Epistemology in the Biblical Tradition – Judean Knowledge-Building, Scribal Craftsmanship, and Scribal Culture[1]

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In this study I have two basic objectives. First, noting the constructivist turn in the study of the Mesopotamian intellectual tradition in recent years, I argue that the Hebrew Bible's epistemology is also fundamentally scribally oriented. To this end, I briefly note previous approaches to the issue of epistemology in ancient Mesopotamia and Judah and introduce the idea of "epistemic cultures". Second, I show how recognizing this scribal epistemology allows us to fully appreciate and understand certain biblical etymologies by examining two examples from the book of Genesis. It is my hope that this paper contributes to the present volume's questions related to the legitimation and the sociology of knowledge.

Mesopotamian Epistemology and Epistemic Cultures

In the early and mid-twentieth century, Assyriologists concentrated on so-called *Listenwissenschaft* or, later, the empirical dimensions of Babylonian knowledge-building.[2] Most recently, however, scholars, such as Gebhard Selz, Francesca Rochberg, and Marc van de Mieroop have located Mesopotamian epistemology *within* the scribal tradition that documented it.[3] Key to our understanding of how they knew their world is the relationship between how Babylonian scribes observed their wider environment *vis-à-vis* how they observed their documents.

The application of constructivist methodologies that recognize that knowledge is a produced social construct has been exceptionally productive in trying to understand the intersection of epistemology and writing in ancient Iraq.[4] Constructivist studies focus not only on what is produced (i.e., know-ledge), but also on the producers and process of its production. Briefly stated, a knowledge (or epistemic) subject,[5] utilizing her tools, applies her practice[6] to "knowledge objects".[7] The outcome of applying practice to these objects is

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2 Perhaps this was in response to the mythopoetic characterization of ancient Near Eastern thought typical of the mid-twentieth century academy. See for example, FRANKFORT/FRANKFORT, 1946, pp. 363-388. Though Thorkild Jacobsen was a major contributor to this volume, he demurs from saying anything of substance regarding epistemology, cf. JACOBSEN, 1946, pp. 125-219. See also, TROLLE LARSEN, 1987, pp. 203-225; BOTTÉRO, 1974, pp. 144-168; ROCHBERG, 2010 [1982], pp. 26f.

3 Niek VELDHUIS, 1997; SELZ, 2011, pp, 49-70; ROCHBERG, 1999, pp. 559-569; VAN DE MIEROOP, 2015. See also WINITZER, 2011, p. 94.

4 The obvious attention in this regard has been on those texts that have been most easily identified with what we moderns might consider approximations of our science, such as astronomical (i.e., celestial divination) and taxonomical (i.e., the list tradition) texts. In any case, my definition of knowledge is a social one: it is a communally recognized "set of organized statements of [perceived] fact or ideas" (BELL, 1973, p. 41, cited in KNORR CETINA, 1999, p. 6 [bracketed insertion mine]), that functions as "a tool for defining one's place in society; its validity and usefulness are inextricably linked to social structure and to the place within that structure where knowledge is produced" (VELDHUIS, 2014, 21).

5 KNORR CETINA, 1999, p. 11.

6 Practices can be defined as "recurrent processes governed by specifiable schemata of preferences and prescriptions", (KNORR CETINA, 2001, p. 175).

7 Often referred to as "epistemic things"; in Rheinberger's words, these are "material entities or processes […] that constitute the objects of inquiry. […] they present

knowledge. In short, the model is a fundamentally syntactical constellation, that is: subject – verb/process – object – result.

Obviously, the actual manifestation of these subjects, processes, and objects is by no means universal, since various groups of experts have their own subjects, processes, tools, and objects.[8] Knorr Cetina has dubbed such respective groups of technical experts as "epistemic cultures". As she defines the term, an "[epistemic or knowledge] culture refers to the aggregate patterns and dynamics that are on display in expert practice and that vary in different settings of expertise".[9] Though she developed the concept to address contemporary scientific cultures, both modern scientists and ancient scribes have technical tools and procedures that require specific training to use expertly and meaningfully. These tools and procedures have little use outside those expert circles and are, most importantly, fundamental in the process of constructing knowledge.

Thus, as a result of their education, livelihood, tools, skill, etc., Babylonian scribes situated sight, sound, and tradition into their specific sub-cultural episteme in a manner different than those without these things. Scribes *ex officio* saw documents and made new copies of them. When scribes lifted their squinting eyes up from their tablets and gazed at the world around them, they did not compartmentalize these habits of seeing.[10] The great lexical lists utilized throughout the history of cuneiform scribalism trained the scribe, whether deliberately or otherwise, to order and understand the world around himself as a collection of written words that are exegeted based on their visual properties and bilingual polyvalencies.[11]

This scribal understanding of the surrounding world is perhaps most clear in the native terminology denoting a number of mantic practices. For first millennium celestial diviners, for example, the sky was covered with a kind of writing, *šiṭir šamê* ("writing of the sky"), the celestial surface itself being

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themselves in a characteristic, irreducible vagueness. This vagueness is inevitable because, paradoxically, epistemic things embody what one does not yet know" (RHEINBERGER, 1997, p. 28); see also, KNORR CETINA, 2001, p. 181.

8   Galison, for example, shows that various sub-disciplines within microphysics each have their own epistemic subjects, processes, objects, and, indeed, even their own dialects that need to be deliberately translated in order for them to exchange and utilize their respective knowledges (GALISON, 1997).

9   KNORR CETINA, 1999.

10   ROCHBERG, 2014, p. 50.

11   VELDHUIS, 1997, p. 139; see also VELDHUIS, 2012, p. 16.

conceived of as a gargantuan lapis writing tablet. Similarly, the gods used the exta of sheep as documentary surfaces to relay their judgments to humanity. The animal's organs were the "tablets of the gods", *ṭuppū ša ilī*, on which messages were composed. In this sense, the sky and the animal's organs were no more – or less – a "natural" phenomenon than the scribe's clay tablet.

A striking example of this scribally understood cosmos can be seen in one of the prisms of the Assyrian monarch Esarhaddon, dating to the middle of the seventh century, in which the king describes the restoration of the temple of Marduk (Esagil), the chief Babylonian god. Esarhaddon recounts how the inhabitants of the land had previously angered the gods with their impiety, and as a result, the gods had struck the land with flooding and divine abandonment. Marduk had initially determined that this punishment should last seventy years. However, the god was gracious, and he lessened the sentence, literally by inverting the signs used to write the numeral 70 (a vertical wedge followed by a *Winkelhaken*) into the numeral 11 (a *Winkelhaken* followed by a vertical wedge):

mar-qí-ti 70 MU.AN.NA.MEŠ	The merciful god Marduk wrote that the
mi-nu-ut ni-du-ti-šu	calculated time of its abandonment
iš-ṭur-ma re-me-nu-ú	(should last) 70 years,
ᵈAMAR.UTU *sur-riš lìb-ba-šu*	(but) his heart was quickly soothed, and
i-nu-uḫ-ma e-liš a-na	he reversed the numbers and (thus)
šap-liš uš-bal-kit-ma	ordered its (re)occupation to be (after)
a-na 11 MU.AN.NA.MEŠ	11 years. [12]
a-šab-šú iq-bi	

Notable here is that the divine act is a scribal act: the written documentation of a legal sentence is physically altered by the god pulling a graphic switcheroo, such that when that sentence was put into effect, the actual reality of the land's punishment was altered. The written documentation of something, rather than its mere oral verbalization, is what is fundamentally tethered to physical reality.

For scribes, natural phenomena worthy of observation included not only the positions of planets, but also dockets, contracts, word lists, and literature. For the scribes and the scribally-literate god alike, writing was as much reality

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12 Esarhaddon 104 ii 2-9a (text and translation: LEICHTY, 2011, p. 196). See also BEAULIEU, 1995, pp. 4f.; ROBSON, 2008, pp. 148f.

as anything else; perhaps more so, since it had the potential to reveal the meaning and order hidden underneath the shallow surface that was observed by the non-literate. Assyriologists now realize just how much the epistemology we see in cuneiform texts is *not* that of ancient Mesopotamian culture as a whole, but primarily that of expert scribes.

Epistemology in Ancient Judah: Previous Approaches

In the mid-twentieth century, scholars, such as William Irwin and G. Ernest Wright, addressed the epistemology of ancient Israel and Judah, and characteristically, their analysis was an argument for a sort of Israelite intellectual exceptionalism.[13] The Hebrews were often understood as unique in the ancient Near East for their experientialism and evidentialism.[14] In more recent years, some scholars have sought a more honest assessment of Israelite knowledge from a consciously emic perspective, such as Meir Malul, Yair Avrahami, and Michael Carasik.[15]

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13 IRWIN, 1952, pp. 42-44. See also BOMAN, 1960, pp. 201-204.

14 In the outlooks of Boman, as well as Irwin and Wright, the combination of Hebrew experiential knowledge and Greek analytical thought created the marvel of the Western intellectual tradition (cf., FRANKFORT/FRANKFORT, 1946, p. 373). Of course, the epistemology in the Bible has also been the focus of a considerable amount of theological and philosophical scholarship; see, e.g., HEALY/PARRY, 2007; DOWD, 2009; GERICKE, 2012, pp. 371-404; HAZONY, 2012, pp. 161-192 and JOHNSON, 2013. While these have their value, my approach here is neither theologically nor philosophically oriented, and so I will not engage with this scholarship to any large degree.

15 CARASIK, 2006; MALUL, 2002, pp. 3-7; AVRAHAMI, 2012, pp. 4-64. Malul (pp. 25-54), in particular, is problematic, since he regards the biblical text as the product of an oral culture rather than a literate professional culture: "Needless to say, the methods applied [to the biblical text], being geared to the analysis of *specimens of writing*, must be in general erroneous, or at least grossly inappropriate for the analysis of the type of source-material that is at our disposal and for carrying out the task of the present book" (2002, p. 52). Furthermore, epistemology has long been a focus of those working with the book of Ecclesiastes, for obvious reasons; e.g., FOX, 1987, pp. 137-155; SCHELLENBERG, 2002. The date of Qohelet's composition and its overall intellectual novelty limits its utility in this study, which focuses on the mid-first millennium.

Nonetheless, in stark contrast to the current situation in Assyriology, very little work has been done on the relationship between epistemology and ancient Judean scribalism.[16] This fact is all the more surprising given the explosion of studies on Judean scribes, literacy, and education in recent decades.[17] Indeed, only a couple of scholars have discussed the intersection between education and epistemology.[18] Most notable in this regard is Karel van der Toorn, whose work in *Scribal Culture and the Making of the Hebrew Bible* is close to a constructivist model.[19] While it is not the main thesis of his

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16 Explaining this situation is difficult, but it seems to be related to the desire by biblical scholars to find in ancient Israel a kind of democratization of reading/ writing that is otherwise not evinced in the broader ancient Near East, and which is only seen in antiquity, perhaps, in certain parts of the Greek world in certain periods. For this particular bent, see SCHNIEDEWIND, 2004 and SANDERS, 2009.

17 For education, see LEMAIRE, 1981; PUECH, 1988, pp. 189-203; CRENSHAW, 1998. For scribalism and literacy in particular, see CARR, 2004; VAN DER TOORN, 2007; ROLLSTON, 2010; SCHNIEDEWIND, 2013.

18 Worth mentioning, as well, is Crenshaw, who essentially comes to the same conclusion as his teacher, G. Ernest Wright, that the Israelites were exceptionally empirical for a culture embedded in the ancient Near East. Based primarily on an inspection of the texts that tradition and modern scholarship have labeled "wisdom", his conclusion is that knowledge in ancient Israel was considered to derive from three sources: observation, analogy and tradition. Crenshaw maintains that some of the Bible's wisdom material, such as Proverbs, is a product of family life and "parental instruction" (CRENSHAW, 1998, p. 230). According to Crenshaw's reconstruction of the epistemology of the wisdom literature, the thoughtful Israelite, acquires knowledge, first and foremost, by observation of the human and natural world. He/she has a creed, but dynamically reinterprets that creed to fit with observed reality. The Israelite God himself does reveal knowledge, but only as a divine epistemological watchmaker, who places it all in nature to be revealed, it seems, by means of careful human observation. Revelation as a source for knowledge, according to Crenshaw's understanding of the wisdom tradition, had a place only at the creation – humanity rediscovers this cosmically embedded knowledge through careful observation (CRENSHAW, 1998, p. 130). Overall, his formulation sounds suspiciously like the epistemic process of a mid-twentieth-century liberal biblical theologian who is rather comfortable with the conclusions of the natural sciences. More positively, Crenshaw is undoubtedly correct that tradition, analogical reasoning, and observation were all part of the epistemic process in ancient Israel and Judah – but this is *as they are in any ancient or modern culture*.

19 VAN DER TOORN, 2007, pp. 205-232. In his discussion of the nativity of the biblical prophetic corpus in particular, he argues that scribes coopted the idea of divine revelation, originally the purview of non-literate prophets, and embodied it in documentation, thereby imbuing the written text with oracular authority. I am rather sympathetic to his take on the textualization of prophecy. Still, van der

work, van der Toorn recognizes that the biblical text does not reveal a view of Judean epistemology *per se*, but rather, that of the particular sub-group of individuals who created those documents, i.e., priestly scribes.[20]

Toorn's approach is less about *how* Judean scribes created knowledge, and more about how they added a novel, mantic dimension to texts they manufactured:

"[…] I call revelation a 'scribal construct.' It will be clear by now that this expression was not intended to mean that scribes invented the notion of revelation as such; their invention was rather in the nature of a radical transformation. They used the concept of revelation as an epistemological category to qualify a body of literature. By identifying revelation with a circumscribed group of texts, the scribes shifted the focus of the concept. Until then revelation had been understood as an interaction between superhuman beings and human individuals in which the former imparted knowledge to the latter; in the concept developed by the scribes, revelation became an object rather than an interaction: it was coterminous with a set of texts." (VAN DER TOORN, 2007, p. 232)

This is not to deny the orality of Judean culture as a whole, *à la* Susan Niditch, nor the high value that scribes must have placed on memorization as Carr, in particular, has highlighted (NIDITCH, 1989; cf., MALUL, 2002, pp. 25-54). But the end of the matter is that for a scribe to be a scribe he was expected to be able to manufacture a written document. It is also important here to mark the difference between literacy and scribalism. Schniedewind has made a case for widespread literacy in pre-exilic Judah, and I do not deny that the ability to read was not confined to those who were inculcated in the scribal craft. But, as both Carr and Veldhuis have emphasized, being able to verbalize a simple document is not the same as being able to read and interpret a piece of literature, technical or otherwise (CARR, 2004, p. 13; VELDHUIS, 2011, pp. 68-89). I would add, as well, that the ability to verbalize and understand something as basic as the name on a seal or even the contents and implications of a contract is a rather different skill set than that needed to fabricate a written document. For the elite status of writers and readers in the biblical text, see also YOUNG, 1998, pp. 239-253; and ROLLSTON, 2010, p. 129.

20 Carasik is an outlier among the recent contributors; the title of his monograph, *Theologies of the Mind in Biblical Israel*, is a recognition that it is not ancient Israel as a whole that he is examining, but rather the vision presented by the Bible's authors in particular.

Scribal Epistemology among Other Epistemologies

Now, about these people: like their Mesopotamian counterparts, the job of the Judean scribe was first and foremost to physically manufacture and interpret documents.[21] This materiality, and the control over the manufacture and distribution that goes hand-in-hand with it, is important to underscore: documents are technological products that physically store knowledge.[22] As manufacturers of a product that stored knowledge, for scribes epistemic authority lay in documents. Documents were certainly not the sole source of epistemic authority for scribes, but, by definition, they were a privileged one. The numerous documentary references in Joshua, Judges, Samuel (ספר הישר, *spr hyšr*; and ספר מלחמות יהוה, *spr mlḥmh yhwh*) and, in particular, Kings (ספר דברי שלמה, *spr dbry šlmh*; דברי הימים למלכי יהודה/ישראל, *dbry hymym lmlky yhwdh/yśr'l*) and Chronicles (ספר מלכי ישראל ויהודה, *spr mlky yśr'l wyhwdh*) attest to the idea that written sources contain knowledge about the past that was obtainable only to scribes.

No doubt, other epistemologies were operative in ancient Judah. Scribes were partakers of the common cultural episteme that broadly featured tradition, analogical reasoning, and observation. Another obvious episteme is the mantic: Yahweh's knowledge revealed through the proper diviners was a potentially valid source. These epistemologies were by no means exclusive of each other; they could and often did overlap.[23]

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21 VAN DER TOORN, 2007, pp. 1f. Though we know that scribes served in a number of loci (temple, palace, army, etc.), the produce of their specific training was not *texts per se*, here defined as the written content of a physical document. In principle, a *text*, such as the content of a letter, could be dictated to a scribe by a second, non-literate party. So too, a non-literate could memorize and verbalize the *text* of a psalm.

22 As Stavrakopoulou has recently noted, documents' limited physicality allowed elites (priests, kings, scribes, etc.) control over the production of and access to knowledge; see STAVRAKOPOULOU, 2013, p. 233.

23 E.g., mantic and scribal in Ezek 2:8-3:4. Nonetheless, tensions between these epistemologies could exist. In 2 Kgs 22:11-20, for example, we see the concern for the validity of the written *torah* supposedly uncovered in Yahweh's temple in Jerusalem by the high priest Hilkiah during the reign of Josiah. When the document's contents were revealed to the king, he was dismayed, but he nonetheless immediately ordered a small entourage (which, notably include a named scribe שׁפן הספר, *špn hspr*, and his son אחיקם, *'ḥyqm*, verse 12) that the document's contents (דברי הספר, *dbry hspr*, verse 13) be verified mantically. They approached the prophet Huldah, conveniently living in Jerusalem, and she confirmed the newly

Judean Scribal *Weltanschauung*:
Documentary Epistemology

But the scribal way of knowing has distinctiveness. Carr has convincingly argued that the process of scribal education in ancient Judah not only trained these craftsmen how to produce documents, it also enculturated them into a specific mindset.[24] While I do not have the space here to go through all of the biblical evidence for this, it will suffice to highlight two points. First and foremost, the biblical texts are *documents*, whose very existence, regardless of their contents, attests to the fact that there was a scribal culture that manufactured material products; and this is the best evidence that the Hebrew

discovered document by divinatory means. Interestingly, Josiah's skepticism regarding the *document* was not punished; rather, in 2 Kgs 22:19-20, Yahweh rewarded the king for his spontaneous mourning when he initially heard its contents. That is to say, the king is praised and rewarded for trusting the purportedly antique knowledge the document records *before* it had been mantically verified. This is a powerful statement: trust the knowledge contained in the documents that scribes offer and you will be rewarded.

Jer 8:8-9, according to van der Toorn, offers a sharply contrasting perspective on the intersection between scribal and mantic epistemologies. He argues that this passage refers to Jeremiah's rejection of the same document whose purported discovery is described in 2 Kings 22 (VAN DER TOORN, 2007, p. 35). This is a difficult passage, and interpretations abound: for Schniedewind, Jer 8:7-9 is referring much more broadly of emerging tension between oral authority (i.e., the משפט יהוה, *mšpṭ yhwh*, in vs. 7) and the written authority of the scribes (SCHNIEDE-WIND, 2004, pp. 114-117). Richard Elliot Friedman sees the conflict as one of the Deuteronomic versus the Priestly school (FRIEDMAN, 1987, pp. 188-206). Regardless of whether Jer 8:8-9 references Josiah's book of the law, what is evinced in both this and 2 Kings 22 is the tension between mantic (here: prophetic) and strictly scribal epistemology. Certainly by at least as early as the exilic or early Second Temple period, scribes could and did assert that the documents they manufactured and the knowledge contained therein originated with God on some level. This is a trajectory that both van der Toorn and Schniedewind track, each with their own emphases. Nonetheless, at least into the late seventh century, for the scribes/sages, the document was authoritative by its virtue of being a written text; for the prophets it was Yahweh's oracular word.

24 CARR, 2004, pp. 126-134. This scribal perspective is evident in a number of places in the biblical text. For example, scholars have noted that the materials in book of Proverbs appear to have played a role in the early stages of Judean scribal training. The idea that Proverbs, a lengthy, sophisticated written document, does not reflect a literate mindset, as both Carasik and Kovacs argue, seems highly problematic at best (KOVACS, 1974, pp. 183f., 186; CARASIK, 2006, p. 63).

Bible has scribal origins and audience, and was tradited by scribes for future generations of scribes. The second bit of evidence for the scribal *Weltanschauung* of the biblical text, which will serve my discussion below, is that the Judean god Yahweh is consistently depicted as skilled scribe; he manufactures, consults, and acts on documents.[25] Such depictions occur diachronically across a wide variety of genres, attesting to a consistently accepted characterization of the deity.

Judean Scribes as an Epistemic Culture

What is now taken as a given in the study of Mesopotamian scribes of the first millennium? That the physicality of writing played a crucial, if not central, role in scribes' epistemic culture, needs to be demonstrated for the scribes who composed and tradited the Hebrew Bible. What was the distinctive interaction between epistemic subject, tools, process, and object that constructed knowledge – *scribal* knowledge in Judah?

Employing a constructivist terminology, the knowledge subjects, of course, are the scribes who manufactured documents. Much has been written on their identity; scribes in ancient Israel and Judah were primarily members of an elite, often priestly, class.[26] Rollston has convincingly argued that there was some sort of formalized and/or standardized process of scribal training in the Iron II (ca., 1000-586 BCE, and presumably carried into exile), regardless of

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25 Yahweh himself writes documents (in Exod 24:12; 31:18; 32:15-16, and Deut 9:10) and, as a good scribe, is capable of creating a new copy of texts from memory (as in Deut 10:1-2, 4). Furthermore, Yahweh has a collection of documents at his disposal for reference and consultation (Exod 32:32-34; Isa 4:3; Ezek 13:9; Ps 69:29; 87:6), and they serve as legal witness as well as future reference for the administratively busy god-on-the-go (see Mal 3:16). The Judean god is also depicted as using documents in the process of planning (Ps 139:16), and he responds to documentation that requires an active response (Isa 65:6; Ps 149:8-9). Moreover, in Jer 25:13, Yahweh is depicted as textually aware, and cites already existing documents. In 2 Chronicles 34 (the Chronicler's account of the Hilkiah's scroll find during Josiah's reign), in Huldah's confirming oracle, Yahweh explicitly cites the copy of his own *torah*, described in verse 14 as ספר תורת־יהוה ביד־משה, *spr twrt-yhwh byd-mšh* ("the book of the *torah* of Yahweh, by the hand of Moses").

26 It seems that there were in ancient Judah scribal families and perhaps even tribes (Judg 5:14) and enclaves (Josh 15:15-16; Judg 1:11-12; 5:15-16) that were known for their skills with the pen.

whether there were formal schools.[27] In this process of inculcation and enculturation, scribes learned the tools, processes, and proper objects of knowledge.

The material culture of scribes is fairly well documented, both textually and archaeologically.[28] Scribes learned to master this toolkit, of course, which would have included writing instruments, ink, various surfaces, and documents themselves. Additionally, as part of their education and enculturation, scribes learned a number of skills and procedures. Obviously, one of the most basic elements of their praxis would have been mastery of the alphabet, including its proper order, its writing, and its reading. This would involve conventions in marking verbalization (standard orthographies, word dividing, etc.). So, too, one had to learn the laying out of basic kinds of documents (making lines, margins, etc.), not to mention how to copy documents, and follow standard formats. Scribes learned language as well and by this, I mean their *own* language, including technical vocabulary and its uses (legal, diplomatic, economic, etc.), as well as literary vocabulary and stylistics (obscure/rare terms; cf., poetic word pairs). In some cases, language training must have included foreign languages and their corresponding writing systems, useful for international correspondence (Aramaic, Egyptian, and Akkadian). The scribal epistemic culture thus had its own distinctive materiality, its own skill sets, and

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27 ROLLSTON, 2010, p. 129.

28 Scribes would create documents (ספרים, *sprym*, *passim*) by writing (כתב, *ktb*, *passim*) using either an awl (צפרן, *ṣprn*, Jer 17:1) or a pen (עט, *ʿṭ*, Jer 8:8; 17:1; Ps 45:2; Job 19:24) with ink (דיו, *dyw*, 36:18), that was stored in a container (קסת, *qst*, Ezek 9:11) expressly made for that purpose (קסת הספר, *qst hspr*, Ezek 9:2-3). Presumably some of the tools were made by the scribes themselves: the pen, for example, had to be manufactured and maintained, and scribes did so by utilizing a scribe's knife (תער הספר, *tʿr hspr*, Jer 36:23), a sub-cultural variant of a common tool. The choice of tool that would imprint the writing on the surface would depend on the surface that had been prepared to receive the writing. That surface could be a scroll (מגלה, *mglh*, Ps 40:8; Jer 36:2, 4, 6, 14, 20,21, 23, 25, 27-29, 32; Ezek 2:9; 3:1-3; Zech 5:1-2) composed of individual panels (דלתות, *dltwt*, Jer 36:23), presumably of papyrus or prepared animal skin, or a tablet (לוח, *lwḥ*, *passim*) that might be made of stone (e.g., Exod 24:12; but see also the Gezer Calendar), or wax, or possibly even clay (though neither of the last two options are explicitly attested in the biblical text). Alternatively, a scribe might imprint the writing on a non-transportable surface, such as a natural, though prepared, part of the landscape (e.g., the bedrock of the Royal Steward Inscription or Siloam Inscription), a prepared monument (e.g., the Mesha Inscription), or a plastered wall (e.g., the Deir ʿAlla text).

its own processes that allowed scribes to craft documents and, in turn, derive useful knowledge from them.

Names and the Construction of Knowledge: ישראל (*yśr'l*) as a Knowledge Object

As Radner has documented, the importance of remembering names in the broader ancient Near East was tremendous.[29] And indeed, scribes spent a great deal of time and effort, as well as ink and papyrus, on names. In constructivist terms, names served as epistemic objects to which knowledge subjects (that is, scribes) applied processes, and created knowledge to be further utilized for various purposes. As scribes, the processes applied to names were documentary: names of people were engraved on seals, which were then pressed into clay bullae; names were recorded in tax lists, rosters of personnel, arranged, stacked and rearranged in genealogies. Names of items were documented in inventories, sales contracts, etc. Names of places were listed in territorial tax appropriations, commercial and military itineraries. In short, names were manipulated documentarily to produce all sorts of useful knowledge that was applied for cultic, economic, and governmental purposes.

The expert process of scribes was not merely the manufacture of documents – documents themselves were also subjected to the process of visual inspection and interpretation. In both the manufacture of documents and in their visual inspection, scribes utilized their epistemic cultures – their pens and ink, their mastery of writing and language.[30] I recognize this is a lot of verbiage to merely state that scribes write things and read things. But being conscious of their processes, I will show, bears fruit in the study of some of the Hebrew Bible's narratives, particularly its etymologies.[31] To this end I will

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29 Radner, 2005.
30 Hyman, 2006, pp. 231-249.
31 Such passages, that explain the origin of the name of a notable person, place or thing, have long been mischaracterized either as naïve folk-etymologies, or, at best, aesthetic devices akin to punning and paronomasia. These approaches take into account neither the learned, scribal origins of the stories, nor the narratively explicit ontological/hermeneutical connections such stories make between the name and its referent. For a full discussion, see Cooley, forthcoming.

discuss the explanation or, I hope to show, *explanations* of the name "Israel" in Genesis 32 and 35.

Genesis 32: 28-29

Genesis 32:28-29 recounts the result of the patriarch Jacob's wrestling match with a divine stranger whom he randomly encounters by the river Jabbok:

וַיֹּאמֶר אֵלָיו מַה־שְּׁמֶךָ וַיֹּאמֶר יַעֲקֹב:	He said to him, "What is your name?" And he said, "Jacob".
וַיֹּאמֶר לֹא יַעֲקֹב יֵאָמֵר עוֹד שִׁמְךָ כִּי אִם־יִשְׂרָאֵל כִּי־שָׂרִיתָ עִם־אֱלֹהִים וְעִם־אֲנָשִׁים וַתּוּכָל:	And he said, "Your name will no longer be called 'Jacob', but rather 'Israel' for you have striven with a god (and with men), and triumphed."
וַיִּשְׁאַל יַעֲקֹב וַיֹּאמֶר הַגִּידָה־נָּא שְׁמֶךָ וַיֹּאמֶר לָמָּה זֶּה תִּשְׁאַל לִשְׁמִי וַיְבָרֶךְ אֹתוֹ שָׁם:	Jacob asked and said, "Tell me, please, your name?" And he said, "Why this, you ask my name?" Then he blessed him there.
וַיִּקְרָא יַעֲקֹב שֵׁם הַמָּקוֹם פְּנִיאֵל כִּי־רָאִיתִי אֱלֹהִים פָּנִים אֶל־פָּנִים וַתִּנָּצֵל נַפְשִׁי:	Jacob called the name of the place "Peniel", for "I have seen a god face to face, and my life was delivered."

Here, there is a pile of consciously onomastic discourse. Not only does Jacob receive a new name as a result of the seemingly pointless tussle, but he inquires of the being's name, though he is rebuffed. And Israel, that is, *Jacob* (the text still calls him "Jacob", even after what has just happened!) names the place in honor of the weird encounter.

The etymology of "Israel" offered here by the scribe is rather straightforward, even if a bit counterintuitive.[32] From the point of modern scientific philology, the name יִשְׂרָאֵל means something like "may El rule", a name that conforms to normative Semitic naming practice.[33] This meaning would have

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32 It follows one of the formal patterns (Form I) for etymologies identified in the classical form-critical study by FICHTNER, 1956, pp. 372-396.

33 Classically, see NOTH, 1928, pp. 207-209; more recently, RECHENMACHER, 1997, p. 98. Contra the ancient translations of the Hebrew text, that meaning, "to rule", seems to be also how the Targums unanimously understand the Genesis etymology. See, e.g., VERMES, 1975, pp. 12f.

been the most obvious to the ancient scribe; but he rejects it and offers an interpretation that is far from literal. Still, comprehending how the scribe interpreted the name, that is *processed it*, is not difficult. He employed methods of *synonymous* interpretation, the kind we see in certain Mesopotamian word lists.[34] That is to say, the scribe chose to identify the components of the name from a spectrum of *possible equivalents*, none of which are intrinsically prioritized. First, he equates the theophoric element of the name אל, *'l*, with אלהים, *'lhym*, two related but different words for a deity. (Actually, he seems to equate אל, *'l*, with עם אלהים, *'m 'lhym*, but we will get back to that below). This is simple enough; still, he could have equated אל, *'l*, with יהוה, *yhwh*, the personal name of the god of Israel (as is done in other places in the Hebrew Bible, e.g., Genesis 16:11). In theory, he could have even identified that אל, *'l*, with another deity, like בעל, *b'l*. What is patently unclear in this passage is precisely *what* the identity of the אלהים, *'lhym*, is that the scribe is equating with אל, *'l*. Traditionally, of course, it is equated with the god of Israel. But the writer does not say that explicitly, and the fact that the explanation of the theophoric element might include ועם אנשים, *w'm 'nšym*, ("and with men") should give warning against such an easy interpretation. Notable too, is that in his exegesis, the scribe also adds a number of syntactical particles (prepositions, conjunctions, etc.), reading the sentence ישׂר אל, *yśr 'l*, as if it were a piece of lyric, stripped of the metrically laborious elements almost always found in prose, but so often frustratingly lacking in good Hebrew poetry.

In any case, the verbal component of the name, written ישׂר, *yśr*, is interpreted with a rather rare root שׂרה , *śrh*, "to strive",[35] rather than the obvious and far more commonly attested root שׂרר, *śrr*, meaning "to rule", which occurs a number of times both as a verb[36] and very frequently as a related noun.[37] Furthermore – and jarringly – the syntax of the components of

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34 See, e.g., HRŮŠA, 2010.

35 KOEHLER/BAUMGARTNER, 2001, p. 1354, (hereafter *HALOT*); שׂרה occurs only here and in Hos 12:4, which references this tradition.

36 Judg 9:22 with the self-same form as in Hos 12:5, offering a wordplay on the name that seems to use the root שׂור, *śwr*, or שׂרר, *śrr*, indicating "to rule". See also Isa 32:1; Prov 8:16; Est 1:22; 1 Chr 15:22 (with a ס).

37 *HALOT* (as note 35), p. 1313. Perhaps in the name *Seraiah*, see SARNA, 1989, p. 405. Note, as well, that the scribe has interpreted the prefixing conjugation of the name not as a jussive (as Hebrew's third person volitive is called), but rather as a preterite (Hebrew's simple past) and has capitalized on the potential temporal

the name has been twisted by the scribe: the divine element, אל, *'l*, should be the verb's subject, not its object.

In constructivist terms, the scribe, our knowledge subject, has applied a process to a knowledge object, the name of the patriarch. The process employed the mental tools and resources of the scribal episteme: the application of synonymous words in interpretation (אל, *'l*, with אלהים, *'lhym*), the use of rare or obscure words (שׂרה, *śrh*), and the use of a hermeneutic otherwise utilized to interpret the rather austere Semitic poetics. The result of this process is *knowledge* that is in turn applied to the problem of Israel's history and identity within a narrative. Perhaps the knowledge actually was the basis of that narrative; perhaps it merely fleshed it out intellectually, giving it a scribally-epistemic legitimacy. For the moment at least, I am leaving that last issue unresolved.

Genesis 35: 9-11

While my discussion of the process of the etymology of "Israel" in Genesis 32 above might have elicited some doubt, there is very little uncertainty among scholars that it is an etymology, a hermeneutical act explaining the origin of a name. When it comes to Genesis 35:9-11, however, the discussion begins by establishing it as an etymology. To be sure, as in Genesis 32, the deity is renaming the patriarch Jacob "Israel". Most commentators remark that the renaming is lacking an explanation, and Westermann goes so far as to consider the absence of an etiology here an "embarrassment".[38] Most often, however, scholars simply obviate the issue, by stating that no explanation is required, since one has already been given in chapter 32, and here in 35:9, God is described as appearing to Jacob "again".[39] Let us examine the passage (Gen 35:9-11):

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overlap of that form with the perfective verbal form to read the verb not as a wish expressed, but as alluding to a past event.

38 WESTERMANN, 1995, p. 553.
39 WENHAM, 2000, p. 325; ARNOLD, 2009, p. 303. More elaborately, Sarna sees Gen 32 and 35 in dialog with each other: in Gen 35, Jacob's new name is being confirmed, not given, by the deity, since it was originally applied to Jacob not by Yahweh, but by the "celestial patron of Esau" east of the Jordan (SARNA, 1989, pp. 241f.).

וַיֵּרָ֨א אֱלֹהִ֤ים אֶֽל־יַעֲקֹב֙ ע֔וֹד
בְּבֹא֖וֹ מִפַּדַּ֣ן אֲרָ֑ם וַיְבָ֖רֶךְ אֹתֽוֹ:
וַיֹּֽאמֶר־ל֥וֹ אֱלֹהִ֖ים שִׁמְךָ֣ יַעֲקֹ֑ב
לֹֽא־יִקָּרֵא֩ שִׁמְךָ֨ ע֜וֹד יַעֲקֹ֗ב כִּ֤י
אִם־יִשְׂרָאֵל֙ יִהְיֶ֣ה שְׁמֶ֔ךָ וַיִּקְרָ֥א
אֶת־שְׁמ֖וֹ יִשְׂרָאֵֽל:
וַיֹּאמֶר֩ ל֨וֹ אֱלֹהִ֜ים אֲנִ֣י אֵ֣ל שַׁדַּי֗
פְּרֵ֣ה וּרְבֵ֔ה גּ֛וֹי וּקְהַ֥ל גּוֹיִ֖ם
יִהְיֶ֣ה מִמֶּ֑ךָּ וּמְלָכִ֖ים מֵחֲלָצֶ֥יךָ יֵצֵֽאוּ:

God appeared to Jacob again; when he came
from Padan-Aram, he blessed him.
God said to him, "Your name is 'Jacob'. Your
name will not be called 'Jacob' any more,
rather, your name will be 'Israel'." And he
called his name 'Israel'.
And God said to him, "I am El-Shaddai: be
fruitful and multiply; a nation and an
assembly of nations will come from you,
while kings will proceed from your loins."

To summarize: the deity changes Jacob's name, and then says, seemingly out of
the blue, "I am El-Shaddai" (which is commonly rendered in translations as
"God Almighty").

In spite of modern commentators' modest bewilderment, from a form critical
perspective, this passage is very much a full etymology and conforms with a
number of other etymologies, in which the name is pronounced (קרא את־השם,
qr' 't-hšm, "and he called the name") and is then explained with a simple
(ויאמר/ותאמר, *wy'mr/wt'mr*) "and he/she said" statement or equivalent. For
example, 1 Samuel 7:12 describes the prophet's naming of a monument called
"Ebenezer":

וַיִּקַּ֨ח שְׁמוּאֵ֜ל אֶ֣בֶן אַחַ֗ת
וַיָּ֤שֶׂם בֵּֽין־הַמִּצְפָּה֙ וּבֵ֣ין הַשֵּׁ֔ן
וַיִּקְרָ֥א אֶת־שְׁמָ֖הּ אֶ֣בֶן הָעָ֑זֶר
וַיֹּאמַ֕ר עַד־הֵ֖נָּה עֲזָרָ֥נוּ יְהוָֽה:

And Samuel took a single stone and he placed
it between Mizpeh and Shen. And he called its
name "Eben-Ezer" [literally, "Stone of Help"],
and he said, "Up to here Yahweh has helped
us."[40]

This form of etymology also occurs in a more telegraphic arrangement in
Genesis 21:3, 6. More commonly, the form is inverted, with the ויאמר/ותאמר,
wy'mr/wt'mr, statement coming first (Genesis 30:7-8, 9-11, 12-13, 16-18, 19-

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40 Note, this verse is dismissed as an awkward insertion by Long, alleviating him
from having to fit it in to the rigid formalism he inherited from Fichtner (LONG,
1968, p. 36; cf. FICHTNER, 1956.

20; 32:2-3; 38:28; Exodus 15:15, 31; Joshua 5:9; 1 Kings 9:12-13).[41] In short, the form dictates that this is an etymology. Minimally, an ontological relationship between circumstance and name is indicated in such passages.

Let me be explicit: I maintain that the name ישראל, *yśr'l*, is explained by the scribe who composed Genesis 35:9-11 (here clearly the Priestly writer) as being derived from the divine moniker אל־שדי, *'l-šdy*. How does the scribe get there? In constructivist terms, how does he, the knowledge subject, apply his expert process to the epistemic object to create knowledge that is further employed in the narrative?

First, the obvious: the אל, *'l*, of ישראל, *yśr'l*, equals the אל, *'l*, in אל־שדי, *'l-šdy*.

Somehow, then, ישר, *yśr*, must equal שדי, *šdy*. Making the leap between the two elements is not difficult, *if* we stop privileging our scientific philology and our obsession with verbalism, and actually *look* at the material page. It is not difficult to see, even in our modern Hebrew Bibles, that ישר, *yśr*, and שדי, *šdy*, appear very similar. י/*y* is י/*y*; שׁ/*š* and שׂ/*ś* are indistinguishable without the diacritical dot; and ר/*r* and ד/*d* are nearly identical in the (Aramaic) script that we utilize. They are quite similar, as well, in the ancient Hebrew script of the Iron II period. Furthermore, scribes actually wrote, that is to say, crafted, the two letters very similarly throughout their ancient history, whether in Hebrew or Aramaic scripts. In the former case, the letters have a large triangular head with either a short descending tail (for a ד/*d*) or a long descending tail (for a ר/*r*).[42] In the Aramaic scripts utilized by Jewish scribes of the Second Temple Period, the ד/*d* and ר/*r* are often identically constructed and are frequently indistinguishable in appearance.[43] The scribe who penned Genesis 35:9-11 employed his expertise in the technology of writing and the manufacture of documents to equate ד/*d* and ר/*r* for scholarly purposes.[44]

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41 Cf. Gen 5:29; Judg 6:32; 1 Sam 4:21 (with לאמר, *l'mr*); 1 Chr 4:9 (with לאמר כי, *l'mr ky*); Exod 2:10 (with ותאמר כי, *wt'mr ky*); Exod 17:15-16 and Gen 26:22 (with ויאמר כי, *wy'mr ky*); see also Gen 4:1. Scanning the etymologies offered for the offspring of Jacob (Gen 29-30), shows considerable variation in form. In any case, explanatory conjunctions, such as כן, *kn*, על, *'l*, or על כן, *'l kn*, are clearly unnecessary.

42 Cf. also the interplay between the two letters on Arad Ostracon #99 (AHARONI, 1981, p. 112).

43 E.g., YARDENI, 2002, pp. 165 (4QSam^b), 167 (4QJer^a), 169 (4QEx^f), 171 (1QIsa^a).

44 The letter order is mixed, similar to the etymology offered for the name יעבץ, *y'bṣ* in 1 Chr 4:9, using the root עבץ, *'bṣ*. There the name is explained by means of the

So, when we verbalize Genesis 35:9-11 we actually obscure the proposed origin of the name. But the scribe who composed this understood the word as a scribe: the word can have an oral manifestation, no doubt, but for the scribe the written manifestation of a word could also offer important data. Reading a text is not only about verbalizing it. If similar (but not identical) sounds are enough to justify for the scribe the etymological relationship between a word and a name, then, certainly, similar appearances should be as well. This is particularly the case if the similar appearances are the result of an identical or similar process of manufacture. The knowledge derived from the name יִשְׂרָאֵל, *yśr'l*, was constructed by the Judean scribe by employing his scribal tools and scribal processes.

Of course, new knowledge was universally suspect in the ancient Near East, and the scribe did not think he was actually constructing knowledge. Rather, he believed he was revealing the knowledge of another scribe, one expertly skilled with the technical mastery and confidence to derive the patriarch's new name from that of the deity. According to the author of Genesis 35:9-11, that scribe was the god of Israel himself. El-Shaddai renamed Jacob, thereby labeling him with a holy name, a name that was wholly appropriate for a holy people.

Conclusion

The Hebrew Bible is a collection of documents crafted by scribes. Recognizing that these experts had a specific tool set and set of processes is fundamental to reconstructing how they manufactured knowledge of their past as well as the world around them. In short, Judean scribes, like their Babylonian counterparts, had an epistemic culture that privileged documents, their manufacture, and the visual component of the technology of writing in the construction of socially useful and meaningful knowledge. A primary object of their process was names, their hierarchies and arrangements, and forms, both linguistic and graphic. By recognizing these realities we can fully appreciate the etymological speculation of biblical authors.

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noun עֹצֶב, *'ōṣeb,* whose root is עצב, *'ṣb.* The mixed letter order did not concern the author of Chronicles.

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