith.<sup>71</sup> The discussion of women in P. Insinger and Ben Sira are closely parallel.<sup>72</sup> Both move away from a focus on the practicalities of interpersonal relations, which take center stage in both earlier biblical literature and Egyptian texts even as late as Ankhsheshonqy. In these later texts, the focus is on the achievement of the status of a “wise man,” with the qualities that that entails: restraint, gentleness, generosity, distrust, patience, trust in God. This is very different from earlier Israelite and Egyptian wisdom, whose goal was human relations, not internal development.<sup>73</sup> Perhaps the strongest argument for direct dependence, rather than shared common motifs, comes not from the specific ideas in each text, but from the topical arrangements of the texts as whole.<sup>74</sup>

Thus, although some of these connections can be attributed to “widely diffused sapiential themes which travelled back and forth in the Hellenistic oikumene, and were coined and re coined in Aramaic, Hebrew, Greek, and Egyptian, to name only the languages most directly involved,”<sup>75</sup> there also seem to be links that go beyond that general level of cultural diffusion, and can be most readily explained as the result of direct or indirect textual transmission.<sup>76</sup>

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Teubner, 1913), does not know of any such examples from the ancient world. But note the baraita found in later versions of *Avot* (ch. 5; although not in the manuscripts), which begins, “when a child is five – Scripture...” and soon lapses into a division into decades: “at twenty – to chase; at thirty – to strength; at forty – to understanding; at fifty – to counsel; at sixty – to old age; at seventy – to white hair; at eighty – to potency; at ninety – to stooping; at one hundred – as if dead and passed from the world.” This shares the notion of 100 as the lifespan of humans, and also the division into decades.

70 Goff, “Hellenistic Instruction,” 148.

71 See Goff, “Ben Sira and Papyrus Insinger,” 58–61. M. Bar-Asher Siegal, “The Treatment of Poverty and Theodicy in the Syriac Translation of Ben Sira,” *Aramaic Studies* 7 (2009): 131–54, 153, argued that “The Syriac translator ... stressed human choice and muted the parts of the text of Ben Sira that suggested divine responsibility for evil.”

72 Lichtheim, *Late Egyptian Wisdom Literature*, 161–62.

73 Lichtheim, *Late Egyptian Wisdom*, 186, noting the contrast in this regard between P. Insinger and Ankhsheshonqy.

74 For the literary arrangement of these, and earlier Egyptian texts, into “instructional units,” sometimes called “chapters” in the texts themselves (see below), see W. T. Wilson, *The Mysteries of Righteousness: The Literary Composition and Genre of the Sentences of Pseudo-Phocylides* (TSAJ 40; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1994), 35.

75 M. Lichtheim, review of Sanders, *Ben Sira and Demotic Wisdom*, in *JAOS* 104 (1984): 769.

76 For the argument for direct textual influence, see Sanders, *Ben Sira and Demotic Wisdom*, and Sanders, “Concerning Ben Sira and Demotic Wisdom,” against the doubts of Goff, “Hellenistic Instruction in Palestine and Egypt.”

## Late Egyptian Wisdom and the Near Eastern traditions

Probably because of the language barriers that exist for modern scholars, Late Egyptian materials are often segregated from the rest of the Near East, perhaps even more than older Egyptian materials are. This is unfortunate and misleading, as the world of the eastern Mediterranean was never a very large one, and in Persian, Hellenistic, and Roman times, was quite interconnected.<sup>77</sup> Lichtheim has noted that the Demotic instruction writer Ankhsheshonqy knew Aḥiqar (which was, it will be recalled, found in Egypt, albeit in Aramaic, and albeit in an apparently different form than that known by Ankhsheshonqy; fragments of a Demotic translation of Aḥiqar also are known).<sup>78</sup> In turn, a proverb of Ankhsheshonqy, “He who is bitten of the bite of a snake is afraid of a coil of rope,” is quoted as a popular proverb in *Qohelet Rabba* 7:4 and *Shir ha-Shirim Rabba* 1:14.<sup>79</sup> Another proverb of Ankhsheshonqy, “He who battles together with the people of his town will rejoice together with them,” provides a close parallel to a Hebrew saying in Bavli *Ta’anit* 11a, “He who shares the sorrow of the community is worthy to see the rejoicing of the community.”<sup>80</sup> And yet another proverb of Ankhsheshonqy, “Do not drink water of a well and then throw the pitcher into it,” is again cited in rabbinic literature as a “saying of the people”: “A well from which you drank water, do not cast a clod into it.”<sup>81</sup> Furthermore, some Wisdom traditions with roots in ancient Egypt (especially Amenemope and P. Insinger) are found in Qumran texts such as 4Q424.<sup>82</sup>

77 This has been argued most thoroughly, to my knowledge, by Lichtheim, *Late Egyptian Wisdom Literature in the International Context*. J. Houser-Wegner, *Cultural and Literary Continuity in the Demotic Instructions* (Ph.D. dissertation; Yale University, 2001), argued that in fact most elements of the Demotic instructions have parallels in earlier Egyptian literature, and therefore no international context was needed to explain them. But this is unconvincing; see Quack, “The Interaction of Egyptian and Aramaic Literature,” 386, for one example, and N. Lazaridis, *Wisdom in Loose Form: The Language of Egyptian and Greek Proverbs in Collections of the Hellenistic and Roman Periods* (Mnemosyne Sup 287; Leiden: Brill, 2007), 7–9.

78 M. Lichtheim, “Demotic Proverbs,” in *Grammate Demotika: Festschrift für Erich Lüdeckens zum 15. Juni 1983* (Würzburg: Zauzich, 1984), 125–40, 129. For the differences between the Elephantine edition of Aḥiqar and the edition known by Ankhsheshonqy, see Quack, “The Interaction of Egyptian and Aramaic Literature,” 376–86. For the Demotic fragments of Aḥiqar, see K.-T. Zauzich, “Demotische Fragmente zum Aḥiqar-Roman,” in *Folia Rara: Wolfgang Voigt LXV. diem natalem celebranti ab amicis et catalogorum codicum orientalisum conscribendorum collegis dedicate* (eds. H. Francke, W. Heissig, and W. Treue; Verzeichnis der orientalischen Handschriften in Deutschland Supplementband 19 Wiesbaden: Steiner, 1976), 180–85; my thanks to Prof. Michael Fox for reminding me of the relevance of this.

79 Ankhsheshonqy 14/14, cited in the rabbinic texts as *לִיה חוּיָה חִבְלָא מִדְחִיל לִיה* “He whom a snake has bitten, a rope frightens”; see Lichtheim, “Demotic Proverbs,” 132. She further notes that “a Greek version is preserved in a Byzantine collection of proverbs.”

80 Ankhsheshonqy 18/10, discussed in Lichtheim, “Demotic Proverbs,” 136.

81 Lichtheim, 136, citing Ankhsheshonqy 23/23 and *b. Bava Qam.* 92b.

82 See M. J. Goff, *Discerning Wisdom: The Sapiential Literature of the Dead Sea Scrolls* (VTSup 116; Leiden: Brill, 2007), 179–97.

All in all, it seems legitimate to conclude that Ben Sira was part of a world that included more recent Egyptian wisdom, with which Ben Sira has much in common. This intellectual world was an interconnected one, in which ideas and formulations traveled around the eastern Mediterranean. As we have seen, not only do specific proverbs circulate, but so do broad themes and ideals. The mechanics of transmission are, of course, worthy of some thought. It is possible that P. Insinger could make its way to Judean circles through a translation into some more cosmopolitan language than Demotic or Hebrew; both Aramaic and Greek are possible mediums. It is also possible that bilinguals would affect this sort of transmission. We know, of course, of Ben Sira's grandson, who translated his grandfather's work from (provincial) Hebrew into (cosmopolitan) Greek, and the Demotic translation of Aḥiqar is relevant here, as well. With books of wisdom, whose contents often transcend any particular local culture and could have more international appeal, one can easily imagine many such examples, creating an international library of wisdom literature that circulated around the region.

### Connecting lines from Ben Sira's world to that of *Avot*

The Roman world of the Rabbis was, of course, a heavily interconnected one, as well. And yet it seems more plausible that the Rabbis were heirs to wisdom traditions already in Jewish society by Roman times than that they were reading Demotic literature. Fortunately, the lines between Ben Sira and later Jewish wisdom are quite well established. The book was known in rabbinic circles of the Roman and Byzantine periods: it is referred to by name, and a small number of passages are cited with some accuracy in rabbinic literature. In fact, one line from Ben Sira, "Humble your pride very much, for the hope of humanity is worms" (7:17), is echoed closely in *Avot* 4:4, "R. Levitas of Yavneh says, Be very very humble of spirit, for the hope of humanity is worms."<sup>83</sup>

For our purposes, it is not enough for Ben Sira to have been transmitted through to rabbinic circles, however. What we really need to know is that the *poetics* of wisdom literature were still circulating in Jewish circles in rabbinic times: were the rules governing the composition and form of Ben Sira still known in some sense in rabbinic times? The textual end of Ben Sira is not what inspired the end of *Avot*; what is needed is the abstract idea of how wisdom texts are supposed to conclude.

83 On all this, see J.R. Labendz, "The Book of Ben Sira in Rabbinic Literature," *AJS Review* 30 (2006): 347–92, esp. 348–56. Labendz notes that it is the fourth-generation Babylonian Amoraim who seem to reintroduce Ben Sira into the Jewish library. T. Ilan, "יחסו של בן-סירה לנשים וקבלתו בתלמוד הבבלי," *Jewish Studies* 40 (2000): 103–11, argued that Ben Sira's misogynistic attitudes are what the Babylonian Amoraim found attractive. This may be part of the story, but the story is more complicated; see Rosen-Zvi, "The Wisdom Tradition in Rabbinic Literature," 179–80.

Tropper has identified one example which he thinks may establish a positive answer to this question. A “bare-bones outline of Jewish history,” touching on Creation, the generations from Adam to Noah and then Noah to Abraham, and the trials of Abraham, provides the opening frame for the final chapter of *Avot*. Similarly, “[t]he last major section of Ben Sira (chapters 44–50) follows the outline of biblical history from the antediluvian patriarch to Nehemiah.” In both cases, individuals spanning the history of the Jews are singled out for attention, but no historical narrative is constructed.<sup>84</sup>

### All (cultural) roads lead to Rom(an era rabbinic literature)

We have, to this point, surveyed two different routes that could have been taken from Ramesside Egypt to Roman Palestine, the first entering through Iron Age Israel and continuing “downwards” through Israelite and Judean societies until the rabbinic period, and the other moving within Egyptian culture until Hellenistic times, at which time it was transmitted to Jewish circles. Of course, these are not mutually exclusive, and in fact these lines of transmission may well be mutually reinforcing.

While *Avot*, and the Mishnah more generally, gives the impression of being in some ways an insular text, it is heir to traditions of thought and expression that are shared with many cultures around the eastern Mediterranean and the Near East. In conclusion, one more possible echo of the Egyptian wisdom tradition is the Mishnah: the “thirty chapters.”

As discussed above, Amenemope contains thirty chapters, and also an explicit notice of this number, concluding, “Look to these thirty chapters...” Within Proverbs, this number is attested only in a conjectural emendation: Proverbs 22:20 reads, *הֲלֹא כְתָבְתִי לְךָ שְׁלוֹם בְּמַעֲצוֹת וְדַעַת*. For the word left unvocalized here, the Masoretic scribal tradition has here *שְׁלוֹם*, but the reading tradition has *שְׁלִישִׁים*. Since Erman in 1924, many commentators have suggested emending to *שְׁלִישִׁים* “thirty” in light of Amenemope, and rendering the verse, “Lo, I have written for you thirty, of counsel and knowledge.” Moshe Held went further, suggesting that the verse should be read, *הֲלֹא כְתָבְתִי לְךָ שְׁלִישִׁים, בְּמוֹ עֲצוֹת וְדַעַת* “Lo, I have written thirty for you; in them there is counsel and wisdom.”<sup>85</sup>

84 Tropper, *Wisdom, Politics, and Historiography*, 58. Tropper adds that “the notion that Ben Sira served as a precedent for the historical outline in the final chapter of *Avot* is strengthened by the consideration that it most probably served as a precedent for a similar outline at the end of the Wisdom of Solomon.”

85 See C. Cohen, “Pharaoh’s שלישים ‘Third-Man Charioteers’ (Exod. 14.7; 15.4) and the Unnoticed Literary Allusion to the Battle of Qadesh in the Song of the Sea,” in *Visions of Life in Biblical Times: Essays in Honor of Meir Lubetski* (eds. C. Gottlieb, C. Cohen, and M. Gruber; Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix, 2015), 17–46, 19–21 n. 7 (the note spreads over these three pages and provides further arguments for the emendations cited here).

The Mishnah, however, provides much firmer examples of the use of “thirty chapters.” It will be recalled that both tractate *Neziqin* and tractate *Kelim* contained thirty chapters. This was noted already by the early Rabbis, in a text such as *Vayyiqra Rabbah* 19:2 and parallels:<sup>86</sup>

מי שטיפש מהו אומר, מי יכול לקצות את זו. מי שפיקח מהו אומר, הריני קוצה שתי משפלות היום ושתי משפלות למחר עד שאני קוצה את כולה. כך מי שטיפש מהו אומר, מי יכול ללמוד את התורה, נזיקים ל' פרקים כילים ל' פרקים. מי שפיקח מהו אומר, הריני למד שתי הלכות היום ושתי הלכות למחר עד שאני קורא את כל התורה כולה.

What does a fool say? Who can cut, dry, and store all these [figs]? What does a wise person say? I will cut, dry, and store two baskets [of figs], and two baskets tomorrow, until I have completed them all. So, too, a fool says, Who can learn all the Torah, *Neziqin* – 30 chapters, *Kelim* – 30 chapters? One who is wise says, I will learn two laws today, and two laws tomorrow, until I have studied the entire Torah.

It can be added that the early, perhaps pre-rabbinic, chronograph, *Seder Olam*, tells the history of the world in thirty chapters, as well.<sup>87</sup> And as mentioned, the Mishnah as a whole was organized into 60 tractates, perhaps neatly divided into two halves of 30 tractates each.

More importantly, however, and more to the point of this paper, is the tradition of self-referential codas. Thus, the two thirty-chapter tractates, *Neziqin* and *Kelim*, also end with self-referential codas that praise the text. Most importantly, such a coda, a small remnant of the legacy of ancient Egypt still lurking in Jewish tradition in Roman times, is to be found at the end of *Avot*, which is clearly a “Wisdom” text in other ways, as well. This is another example of a literary phenomenon that is found in biblical wisdom literature and in post-biblical Jewish literature, with roots in ancient Egyptian wisdom. The rivers of wisdom run from Egypt into rabbinic literature.

86 See also *Shir ha-Shirim Rabbah* 5:2, and compare Mishnat Rabbi Eliezer § 13.

87 See C. Milikowsky, פירוש ומבוא, סדר עולם: מהדורה מדעית, (Jerusalem: Yad Yitshak Ben-Zvi, 2013).