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Roger White Ed.D.
Azusa Pacific University

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Baruch the Scribe:

Preserver of Knowledge and Model for Librarians

Roger White, Ed.D.
Professor, University Libraries
Azusa Pacific University

ABSTRACT

This article discusses how the Old Testament character Baruch serves as an inspiration for contemporary Christian librarians. Events from his scribal career parallel several common experiences of library professionals including archiving materials, maintaining and promoting a collection, dealing with criticisms from administrators and community leaders, and becoming weary from overwork. How he handled himself in the midst of these activities is noteworthy as is God's response to his service. The life and legacy of Baruch provide several parallels and encouraging lessons applicable to all those called to serve in libraries.

Introduction

Baruch, the loyal scribe of the prophet Jeremiah, is a bible character whose career can be considered a vocational forerunner to that of the professional librarian. His life and legacy yield several important lessons applicable to those working in libraries today. In Hebrew, Baruch is described as a *soper* (Jeremiah 36:26, 32), which is translated *scribe* ("Scribe," 1996). In Old Testament times, a *soper* was usually someone who served in a secretarial role for dictation, transcribing documents, and letter writing, but also for accounting, record keeping, and preserving texts ("Scribe," 1996). The etymological connection between historical scribal duties and those of a professional librarian is reflected in contemporary definitions of the word *scribe*. *The Oxford English Dictionary* lists *scribe* as the oldest meaning for the word *librarian* ("Librarian," 1989). In some cases, historical figures have been identified for inspirational purposes as patron saints of librarians, including Aldhelm (Gibson, 1982), Catherine of Alexandria (Calamari & DiPasqua, 2007), Jerome (Kaschins & Kemp, 1988), and Lawrence (Calamari & DiPasqua, 2007).

By taking a closer look at Baruch, whose name means, "blessed" ("Baruch," 1996), lessons and perspectives relevant to contemporary library professionals can be gleaned from the life of this faithful practitioner. Baruch's scribal work included serving in traditional roles of secretary (*amanuensis*) and stenographer, but also included being principle compiler and editor of much of Jeremiah's work, especially what is now Jeremiah 36-45 (Brueggemann, 1998). From the biblical text, we learn that Seraiah, Baruch's brother (Jeremiah 51:59), also served Jeremiah for a time in some scribal related activities. Jeremiah instructed Seraiah to transport a scroll to Babylon for reading aloud, after which he was to tie a stone around the scroll and throw it in the Euphrates River. This latter action (a type of weeding task) was at the

time a symbolic act illustrating the pending fate and sinking of Babylon (Jeremiah 51:60-64).

Because much more is known about Baruch both from the biblical text and supporting references, his life and vocation will be used as the focus for the current discussion. Baruch was involved in many activities during his professional career that have relevance for contemporary librarians. Faithfulness to his vocation is both exemplary and inspirational. In fact, his hand still leaves a mark, quite literally, on his work to this day even though he lived thousands of years ago.

A Review of Baruch's Professional Career

The book of Jeremiah recounts several episodes from the life of Baruch reflecting activities and experiences similar to those faced by contemporary professional librarians. The stories take place during the time when the Babylonians are poised to invade Judah and take the city of Jerusalem. Jeremiah is warning the people of the impending danger and proclaiming God's call to repentance and God's assurance of ongoing faithfulness (cf. 36:4). In the process, Baruch the scribe is called on to assist in preserving and distributing Jeremiah's message and he plays a key role in the unfolding political drama surrounding the delivery of the prophecies. The biblical account of Baruch's career extends over four non-consecutive chapters of the book of Jeremiah and the following review of those chapters emphasizes elements of the narrative that might be of special interest to librarians and other professional preservers and guardians of knowledge.

Jeremiah 32: Archiving Important Documents

In a gesture intended to show God's faithfulness to the people of Jerusalem, Jeremiah publicly buys some land from his cousin (cf. Leviticus 25:25) even though foreign enemies are about

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to overtake and occupy the city. Jeremiah asks Baruch to archive the title-deed from the real estate purchase (verses 11-14). He is told to take both the sealed and open contracts spelling out the conditions of the sale and place them in a clay jar to preserve them (verse 15). Typically these earthenware containers would be sealed with pitch (an effective storage method later employed with the Dead Sea Scrolls). Following the occupation of the territory and the exile, returning families would be able to verify ownership of the land by referencing the carefully stored documents. This foreshadowed homecoming exemplifies God's faithfulness to the people, the very circumstances Jeremiah's actions were attempting to highlight. Following the signing of the contract and the completion of the land transaction Baruch faithfully carries out the public filing and safekeeping of the purchase deeds. As Scalise (2004) has noted, it is possible that elements of the deed's text may make up part of this chapter (esp. verses 6-15) along with the colophon-related testimony (inscribed publication details) provided by the scribe. We see in this account how Baruch is entrusted with important documents and how he fulfills the role of an archivist.

Jeremiah 36: Developing, Maintaining, and Distributing a Collection

Baruch collects and records Jeremiah's prophetic message in an appropriate media format (verse 4). He makes it accessible to people in the temple by reading it a number of times aloud on Jeremiah's behalf (verses 5-6, 8, 10). Afterwards, Baruch brings the document to a meeting with his professional counterparts in the temple and gives them a private reading at their request (verses 11-15). Provenance (a document's history) is sought as the group of scribes and related officials attempts to assess the genuineness of the material, accredit its authority, and determine its credibility (Kidner, 1987; Brueggemann, 1998). Part of the material review included inquiring about the acquisition procedure (verse 17) so Baruch explains the step-by-step process he followed in making the scroll (verse 18). Believing him to be in danger because

of the politically sensitive nature of the book's content, they encourage him to hide (verses 16, 19).

Baruch's book is then taken and stored in one of the scribe's special collection areas, and later this new acquisition is abstracted for the king (verse 20). As a result of hearing this book review, the king decides to read the original and requests it be retrieved from the stacks (verse 21a). As the scroll is being read aloud, the king begins to cut out pages with a knife and destroy them in a fire even though some of the scribes urge him not to do so (verses 21b, 23, 25). By the conclusion of the reading, the scroll had been bowdlerized (expurgating offensive parts) and burned completely. The king then orders Baruch and Jeremiah (note order in text) to be seized, but God hides them (verses 24, 26).

God instructs Jeremiah to make a second edition of the scroll and Baruch assists him in producing (reissuing) a revised and expanded version (verse 28, 32). God also issues a penalty to the king for questioning the content and rejecting the message presented in the scroll, symbolized by damaging and burning it (verses 29-31).

In this passage we see Baruch carrying out a number of duties analogous to those practiced by a circulation librarian or collection developer. The integrity and condition of library materials is maintained and the material is made available to patrons.

Jeremiah 43: Criticized for Nature of Content

Jeremiah's message is disliked so much by some of his critics that they falsely accuse Baruch of provoking Jeremiah to speak against them (verse 3). It is a classic case of the messenger being blamed for the message, or in this case, the person maintaining Jeremiah's corpus of work being accused of slanting the content of the still unfolding prophecy. In the midst of the confusion surrounding the impending Babylonian occupation, the accusers forcibly take Baruch and Jeremiah along with others to Egypt in direct defiance of God's command that the people of Judah not go there (verses

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5-7). This story illustrates a parallel between Baruch's situation and those faced by many library administrators who must wisely handle complaints about the nature of an item in the collection even when the complaint is accompanied with a threat. A contemporary issue related to questions or complaints about a collection is the role that library administrators have in deciding what will or will not be included in a library's holdings. Often, collection development decisions have ethical and/or moral implications due to the nature and/or content of the items.

Jeremiah 45: Weary, Overworked, Exhausted, and Despairing

This entire chapter is a short message from God communicated by Jeremiah directly to Baruch. We discover Baruch is weary and complaining about his lack of rest following the completion of Jeremiah's long dictation (verses 1-3). God responds by announcing disaster is coming to the whole land and all those living in it; therefore, it is best to discontinue seeking great things for oneself (verse 4-5). As a consolation God promises Baruch will at least escape with his life during these difficult times (verses 5). In this chapter the similarity to the often-thankless job of the librarian is quite clear. Baruch's long hours of making sure the scrolls were complete and ready for use took their toll, not unlike the situation of the overworked library employee today.

The Ongoing Legacy

The story of Baruch does not end with the accounts found in the book of Jeremiah. History and archeology yield other insights into our knowledge of Baruch, son of Neriah (Jeremiah 32:12, 16; 36:4, 8, 32). The ancient historian, Josephus (book X, chap. 9), tells us Baruch "came of a very distinguished family and was exceptionally well instructed in his native tongue" (Josephus, trans. 1937, 1958, p. 247). Along this same line some contemporary scholars have suggested Baruch may have originally been an official royal scribe who left his governmental position to support Jeremiah in his activities (Shanks, 1987). St. Jerome, commenting on Isaiah 30:6-7, records the

Hebrew tradition supporting the notion that Baruch died in Egypt (Wiseman, 1996; Gryson & Somers, 1996).

Baruch's popularity as an historical figure gave rise to several written works attributed to him. The Apocrypha includes the *Book of Baruch* (or *1 Baruch*) and several pseudepigraphal works from the first and second century CE also carry his name. These include *2 Baruch* (or the *Syriac Apocalypse of Baruch*), *3 Baruch* (or the *Greek Apocalypse of Baruch*), and *4 Baruch* (or *The Things Omitted from Jeremiah the Prophet*; or *The Rest of The Words of Baruch*) (Charlesworth, 1983). This collection with its many multi-named works might have been quite challenging for early catalogers to process. Baruch's name was added to a number of documents in an attempt to lend credibility to their message. The Baruch tradition continued through building on his exceptional character, position, and reputation as a scribe. In some of the writings listed above, his role seems to move beyond scribe of Jeremiah to prophet in his own right (Wright, 2003). Thus his historical persona continues to be elevated and a significant associated literary heritage persists to this day.

A fascinating development in the Baruch story comes from archeological discoveries of the last few decades. Dozens of clay bullae used to seal manuscripts have recently surfaced dating from the time of the Babylonian conquest. Bullae were lumps of clay placed on rolled and folded papyrus documents and pressed with an official's seal. Apparently several collections of these similarly sealed documents stored in public archives were long ago destroyed by fire. The heat from the blaze destroyed the papyri but hardened the clay bullae. The newly discovered bullae are engraved with various names and symbols. Remarkably, one of the bullae has an inscription attributed to Baruch, "belonging to Berekhyahu, son of Neriyaahu, the Scribe" (Shanks, 1996, p. 37). On a second bulla with the exact same inscription, there is a fingerprint impressed into the hardened clay, most likely belonging to the person who would have sealed the original document, Baruch himself. A photograph of this single bulla adorned the 1996 March/April cover of

Biblical Archaeology Review in 1996 (Volume 22, Number 2) and brings the story of Baruch into our own lifetime and libraries. The preservation and discovery of the seal is a symbolic and poignant reminder of the lasting impact and imprint a librarian can have on a collection (be they scrolls, manuscripts, or books). Like Baruch, librarians never know how far an act of daily fidelity to vocation will extend nor the ultimate influence it may have on a culture.

Lessons from Baruch's Life

God called Baruch to preserve knowledge that reflected truth.

His archiving of important documents and conserving of God's message through Jeremiah is evidence of Baruch's obedience to God and fulfillment of his vocation. In a similar way, Christian librarians may feel a sense of calling or vocation to preserve knowledge. Libraries serve as cultural repositories and storehouses of knowledge. As such, librarians are guardians of an intellectual inheritance, which may or may not reflect or represent God's truth. Librarians share a vocational calling similar to Baruch's, to responsibly preserve the knowledge entrusted to them, but this knowledge may or may not be expressly Christian or even consistent with Christian orthodoxy. Baruch's calling went beyond preserving all knowledge to specifically proclaiming God's truth and message to an oppressed generation. Librarians in some contexts may find themselves called to speak out on the moral and ethical implications of a library's holdings in the midst of other important preservation and conservation efforts.

Peers acknowledge Baruch for his professionalism and faithfulness.

The scribes of the king's court respect Baruch. They authenticate the soundness of his documents and seek to protect his life in the face of those who disapprove of the scrolls' content. In the midst of carrying out his scribal duties Baruch is found faithful and his work deemed beyond reproach. Years after his death his good name was added to documents to increase their perceived value to potential readers. Excelling in one's work and being true

to one's calling are still values honored by peers and can have lasting benefits. Professionalism, integrity, and faithfulness in library work become a lasting legacy.

Baruch is found faithful to the task in the face of opposition at the highest level.

Not liking what he reads, the king destroys the original copy of Jeremiah's message and Baruch must reproduce it. Leaders in the community who also dislike the message accuse Baruch of instigating Jeremiah against them and they take Baruch hostage. How many times have librarians received complaints about content in the collection and been held personally accountable for authors' works? In the face of those who might want to censure works within a library collection or take issue with those who hold the trust, librarians can draw encouragement from Baruch's example to persevere in the face of opposition.

God rewards Baruch.

In the end Baruch's faithfulness is recognized. Through the difficulties of prolonged dictation, personal danger, and general weariness Baruch receives divine consolation. While we might prefer a story where the scribal hero receives more tangible compensation and perhaps is extended human accolades, given the immediate situation and dire setting faced by Baruch, God is surely gracious to the scribe. The life of Baruch illustrates how God may be relied on to be gracious to those who today are called to be librarians and who face similar tenuous and challenging circumstances. †

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