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THE USE AND INTERPRETATION OF BIBLICAL TRADITION
IN BEN SIRA'S PRAISE OF THE ANCESTORS

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In his recent book on scribal education in antiquity, *Writing on the Tablet of the Heart*, David Carr presents the thesis that while ancient scribes did indeed memorize texts, what we might call "pure" memorization was not the ultimate, certainly not the only goal of the educational process. Committing important texts to memory secured cultural continuity across generations, and the scribe's ability to transmit these central texts was highly valued. But as Carr writes,

The fundamental idea is the following: as we look at how key texts like the Bible and other classic literature functioned in ancient cultures, what was primary was not how such texts were inscribed on clay, parchment, or papyrus. Rather what was truly crucial was how those written media were part of a cultural project of incising key cultural-religious traditions—word for word—on people's minds... Scribal recollection of early traditions was assured partly through teaching students to read and reproduce written copies of the key traditions. Nevertheless the aim of the educational process was ultimately the scribe's memorization of the cultural tradition and cultivation of his (or occasionally her) ability to perform it.¹

As part of his discussion of "Hellenistic Judaism," Carr spends considerable time on Ben Sira, for several reasons of which I want only to highlight a few here. First, Ben Sira straddles the border between what Carr calls "pre-Hellenistic Israelite education-textuality," but he also anticipates "changes that are more widely attested elsewhere."² Second, Ben Sira represents a "textuality based in the priesthood, or at least closely connected with it."³

* This paper is a revised version of the paper that I gave at the "Third International Conference on the Deuterocanonical Books: The Book of Ben Sira" in Pápa, Hungary, May 20, 2006. I presented it at the Seminar on Ancient Judaism and Christianity at the University of Toronto on June 26, 2006. I am grateful for the questions and comments of the conference attendees and the members of SAJC, many of which have shaped its present form of.

¹ D. Carr, *Writing on the Tablet of the Heart: Origins of Scripture and Literature* (New York: Oxford University Press 2005) 8-9.

² Carr, *Writing*, 207.

³ Carr, *Writing*, 207.

Third, Ben Sira, clearly values and employs oral techniques for learning. Indeed the evidence from his book indicates that Ben Sira, as a learned scribe, embodied the oral-textual interplay for which Carr is arguing. Ben Sira admonishes the aspiring student to "Listen to me your father, O child" (3:1), and he proclaims, "Wisdom becomes known through speech and education, through words of the tongue" (4:24). Yet, Ben Sira can still say, "Instruction in understanding and knowledge I have written in this book... Happy are those who concern themselves with these things, and those who lay them to heart will become wise" (50:27-28). Finally, the sources for Ben Sira's knowledge are themselves varied. We see three primary repositories from which Ben Sira drew his learning: (1) the "Torah"; (2) the wisdom of the sages; (3) the way the natural world works.

While the traditional scribal wisdom that Ben Sira learned and then taught undoubtedly has a significant oral component, a few places in his book suggest that at least what he calls "Torah" is not always some body of oral teaching, but it actually involves some written/textual preservation of the law of God. Perhaps the clearest passage is in the famous chapter 24 in which Ben Sira has Woman Wisdom, that desirable female that all his students should court, praise herself. It has become almost a commonplace to say that Ben Sira takes Wisdom, whom God has sent to dwell among his people and to minister in the temple, and relates her closely to Torah. Two things stand out in this relationship, however. First, Wisdom's residence in the Jerusalem temple pushes further the connection between the priesthood—and I would say a particular group of priests—and the teaching of God's law, a task assigned both to Moses and to Aaron in the Praise of the Ancestors.⁴ Second, Ben Sira makes an important claim in 24:23:

All this [i.e. Wisdom's activity] is the book of the covenant of the Most High God, the law that Moses commanded us as an inheritance for the congregations of Jacob.

Although Ben Sira's Hebrew does not survive for this verse and we only have his grandson's translation on which to rely, there is no reason to doubt that Ben Sira himself theorized that heavenly wisdom had become embodied in text. And indeed, when one looks at the Hebrew of Ben Sira, traces of textuality are everywhere. I want to explore some of those traces in this paper.

Scholars have also frequently noted that Sirach does not contain explicit quotes from the Hebrew Bible.⁵ Yet the frequency of themes and language

⁴ On the issue of Ben Sira and his support of particular priests, see S. Olyan, "Ben Sira's Relationship to the Priesthood," *HTR* 80 (1987) 261-86 and B.G. Wright, "Fear the Lord and Honor the Priest: Ben Sira as Defender of the Jerusalem Priesthood," in *The Book of Ben Sira in Modern Research* (ed. P.C. Beentjes, BZAW 255, Berlin: de Gruyter 1997) 189-222.

⁵ Some see the use of מִטּוֹרָה in 48:10 as an explicit and formal quotation of Malachi, but I have argued that this participle better fits into the larger series of participles in the passage on Elijah and should not be viewed as a citation formula.

found in works that later came to make up the Hebrew Bible makes it clear that Ben Sira did have access to and had most likely memorized textual sources. Questions about the identity of those sources, their processes of transmission and their authority for Ben Sira often get tied up with the difficult problem of the development of the biblical canon in the Second Temple period. These are questions that I do not intend to address here.⁶ I am much more interested in Carr's model of scribal education and textual transmission and how we see it working out in Sirach. Essentially as I understand Carr, even though the memorization of texts was a fundamental aspect of the educational process and one of the scribe's important functions was to preserve these texts across generations, the end of the educational program was intended to give the scribe a proficiency with and mastery of the texts that enabled him to employ them creatively in performances.

Yet, ultimately the performance is what counts, and what gets done with the texts in performance matters most. Thus, in a way, Carr does not go far enough. Two recent books, however, highlight the cultural performance of texts. The first, Hindy Najman's *Seconding Sinai*, focuses on the meaning of pseudigraphy and the rewriting/interpretation of the Torah of Moses.⁷ She asks the question, employing the insights of Michel Foucault, of whether we can really distinguish sharply "between the *transmission* and the *interpretation* of biblical traditions."⁸ She identifies what she calls a "discourse tied to a founder," which

provides... a helpful way to think about the developing conceptions of the Mosaic Law and figure of Moses. On this understanding of a discourse tied to a founder, to rework an earlier text is to update, interpret and develop the content of that text in a way that one claims to be an authentic expression of the law already accepted as authoritatively Mosaic.⁹

For Najman, such discourse, then, offers the possibility of interpretive creativity without claims to innovation, since, as she observes,

See B.G. Wright, *No Small Difference: Sirach's Relationship to its Hebrew Parent Text* (SBLSCS 26, Atlanta: Scholars Press 1989) 210.

⁶ For a recent attempt to connect the Praise of the Fathers with canonical questions, see A. Gophen-Gotstein, "Ben Sira's Praise of the Fathers: A Canon-Conscious Reading," in *Ben Sira's God: Proceedings of the International Ben Sira Conference Darmstadt—Usluwa College 2001* (ed. Renate Egger-Wenzel, BZAW 321, Berlin: de Gruyter 2002) 235-67.

⁷ *Seconding Sinai: The Development of Mosaic Discourse in Second Temple Judaism* (JSJSup 77, Leiden: Brill 2003).

⁸ Najman, *Seconding Sinai*, 8.

⁹ Najman, *Seconding Sinai*, 13.

To take personal responsibility for a new interpretation would have been contrary to the Second Temple conception of authority, which always demanded roots in the pre-exilic past.¹⁰

On the face of it, Ben Sira would seem to present a somewhat unique exception to this claim, since both he and his grandson attach his name to his book, tying it inextricably to his own authority as a scribe/sage.¹¹ Yet, even Ben Sira, in at least two ways, reveals his desire to connect his teaching and ideology to an even more ancient past. First, in his Praise of the Ancestors (chaps. 44-50) he singles out selected figures from Israel's past and then ties his ideal priest-ruler, Simon II, to them. He thus grounds Simon's actions—and more importantly his positions, his assessment of Simon's social, religious and political activities—within the framework of the actions and offices of these ancient figures. Second, by embodying wisdom in Torah, Ben Sira subtly frames all of his wisdom teaching as essentially the Torah of Moses. In this way, one might even argue that Ben Sira participates in Najman's Mosaic discourse.¹² Thus, even though he attaches his name to the book, Ben Sira has not escaped from the perceived necessity of having his own teaching rooted in the pre-exilic past.

The second book, Carol Newsom's *The Self as Symbolic Space*, examines the Serekh Ha-Yahad and the Hodayot from Qumran in an attempt to understand how these texts contributed to the formation of a sectarian identity among the members of the Qumran community.¹³ Relying more thoroughly on Foucault than does Najman, Newsom offers

a way of reading the sectarian texts that draws attention to how the discourse of the community creates an alternative figured world and self-identity, thereby critically engaging other forms of contemporary Judaism.¹⁴

In order to examine Second Temple Judaism as "a community of discourse," she appeals to the metaphor of culture as conversation. Yet, as she notes, this metaphor can be a troubled one as well, especially when "the language of a culture can no longer be used with automatic ease and self-consciousness."¹⁵ Judaism exhibited some "indirect" instances of "a troubled relationship with language." So, for example, its nature as a multi-lingual religion

¹⁰ Najman, *Seconding Sinai*, 14.

¹¹ For the term "scribe/sage," see R.A. Horsley and P. Tiller, "Ben Sira and the Sociology of the Second Temple," in *Second Temple Studies III: Studies in Politics, Class and Material Culture* (eds. P.R. Davies and J.M. Halligan, JSOTSup 340, Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press 2002) 74-107.

¹² For the criteria of Mosaic discourse, see Najman, *Seconding Sinai*, 16-18.

¹³ *The Self as Symbolic Space: Constructing Identity and Community at Qumran* (STDJ 52, Leiden: Brill 2004).

¹⁴ Newsom, *Symbolic Space*, 21.

¹⁵ Newsom, *Symbolic Space*, 5.

raises the issue as does the frequency with which the problem of false speech appears in the literature of this period. But, Newsom writes,

The major index of an anxious relation to language, however, is simply the ubiquity of biblicalizing language and genres in Second Temple literature. Echoes of the biblical text haunt virtually all of the new compositions of this period. It is the "super-adequacy" of the biblical idiom that authors of this period have to confront, a traditional language that both facilitates and authorizes their speech but at the same time dominates it. This is not to say that the literary production of Second Temple Judaism was not creative but to note that authors were always glancing over their shoulders at the speech of scripture. Although seldom made explicit, there is an element of the agonistic in the relation of new texts (rewritten Bible, pseudonymous compositions, commentaries, etc.) to scripture. The new compositions seek both to share in the cultural authority of scripture but also in some measure to co-opt it.¹⁶

Although Newsom employs this analysis in order to look at Qumran texts, we might see some of the same forces at work in Ben Sira. Whether it is a haunting or not, biblical idiom and the "biblical" text infuse much of Ben Sira's thought and language, and he employs both language and texts in order to authorize his own teaching, to shape it and to construct a world of meaning for his students. Although I am not pursuing in this paper the same ends that Newsom is for Qumran (a task that undoubtedly would require a book-length treatment), certainly Ben Sira's discourse creates a figured world for his disciples as they hear and absorb his teaching. But I have no doubt that however much the biblical texts and idiom might be seen to reflect a Jewish anxiety about language, Ben Sira clearly tried to co-opt them as we can see in the way he employs them throughout his book.

In Ben Sira's praise of important figures in Israel's history, all the way from Adam to Simon II, he would have had numerous opportunities to display his mastery of the textual traditions about them that he had inherited. Indeed, throughout this section he demonstrates just how much of a master of the texts he was. In this paper, however, while trying to take into account some of the issues that Carr, Najman and Newsom raise, I will not be analyzing Ben Sira's discourse per se. At this stage I am more interested in what might be called his intertextual relations, all the while acknowledging that discourse and intertextuality differ from one another.¹⁷ I want to recognize at this juncture that we cannot read Ben Sira's book, *as a text*, as an independent and autonomous work, but that we have to read it in relation to other texts. Those "other" texts exerted pressure on Ben Sira's construction of each figure in the Praise of the Ancestors, and he did not, indeed could not, have created these vignettes outside of the influence of those texts. He constructed his pictures of these figures at least in part by manipulating, shaping,

¹⁶ Newsom, *Symbolic Space*, 6.

¹⁷ For the relationship between intertextuality and discourse, see Najman, *Seconding Sinai*, 15 and Newsom, *Symbolic Space*, particularly 85-87, 213-14, 246-49.

framing and interpreting the Israelite texts that transmitted their stories. I also recognize that intertextual influences might come from within the book itself. In general I have not looked too far beyond the figures I have chosen for this paper, but the more one looks at the Praise of the Ancestors, the more one can see how various aspects of Ben Sira's descriptions of them often stretch out into a network of intertextual relations with other parts of the book. For reasons of space, analysis of these networks will have to wait until another time. In order to outline some of the ways that Ben Sira executes all these tasks, I have selected four examples of ancient Israelite heroes for whose descriptions Ben Sira takes different tracks: Noah, Moses, Aaron and David. Ben Sira's treatment of these men amply demonstrates that

1. there is a large web of intertextual relations that shapes Ben Sira's descriptions of his heroes and
2. his concern is not to reproduce the texts, but to carry out his own agendas and ideological commitments using these textual traditions as his raw material.

I should make some comment about my use of the terms "text" and "biblical" before moving on. When I use the word "text" in this paper, I do not have in mind a picture of Ben Sira reading from a scroll; I am referring to a particular content that has come to Ben Sira in some packaged form that we could identify as, say, Genesis or Exodus. I do not have any certainty about the particular form that Ben Sira would have encountered them. I recognize that these texts had not achieved any final form in this period, but the manuscripts discovered at Qumran do show an emerging consistency in them, even if their textual forms have not yet stabilized. So, although I refer to Genesis or Exodus, for example, and use chapter and verse numbers, this is for our scholarly convenience and does not assume that Ben Sira possessed anything like a "book" as we would know it. The term "biblical" is also a term of convenience and denotes only a text that ended up in the Hebrew Bible. I do not think that Ben Sira had a Bible in any modern sense of the term. He certainly regarded certain works as authoritative, but I am not concerned here to compile some list of books that Ben Sira regarded as sacred or canonical. I want to see if in the Praise of the Ancestors I can find evidence to suggest that Ben Sira knew specific texts and that they provided a resource for him as he constructed his Praise. I want to look for traces of the "considerable proficiency" that his grandson claims for him in the introduction to his Greek translation and to see a bit of how this proficiency creates the foundation for his own performance of the traditions about these pivotal "historical" figures.

By looking at how he used biblical sources, I am not implying that Ben Sira only drew on biblical texts. He almost certainly was acquainted with a much wider corpus than what we now call the Bible, and they also would have been part of his network of intertextual connections. Randal Argall, for example, has argued that Ben Sira knew non-biblical sources about the

patriarch Enoch, and I have tried to show that some of Sirach was intended to counteract claims made in some Enochic books.¹⁸ Unfortunately, there are many cases where we simply do not know if Ben Sira used sources for the Praise of the Ancestors that were not accepted into the Jewish Bible, whereas we can potentially identify texts that later became part of the Hebrew biblical canon (whether or not Ben Sira considered them canonical), and we can ask questions about how those specific texts exerted pressure on what he eventually produced.

One of the difficult issues, however, when treating the book of Ben Sira is how to use the Hebrew texts that have survived. Except for the initial part of the section on Noah, which is the last verse preserved in the Masada manuscript, the Hebrew for the examples I have chosen survives in MS B from the Cairo Geniza and its marginal corrections. As all scholars who work on Sirach know, the Geniza manuscripts, while essentially transmitting Ben Sira's Hebrew, contain numerous corruptions and problems. The Greek translation of Ben Sira's grandson often reflects his grandfather's Hebrew, but it just as often does not provide access to that Hebrew terribly well.¹⁹ Since the Geniza manuscripts are medieval copies of earlier exemplars, as a methodological point we probably should be suspicious of whether the scribes copying the text have harmonized Ben Sira's Hebrew to reflect biblical sources. After all, they most likely knew the biblical text very well themselves, and they might have recognized, and made clearer what they took to be allusions to it. They might even have created biblical allusions where there were none. This, of course, is a conundrum that we scholars cannot adequately solve. I would say, however, that, as we shall see, many of Ben Sira's uses of the text are quite subtle and clever, and I am not convinced that a medieval scribe copying what was by then a non-biblical text would worry much about biblical references. At any rate, I have worked from the methodological assumption that unless I have good reason to doubt it the extant Hebrew of MS B or its marginal corrections is most likely Ben Sira's. This is particularly true if the Greek translation supports the extant Hebrew. I will note textual problems and decisions as they bear on the interpretation of Ben Sira's text.

NOAH (44:17-18)²⁰

The Hebrew of these two verses is relatively unproblematic. The Greek appears to have misread נכרתי ונכרתי in v. 17d as נכרתי ונכרתי (which appears in 17c).

¹⁸ R.A. Argall, *1 Enoch and Sirach: A Comparative Literary and Conceptual Analysis of the Themes of Revelation, Creation and Judgment* (SBL 18, Atlanta: Scholars Press 1995); B.G. Wright, "Putting the Puzzle Together: Some Suggestions Concerning the Social Location of the Wisdom of Ben Sira," in *Conflicted Boundaries in Wisdom and Apocalypticism* (ed. B.G. Wright III and L.M. Wills, SBL 55, Atlanta: SBL 2005) 89-112.

¹⁹ Wright, *No Small Difference*.

²⁰ For much more detail on Ben Sira's treatment of Noah, see Matthias Weigold's contribution to this volume.

Ben Sira highlights Noah's righteousness, his preservation of the human race and the covenant that God made with him.²¹ Both adjectives in 17a, פְּרָאִי and דִּימָה, derive directly from Gen 6:9 and establish Noah's standing before God. Verse 17b appears to be Ben Sira's interpretive summary of the Flood story: "In a time of destruction, he was the continuator" (פְּרָאִי דִּימָה). The idea that because of Noah "there was a remnant" (פְּרָאִי דִּימָה) could have originated in the Genesis narrative.²² In 7:23 after the flood had destroyed all living things, "Only Noah was left (נִשְׁאַר) and those with him in the ark." To invoke the idea of the remnant here develops Ben Sira's main point in 17b that Noah was the one who continued the human race.²³ In addition, it might recall prophetic notions that a remnant, which continues to be faithful to God, will be preserved in the midst of a faithless Israel. In this connection, notably Noah's righteousness qualifies him as a פְּרָאִי דִּימָה.

Verses 17d and 18 tell the result of the Flood story: Not surprisingly, Ben Sira uses לְבַרְכָּךְ, the same term for flood found in Genesis throughout the Flood narrative. He relates that by a covenant, God made the flood cease. In the Genesis story, God actually makes two covenants with Noah. The first, in 6:18, gives Noah assurance that he, his family and the animals he takes with him will survive the impending destruction. With the second, in 9:8-17, God promises never again to send a flood to destroy the earth. In recalling this covenant, Ben Sira employs a number of terms drawn from the Genesis narrative. The covenant that Ben Sira mentions in 17d, using the expected פְּרָאִי, almost certainly refers to the second biblical one, since he notes the "eternal sign" that God "established."²⁴ Although Ben Sira does not mention the rainbow explicitly, his phrase עֲלָה עִוָּן probably intends it. In the Genesis narrative, however, the covenant is called "everlasting," but the sign is not. Ben Sira has exactly the reverse. He also uses the verb לְבַרְכָּךְ (reading with the margin of MS B), the technical term for making a covenant, further reinforcing that the sign/rainbow is the continuing sign of God's covenant. Thus, whereas Genesis has God establishing an eternal covenant with Noah whose sign is the rainbow, Ben Sira has the flood cease through a covenant, which is assured because God established an everlasting sign with Noah—a slight but significant rearrangement of the biblical text. Finally, v. 18b is almost identical to Gen 9:15. In the biblical verse, God promises that the waters "shall never again become a flood to destroy all flesh" (לֹא-יִשְׁבַּח עוֹלָם מַבּוּל לְבַרְכָּךְ).

²¹ Noah appears as the first in a series of people with whom God instituted covenants.

²² The Greek adds here "on the land," but there is no warrant for it in the Hebrew.

²³ Devorah Dimant observes that "Ben Sira ascribes to the motif of Noah as remnant an importance not found in the Genesis account" ("Noah in Early Jewish Literature," in *Biblical Figures Outside the Bible* [eds. M.E. Stone and T.A. Bergren, Harrisburg: Trinity Press International 1998] 126).

²⁴ The idea of covenant is very important to Ben Sira in the early portions of the Praise. See, for example, B. Mack, *Wisdom and the Hebrew Epic: Ben Sira's Hymn in Praise of the Fathers* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press 1985) 76-77.

Ben Sira reports that God made the covenant with Noah "in order never again to destroy all flesh" (לֹא-יִשְׁבַּח עוֹלָם מַבּוּל לְבַרְכָּךְ).

In a very short scope—less than two verses—Ben Sira summarizes the major elements of the biblical story about Noah. The biblical narrative is, of course, much longer than Ben Sira relates, but he alerts his reader to the precise features of the narrative that interest him by employing in his summary the important vocabulary of those scenes within the Noah story. In all but one colon, he uses vocabulary drawn from Genesis. Yet even that one colon, 17b, which I suggest represents Ben Sira's major interpretive understanding of Noah and a significant reason why he includes Noah in the Praise, gets qualified immediately after with biblical language that perhaps represents Ben Sira's explanation for his view of Noah. Noah as remnant constitutes Noah as continuator. So, the survival of the human race after the flood through Noah segues to God's selection of Abraham, whose legacy is covenant and blessing. Ben Sira both summarizes and retells the biblical story of Noah while maintaining points of contact with it. In that retelling, the story both authorizes and grounds Ben Sira's picture of Noah.

MOSES (44:23-45:5)

Moses is, of course, one of the central figures in Israelite history, and he appears in many Pentateuchal narratives. So, unlike the Noah story, which is fairly limited in scope compared to narratives featuring Moses, Ben Sira could not effectively summarize the entire story; he had to select which episodes he wanted to include in his praise. As one might guess, most of Ben Sira's praise of Moses focuses on the Exodus events and the giving of the Law, although he shapes them to fit his own agenda and themes.

Sirach 44:23-45:1 focuses on Moses' stature—of all the descendants of Jacob, he found favor with "all the living," and, as a result, both God and human beings loved him. The phrase יָרַבְכָּךְ הוּא מֹשֶׁה, a common Hebrew idiom for finding favor, occurs several times in the Exodus narrative, particularly in Exod 33:12-17 where it comprises a central theme. The passage culminates with God's affirmation to Moses, "I will do the very thing you have asked; for you have found favor in my sight (יָרַבְכָּךְ הוּא מֹשֶׁה), and I know you by name."²⁵ Whether Ben Sira's claim that Moses found favor before all the living reflects any specific biblical passage or an independent use of the biblical idiom for his assessment of Moses' significance is not clear since the phrase is so common. At the end of 45:1, Ben Sira emphasizes that Moses' memory is blessed. While not a statement from biblical sources, having a blessed memory is a central theme in Sirach generally and in the Praise

²⁵ Earlier in Exod 11:3, we find that Moses was "very important in the land of Egypt, in the sight of Pharaoh's officials and in the sight of the people." The phrase here, יָרַבְכָּךְ הוּא מֹשֶׁה, parallels יָרַבְכָּךְ הוּא מֹשֶׁה, which characterizes the Hebrews' stature with the Egyptians.

specifically (cf. 44:8-10), and the verse brings the person of Moses into the orbit of Ben Sira's larger concerns.

Verse 2 transitions from Moses' stature to his deeds. Most commentators agree that the Greek along with MS B suggest a Hebrew of בְּאַלֹהִים וּבְכַבְּדוֹ, "and he made him in glory like the angels/holy ones/God." While not an exact biblical phrase, Ben Sira almost certainly draws on Exod 7:1 where God says to Moses, "I will make you like God to Pharaoh" (וְאֵתְּנֶךָ לְפָנָיו כְּאֵלֹהִים).²⁶ At least as far as Ben Sira is concerned, the qualities that endeared him to God also prompted God to grant him such an elevated status.

The last phrase in the verse, וַיִּמְצָאֵהוּ בְּכַבְּדוֹ בְּיַם סוּף, "and he strengthened him with/in fearful things," probably points to the so-called plagues.²⁷ Although "fear" is a minor theme in the Exodus story, "fear of God" dominates Sirach. The plagues themselves are not called "fearful" in Exodus, but in Exodus 9 two verses might have prompted Ben Sira to connect these "fearful" acts with the fear of God. In 9:20, when hail is about to come to kill all the livestock, "[t]hose officials of Pharaoh who feared the word of the Lord hurried their slaves and livestock off to a secure place." Fear of God on the part of even the Egyptians resulted in safety from the disaster. Later in 9:30 Moses notes that Pharaoh does not yet "fear the Lord God." The plague of locusts follows as a result. Later at the Reed Sea, when the Pharaoh's charioters drown in the returning waters, the people of Israel "feared the Lord and believed in the Lord and in his servant Moses." This passage, then, shows how Ben Sira the scribe could use his knowledge of the biblical text to reinforce the story, but at the same time he could exploit Exodus in order to reinforce one of his major thematic interests.

Verse 3 follows up v. 2 by noting, "he wrought swift signs/miracles by his word." MS B is defective at this place, but the Greek σιγῆς almost certainly renders מִלִּישָׁה, a translation equivalent found elsewhere in Sirach, and the word used of the plagues in Exodus, about which Moses warns Pharaoh in each case. The clause, לִישָׁה לְפָנָיו וְיִמְצָאֵהוּ, "and he strengthened him in the presence of Pharaoh," looks to be a very clever word play based on the Exodus story. The verb יִמְצָאֵהוּ is conspicuous in the Exodus narrative, since this is what God does to Pharaoh's heart—he "hardens" it (cf. Exod 9:12, 35; 10:20, 27). In a turnabout, Ben Sira claims that God "hardened" Moses before Pharaoh, probably referring to Moses' steadfast demand that the Hebrews go free. For Ben Sira, Moses is just as unyielding to Pharaoh as Pharaoh is to Israel's God.

²⁶ Some commentators also invoke Ps 86, and while that verse might be alluded to, the Exodus 7 passage is more directly relevant. If the Greek translation "angels" or "holy ones" is warranted, it would represent an early interpretation of this phrase. The phrase perhaps also alludes to Moses' shining face that resulted from his reception of the tablets of the Law in Exod 34:29, which later Jewish interpretation took to be the reflection of the divine Shekhinah.

²⁷ The Greek adds "enemies" here probably misunderstanding the reference in the Hebrew.

Ben Sira moves immediately to the Sinai experience in 3c, which notes generally that God gave Moses commandments (וְצִוָּהוּ) for the people. The sentence probably alludes to the giving of the Decalogue. If so, Ben Sira's language recalls Deuteronomy rather than Exodus. Three times in Deuteronomy's version of the Decalogue (5:12, 15, 16) the verb "to command" (וְצִוָּה) appears within an injunction, and Deut 5:32, 33 lay heavy emphasis on the exact fulfillment of what God commanded. Verse 3d is defective in Hebrew, but it can be reconstructed with some certainty from the Greek. The revelation of God's glory (probably בְּכָבוֹד, Gk. δόξα) could derive from more than one place in the Exodus story. A likely episode is Exod 24:15-17 in which a cloud covered Mt. Sinai and "the glory" (וְכָבוֹד) of the Lord settled on the mountain.²⁸ Moses subsequently entered the cloud and encountered God directly.²⁹ Also possible is a reference to Deut 5:22, the verse that immediately follows the giving of the Decalogue and to which Ben Sira probably alludes later in v. 5, which speaks of "the fire, the cloud and the thick darkness."

Verse 4 recalls 44:23. There Moses "found favor with God and humans"; in this passage, Ben Sira emphasizes Moses' direct access to God, a relationship that no ordinary human being can have. Moses is indeed remarkable, since God selected him out of "all flesh" because of this humility (וְרִנְיָה) and faithfulness (וְאֵמֻנָה). The same qualities get applied to Moses in the incident related in Numbers 12 when Miriam and Aaron speak out against him for marrying a Cushite woman. They ask, "Has the Lord spoken only through Moses?" God answers Moses' siblings apparently because, as the narrator tells us, "Moses was very humble (וְרִנְיָה), more so than any one else on earth" (12:3). In God's response to Miriam and Aaron, we hear that God speaks to prophets through visions and dreams, but not so with Moses. "He is entrusted (וְאֵמֻנָה) with all my house. With him I speak face to face" (12:7). The connection is all the more striking since not only does Ben Sira use the same Hebrew roots to describe Moses, his claim of Moses' uniqueness—he was selected out of "all flesh"—reflects the claim in Numbers that Moses was more humble than any other human being "on the face of the earth."

Because of these qualities, Ben Sira tells us in v. 5 that Moses heard God's voice (וְקוֹל) and went into the thick darkness (לְפָנָיו). He then notes that God gave into Moses' hand the commandments (וְצִוָּהוּ), "the Torah of life and understanding."³⁰ God's voice, Moses' entry into the cloud and the giving of commandments all come together in Deut 5:22, "These words the Lord spoke with a loud voice (וְקוֹל) to your whole assembly at the mountain, out

²⁸ The idea that God's glory is in the cloud might also be transferred back in the story to the first moments at Sinai when the mountain is covered in clouds (Exodus 19). Ben Sira might also be alluding to Moses' descent and his shining face, the second time that this event could possibly be in the background.

²⁹ The Hebrew has the singular וְרָאָה, while the Greek has a plural. The appositive, "torah of life and understanding" might suggest that the plural of the Greek fits better here.

of the fire, the cloud, the thick darkness (עָרַבְלַיִם), and he added no more. He wrote them on two stone tablets and gave them to me." Exodus 20:21 also notes specifically that Moses enters the darkness to speak with God, and later he descends with the tablets of the law.

From v. 3c through 5d we see a kind of chiasmic structure over these bicola of a-b-c-b'-a' (although it is not exact in the number of cola on either side). 3c (=a) refers to the giving of commandments followed in 3d (=b) by Moses' direct contact with God's "glory." Ben Sira's use of Numbers 12 in verse 4 (=c) sits in a rhetorically strategic position in that it provides the reasons why Moses can meet face to face with God. Verse 5a, b (=b') then has Moses in direct contact with God through his voice and presence in the cloud. This encounter ends in 5c, d (=a) with Moses receiving commands "into his hand."

Even though Ben Sira's version of the events surrounding the giving of the tablets of the law in v. 5 shows similarities to both Exodus and Deuteronomy, his language about the law reflects Deuteronomy much more than Exodus. So, for example, the Hebrew term חֻמֵּי הַתּוֹרָה is more characteristic of Deuteronomy than of Exodus. Ben Sira calls the commandments חֻמֵּי הַתּוֹרָה וְדִבְרֵי הַתּוֹרָה, a phrase that clearly echoes Deut 30:15–16 and 32:46–47, both of which connect the law and its fulfillment with life. Furthermore, the last two clauses of v. 5 reinforce Moses' teaching function: "to teach to Jacob his statutes, and his decrees and ordinances to Israel."³⁰ The three Hebrew terms חֻמֵּי הַתּוֹרָה, דִּבְרֵי הַתּוֹרָה and חֻמֵּי הַתּוֹרָה in Sirach match exactly the prescriptions that Moses sets before the Israelites in Deut 4:44–45. Furthermore, the verb חָנַן occurs in connection with Moses only in Deuteronomy (see in particular 4:1, 5).

For his section on Moses, then, Ben Sira drew on Exodus, Numbers and Deuteronomy. Moses stands out as a completely unique individual in the history of Israel because, on the one hand, God made Moses "like God." Ben Sira seems to understand this act as almost a quasi-divine transformation for the lawgiver, since unlike the biblical text where Moses' "god-like" status is relational—he is as God to *Pharaoh*—Ben Sira makes it existential, removing the relational aspects—in fact, "the king" is not mentioned for another three cola.³¹ Yet, on the other hand, Moses has special access to the divine presence because he had the personal qualities or charisma to warrant such access. Moses finds favor "with all the living" because of the characteristics of humility and trustworthiness. He was responsible for communicating and teaching that fundamental element of Israel's relationship with God, the Torah. The clear agreement of Ben Sira's language with parallels in these three biblical books suggests that he is working with texts that he has thoroughly mastered. In making his claims about Moses, Ben Sira constantly provides touchstones to his textual sources, however much he has shaped them to fit his own purposes.

³⁰ In 36:16–17 Ben Sira also puts Israel and Jacob in parallel.

³¹ On Exod 7:1 and the implications for Moses' status as "God" in Philo of Alexandria, see the discussion and secondary literature in P. Borgen, *Philo of Alexandria: An Exegete for His Time* (NovTSup 86, Leiden: Brill 1997) 201–05.

AARON (45:6–22)

In this section Ben Sira treats both Aaron specifically and the priesthood in general, and his description of Aaron sets up his later praise of Simon II (chap. 50), which has a close intertextual relationship with the praise of Aaron.³² Ben Sira divides this section into two major parts, one on the priestly vestments and the other on the priesthood's cultic functions.

With v. 6 we are immediately faced with a difficult textual problem. The Greek adds διοριστὸν αὐτοῦ ἀβεβήτων αὐτοῦ after Aaron's name. If the Greek accurately reflects Ben Sira's Hebrew and MS B is a corruption, then the verse should read, "He raised up a holy person like him, Aaron his brother out of the tribe of Levi." Simply following MS B we have, "He raised up a holy one, Aaron out of the tribe of Levi."³³ Whichever text we use, though, we are presented with two basic claims that are important for Ben Sira: (1) Aaron is holy and (2) he comes from the tribe of Levi. Aaron's Levite origins derive from Exodus, where he and Moses are said to be brothers from parents who are Levites (2:1; 4:14). The claim that Aaron is holy might originate in Ps 106:16, where he is called "the holy one of the Lord" (קָדוֹשׁ יְהוָה).

Ben Sira immediately identifies the basis upon which Aaron receives the priesthood. God established with him אֱלֹהֵי עוֹלָם, an "eternal statute."³⁴ Exod 29:9 and 40:15 both call the priesthood "eternal." In 29:9 it is אֱלֹהֵי עוֹלָם that confers the priesthood, a phrase very close to Ben Sira's; in 40:15 it is simply אֱלֹהֵי עוֹלָם. Ben Sira's exact phrase occurs in two passages in Exodus, 29:28 and 30:21, where it refers to certain priestly prerogatives accorded to Aaron and his sons. In his use of the phrase, Ben Sira transfers the idea of אֱלֹהֵי עוֹלָם from the prerogatives to the priesthood itself. The prerogatives accompany the priesthood, which Ben Sira takes as the proper subject of this statute.

Due to this eternal statute, God gave Aaron הוֹד, "splendor," and blessed him with glory (כְּבוֹד); reading the verb as הוֹדֵאֵרְוֹ for MS B's הוֹדֵרְוֹ. The noun הוֹד is not applied to Aaron in the biblical accounts, but the idea that Aaron receives glory might derive from Exod 28:2 and 40 where the vestments of the priesthood, to which Ben Sira will move in short order, are for "glorious adornment" (לְכַבֵּד וּלְתַפְאֵרֶתָא). Ben Sira, then, subtly takes the notion of glory that is applied to the priestly vestments in Exodus and transfers it directly to Aaron. So, just as the priesthood is the "eternal

³² For the treatment of Simon II and an assessment of his place in the Praise of the Ancestors, see O. Mulder, *Simon the High Priest in Sirach 50* (SJSup 78, Leiden: Brill 2003). For a very detailed look at the textual relations of the section of Aaron, see P.C. Beenjes, *Jesús Sirach en Tenach* (Ph.D. dissertation; Katholieke Theologische Hogeschool Amsterdam 1981) esp. 175–99.

³³ See P.W. Skehan and A.A. Di Lella (*The Wisdom of Ben Sira* [AB 39, New York: Doubleday 1987] 509), who argue for the longer version based on the Greek. M. Segal (*Spr ba-syr' hšim* [Jerusalem: Bialik Foundation, 1958] 313) thinks the Syriac actually has the closest thing to the original, but its text is still longer than the Hebrew of MS B.

³⁴ The Greek is actually interpretive here referring to an "eternal covenant."

statute" and not the prerogatives that go along with it, Ben Sira claims that glory resides in Aaron not in his clothes.

Verse 7d is difficult to interpret. MS B(xt) contains the strange epithet *רֹאשׁ בְּרוֹתְעֵיבֵי רֹאשׁ*, "with the horns of a wild ox," a phrase that occurs in Num 23:22 and 24:8. Perhaps, however, we should read with MS B(mg), which has *רֹאשׁ* instead of *רֹאשׁ*.³⁵ The verb *וְזָרְדוּ*, "he girded him," although it does not occur in biblical passages about Aaron, serves as the segue from 7c to the actual description of the priestly vestments.³⁶ Verse 8a, *וְלֵבָשׁוּ בְּלִיָּהּ תַּפְאֵרֶת*, "and he clothed him in complete magnificence," continues the theme of the last two clauses. The verb *לְבַשׁ* occurs several times in connection with Aaron's vestments in Exodus (29:5, 8; 40:13, 14), and the noun *תַּפְאֵרֶת* explicitly recalls Exodus 28:2 and 40.

Verse 8b presents another textual dilemma. The Greek *οκεύειν* probably presupposes the Hebrew *כָּבַל*, as Patrick Skehan and Alexander Di Lella and Moshe Segal note.³⁷ Whether that Hebrew originated from *כָּבַל* and has been further corrupted to *כַּבְּבָל*, which stands in the text now, as Skehan and Di Lella argue, or whether the present text ought to be accepted as Segal proposes is not entirely clear. What is certain is that neither the verb *כַּבְּבָל* nor the noun *כַּבְּבָל* are applied to Aaron or to his clothes in the biblical texts, but the terms reinforce Aaron's glory and magnificence. Ideas that Ben Sira will apply later to his contemporary Simon II (cf. especially 50:5, 11). The list that follows, on the contrary, corresponds precisely with the biblical terms for articles of priestly clothing: *כִּתְמוֹתַי*, *כִּתְמוֹתַי*, *כִּתְמוֹתַי*.

Now that his readers are no longer in doubt of Aaron's (and by extension his descendants') exceeding glory and thus his claim to the priesthood, Ben Sira moves in v. 9 to descriptions of the clothes themselves. As in Exod 28:31-33, Aaron's robe (*כִּתְמוֹתַי*) has bells and pomegranates around its hem, and just as in Exod 28:35, Ben Sira relates that the sound of the bells will be heard when Aaron ministers. Where Ben Sira and Exodus differ, however, is about the function of the bells and about where Aaron exactly serves. In Exod 28:35, the bells apparently let God know that Aaron is coming into or going out of the "holy place" (*קֹדֶשׁ*) so that he will not die. For Ben Sira, Aaron is heard more specifically in the "sanctuary" (*קֹדֶשׁ*) "as a memorial for the sons of his people." The idea of a memorial (*זִכָּרוֹן*) is actually connected with the ephod in Exod 28:12, 29, specifically that Aaron bears the names of the "sons of Israel" on the ephod when he comes before God. For some reason that is still unclear to me, Ben Sira seems to be transferring that notion here, even though he does not discuss the ephod until v. 10c.

In the beginning of v. 10, the phrase *וְלֵבָשׁוּ בְּלִיָּהּ תַּפְאֵרֶת* comes directly from Exod 28:2, 4, and the three materials that he lists—*כֶּהֵן*, *זָהָב*, and *תַּבְּרִיטָא*—derive

³⁵ The Greek translator does not really know what to do with this, and taking his cue from the verb he translates, "he clothed him with a robe of glory." See my discussion in *No Small Difference* (171-72) where I tentatively argue for the possible originality of MS B(xt).

³⁶ The last phrase in MS B is a duplicate and was not part of Ben Sira's text.

³⁷ Skehan and Di Lella, *Wisdom of Ben Sira*, 509; Segal, *Spr bh-syr*, 313.

from Exod 28:5 as does the remark that they are skillfully worked (*בְּעֵשֶׂה דַעֲבָה*).³⁸ Verse 10c gives three additional pieces of priestly clothing: the breastpiece of judgment (*כִּתְמוֹתַי*), the ephod (*אֵפֹד*) and the robe/girdle? (*רֹאשׁ*). The first two items appear among the priestly vestments described in Exodus 28. The last is not part of the biblical list of Aaron's clothing. Skehan and Di Lella apparently assume that this is a reference to the sash (*כִּתְמוֹתַי* in Exod 28:2, 40), but that is by no means clear to me.³⁹

Verse 11 continues from the preceding verse with the materials that were used to make these garments. The first is *וְעֵץ הַלֵּלִיָּהּ*, "crimson thread," the same material found all over in the Exodus descriptions, both in the prescriptions given to Moses and in the execution of them, except that Ben Sira reverses the terms. This thread is made by a weaver (*אֹרֵז*), a phrase identical to Exod 39:22, 27. The next two clauses describe the stones that are set in the ephod. While the phrase "precious stones" (*אֲבָנֵי יָפִיָּהּ*) is not found with respect to the ephod, the engraved signets (*אֲבָנֵי חֹתֶמֶת*) are. The Hebrew of MS B and the Greek of v. 11c are completely different and too difficult to reconstruct in such a way as to be useful for my purposes here. V. 11d, however, specifically mentions the function of the stones as a memorial "for the number of the tribes of Israel" (cf. above v. 8; see Exod 28:21 for the term *שֵׁמֶשׁ*). Ben Sira's description of the stones abbreviates the longer account found in Exodus 28 and 39, and consequently, as we have already seen, he plants biblical vocabulary in the midst of his own summarizing comments in this case terms like "tribes," "remembrance," "stones."

In verse 12, Ben Sira reprises his picture of the glorious high priest. He begins with the golden crown, *כִּתְמוֹתַי*, a term not used at all of Aaron's vestments in the biblical text, but one that might betray Ben Sira's support for the ideal of a high priestly ruler of Israel.⁴⁰ Ben Sira envisions this crown as being upon the *כִּתְמוֹתַי*, and there is a plate (*פָּתֵל*) on which is engraved, according to Exod 28:36, "Holy to the Lord," although Ben Sira does not report the words of the inscription. The end of v. 12 returns to a list of adjectives meant to emphasize the amazing sight created by the high priest as he officiates. This vision relates to Ben Sira's later description of Simon II as he officiates in the Temple, and it reinforces Ben Sira's support of the

³⁸ Does the reference to Aaron as holy in v. 6 have any connection with applying an adjective used of his clothes to Aaron himself as we saw above?

³⁹ Skehan and Di Lella, *Wisdom of Ben Sira*, 512.

⁴⁰ For an argument on this point, see my paper "Ben Sira on Kings and Kingship" (paper delivered at the conference "Representations of Hellenistic Monarchy in Hellenistic Culture," Somerville College, Oxford University, March 24-26, 2003). See also M. Himmelfarb, "The Wisdom of the Scribe, the Wisdom of the Priest, and the Wisdom of the King According to Ben Sira," in *For a Later Generation: The Transformation of Tradition in Israel, Early Judaism and Early Christianity* (eds. R.A. Argall, et al., Harrisburg: Trinity Press International 2000) 89-99.

Aaronid priesthood and the high priest's position as the one who rules Israel.⁴¹

In v. 13, Ben Sira makes the transition from the high priest's vestments to his cultic service via a sweeping statement about the high priestly office using the vehicle of these vestments to do it. The Hebrew of the verse is fragmentary but seems to represent Ben Sira's ideology of the priesthood in his own time. He probably relies, however, on a statement like that in Exod 29:29–34, which explicitly limits the high priestly garments to Aaron and his sons. Interestingly, in the Exodus version of the regulations for the ordination sacrifice, we find that no "outsider" (גֵּרִי) can eat of it. Ben Sira has adopted this term in order to indicate that no one but Aaron's descendants may wear the priestly vestments, thereby clarifying who can legitimately hold the high priestly office. At the same time he transports the ancient tradition of the priesthood into his own time, in a sense skipping the generations from Aaron to his own day. "Before him no one had these, and no outsider (גֵּרִי) has ever worn them, except his sons alone and his descendants for all generations."

We now turn to the high priest's cultic functions. Verse 14 outlines the מִזְבֵּחַ or daily cereal offering in which half is burnt in the morning and the other half in the evening (described in Lev 6:19–23). According to Leviticus, which Ben Sira seems to follow, the offering is to be "regular" (רְגִילִי). In agreement with the language of Leviticus, Ben Sira prescribes that the sacrifice is to be completely burned (כָּלִיל תִּקְרָא).

Even though for Ben Sira an Aaronid priesthood is the only legitimate one, he further grounds it in Mosaic authority. He has already employed Mosaic texts to authorize his description of the glorious stature of Aaron and his descendants, and now he appeals not to textual authority, but to the "historical" Moses who ordained Aaron. Of course, here as well, Ben Sira adapts the textual tradition he has inherited. In v. 15, he notes that Moses ordained (וְיָרַד אֵלָיו אֱלֹהִים), using the technical phrase found in Exodus 29. The description of Moses' actual ordination of Aaron comes from Leviticus 8 in which he invests Aaron with the priestly clothing and anoints him with oil. Ben Sira's version has Moses anointing Aaron with oil, qualifying it with the adjective "holy" (קֹדֶשׁ). Ben Sira then goes beyond what we read in the Pentateuch when he says that God made an "eternal covenant" (בְּרִית עוֹלָם) with Aaron and his descendants "for the days of heaven."⁴² Never does God make an eternal "covenant" with Aaron, although in several places, as we have seen, the priesthood and its prerogatives constitute a חֲוָה עוֹלָם. Of course, God does make such a covenant with Phinehas, to which Ben Sira

⁴¹ On Ben Sira's views of the priesthood, see Olyan, "Ben Sira's Relationship," Wright "Fear the Lord" and "Ben Sira and the Book of the Watchers on the Legitimate Priesthood," in *Intertextual Studies in Ben Sira and Tobit* (eds. J. Corley and V. Skemp, CBQMS 38, Washington: Catholic University of America 2005) 241–54.

⁴² The phrase is found in Deut 11:21 and Ps 89:30, but I am not sure if Ben Sira would have taken the phrase from there or not. Himmelfarb, "Wisdom of the Scribe," 95 argues that it originates in Psalm 89.

refers in 45:24. Here he retrojects the covenantal connection backwards in time, and thus he equates the "statute" with the "covenant." This rewriting strikes me as part of Ben Sira's ideological program to create the foundation for an Aaronid priesthood whose right it is to serve at God's altar and to hold the high priesthood.⁴³ As priest, Ben Sira says that Aaron and his descendants will serve (לָשֵׁר) God and "bless his people with his name." With respect to the last clause, Ben Sira might well be drawing on his personal experience (as we perhaps see in chapter 50), but just as likely he has two biblical passages in mind. In Lev 9:22–23 Aaron blesses the people as he does in v. 15, but perhaps more significantly in Num 6:23–27 Aaron *and his sons* invoke God's name (cf. 50:20)—"So shall *they* put my name upon the people of Israel, and I will bless them"—which brings the focus back to the importance of the priesthood belonging to Aaron's descendants down to Ben Sira's time.

Sirach 45:16 begins with a similar claim to one we saw above with Moses—God chose Aaron from all the living, and as with Moses, only God's election permits him to draw near (לָקְרוֹב) to God to offer sacrifices. The verb שָׁנַן is clearly a technical term for the priest approaching the altar, and it occurs frequently in Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers and Deuteronomy. The words that Ben Sira employs for the sacrifices offered by Aaron are also technical: עֹלָה ("burnt offering"; see Leviticus 1); חֶלְבֵי־שֶׁמֶן ("fat offerings"; see Leviticus 3);⁴⁴ וְאֵחָדָם יָרַח לְקַדְשׁוֹ ("to burn sweet smelling incense as a memorial"; almost an exact replica of Lev 2:9); לְאֵתוֹ ("to atone"; see Lev 16:34 on the day of atonement).⁴⁵

The language of v. 17, in which God gives Aaron מִצְוֹתָיו, as he did Moses, also confers authority on Aaron over statutes (דְּבָרִים) and judgment (מִשְׁפָּטִים), and subsequently he is charged to "teach his people statutes (דְּבָרִים) and ordinances (מִשְׁפָּטִים) to the children of Israel." Teaching language is familiar from Deuteronomy and resembles Ben Sira's statement that Moses was to teach Israel וְשִׁפְטֵי־דְבָרָיו וְחֻקֵּי־תִּבְרֹתָיו—in both cases utilizing the verb לָמַד. Deuteronomy also charges priests to teach, specifically in 33:10 where Levi is commanded to "teach Jacob thy ordinances (מִשְׁפָּטֵי־יְהוָה) and Israel thy law (דְּבָרֵי־יְהוָה)." Oddly enough, while this and other places in Deuteronomy establish a teaching and decision-making function for the levitical priests, Ben Sira never mentions the levitical priesthood while favoring an Aaronid one. Yet by explicitly pointing out in v. 6 that Aaron was of the tribe of Levi, he can exploit the language of Deuteronomy by attaching the priestly teaching function to Aaron in order to further his own priestly ideology.

Verses 18–19 relate the rebellion of Korah found in Numbers 16–17. Ben Sira narrates an abbreviated version of the story that is full of interesting interpretations. He begins by saying, "Strangers (גֵּרִים) burned with anger

⁴³ On Ben Sira and an Aaronid priesthood, see Olyan, "Ben Sira's Relationship."

⁴⁴ The Greek mistranslates this word as אֵחָדָם.

⁴⁵ The idea of atoning for Israel might be broader than any specific ritual, however. See, for example, Ben Sira's comments on Phinehas who "atoned for the people of Israel" (45:23).

(וַיִּדְרֹא) against him (i.e. Aaron).” This clause sets up Ben Sira’s entire reading of the story. First, in Numbers Korah, Dathan and Abiram rise up against both Moses and Aaron; in Sirach only Aaron is the object of their opposition. Ben Sira attributes their rebellion to jealousy, a motivation he supplies. The phrase *וַיִּדְרֹא* in 18b derives from Num 16:40 (17:5 in MT) toward the end of the narrative.

Second, the verb “to burn with anger” is actually used of Moses in the biblical story (Num 16:15) and not of the rebellious group. Ben Sira creates an interesting parallel in his text when he says that the rebellious three were angry with “wrath and anger” (אֵרָא). When he speaks of their destruction (v. 19), it happens because God “saw it and became angry” (וַיִּרְאֵהוּ). God then destroys them in his “burning anger” (אֵשׁ בְּחַרְוֹן אֵרָא). The language of burning sets the stage for Ben Sira’s recounting of the punishment. In Num 16:35 fire went out from the Lord and consumed the rebels who were offering incense. Ben Sira explicitly notes this punishment by fire as God’s response. In what is perhaps an allusion to the opening of the earth, which swallowed up Korah and his entourage, Ben Sira says that God wrought a “sign” (אֵשׁ).

Third, the noun *וַיִּדְרֹא* parallels Ben Sira’s previous use of this term in v. 13 with respect to the Aaronid priestly garments. In this case it probably derives from Num 16:40 (17:5 in MT), where at the end of the Korah episode, Eleazar fashions a bronze covering for the altar as a “reminder to the people of Israel that no stranger (*וַיִּדְרֹא*), who is not a descendent of Aaron, should draw near to burn incense before the Lord lest he become like Korah and his company.” So, no “stranger/outsider” may wear the priestly vestments, and strangers who presume to usurp the cultic prerogative of the Aaronid priests risk God’s anger. By recalling the punishment suffered by Korah, we might speculate that, given the narrowed focus on Aaron in this passage, Ben Sira might be issuing a warning to any potential contemporary “usurper” of the priesthood (at least from his perspective).

As a result of this episode, according to Ben Sira, God gave Aaron glory (v. 20). This verse comes between Ben Sira’s version of the rebellion of Korah and his report of Aaron’s inheritance. Interposed between these two episodes in the text of Numbers is the story of Aaron’s staff that blooms. Perhaps Ben Sira means to allude to that story via the idea of Aaron receiving glory, but this is by no means assured. Verses 20b-22 almost certainly rely on Numbers 18, which delineate the inheritance of Aaron and his descendants, even to the point that, except for his mention of the bread of the presence (cf. Lev 24:5-9), Ben Sira follows the order of the biblical text in which the list of the offerings that are due Aaron precedes the denial of any land to him. So, Ben Sira relates that the “holy offerings” (עֹלֹת הַקֹּדֶשׁ; cf. Num 18:19) belong to Aaron. He notes that the offerings from the fire (עֹלֹת הַבַּיִת; cf. Num. 18:9) will be Aaron’s food. Indeed, Ben Sira calls these things a “gift” (תְּרוּמָה) the same word used in Num 18:7 to characterize the Aaronid priesthood. Aaron does not inherit land, however. In denying Aaron this legacy, Ben Sira agrees with Num 18:20, a verse he echoes closely, if we can reconstruct the missing elements in the Hebrew text with some degree of probability.

Num 18:20:

בְּאֵרְצָם לֹא תִהְיֶה לָהֶם זֵדוּת לְדַד בְּזֵדוּכֵם
אֵת הַלֶּקֶד וְתִהְיֶה לָהֶם כְּתוּבָה בְּיַד יְשׁוּרָאֵל

Sir 45:22:

אֲדָר בְּאֵרְצָתְכֶם אֲרִיזָה עֵלְיָם לֹא יִנְדָּל וּבְזֵדוּכֵם לֹא יִדְלַק נִחְלָה
אֲשֶׁר יִזְיֶינָה הַחֶלְקֵי נִחְלָתוֹ בְּזֵדוּת בְּיַד יְשׁוּרָאֵל

To review briefly the section on Aaron, Ben Sira draws on quite a range of biblical texts in order to create his ideology of an Aaronid priesthood as the only legitimate Israelite priesthood. He repeatedly reiterates that Aaron was glorious, both in his vestments and as a result of the Korah rebellion, a passage that makes a clear distinction between Aaron and his sons and “outsiders” who are illegitimate. Ben Sira probably even takes passages linked to the Levites and applies them to Aaron. Throughout this section, Ben Sira carefully lays the groundwork for his praise of Simon II in chapter 50. I am also relatively convinced that these statements reflect contemporary issues concerning the priesthood that Ben Sira thought he had to address, but even though his ideological commitments seem pretty clear, the specific circumstances to which he was responding are less certain.

DAVID (47:2-11)

The importance of the priesthood to Ben Sira conditioned my choice of Aaron for this paper, and so Ben Sira’s view of kingship motivated my choice of David. Ben Sira’s assessment of the monarchy bears directly on his representation of Simon II, whom he constructs as ideal priest and ruler. In that light David would be a potentially illuminating figure, even though Ben Sira is generally ambivalent about the institution of the monarchy.⁴⁶ More-over, looking at Ben Sira’s praise of David allows us to examine a figure whose biblical traditions fall outside of the Pentateuch.

After his brief note in v. 1 that Nathan prophesied during the time of David, Ben Sira begins his discussion of the king in v. 2 by employing sacrificial imagery, which frames the section in cultic language, which is more at home in a priestly context than a royal one:⁴⁸ “Like the choice fat lifted up from the sacred offerings, so was David from Israel.” The phrase

⁴⁶ Here we encounter a textual difficulty. The Greek has *αὐτῶς γὰρ*, which makes God the portion of Israel as in the Numbers text. The Hebrew of MS B continues with the theme of the verse that the offerings are Aaron’s inheritance. Either the Hebrew is corrupt, and it originally resembled Num 18:20 where God is Aaron’s portion, or the Greek ignores the emphasis of the Hebrew on the offerings and aligns the text with the verse in Numbers. The reconstructions here are those of Segal, who recognizes the similarity with Numbers.

⁴⁷ See Wright, “Ben Sira on Kings” and Himmelfarb, “The Wisdom of the Scribe.”

⁴⁸ See G.G. Xeravits, “The Figure of David in the Book of Ben Sira,” *Hermoth* 23 (2001) 29.

"to lift up the fat" (רָם הַלֵּב) from an offering occurs in Leviticus 4:8, 19 and represents separating out the best portion of the sacrifice. Thus is David the best of all of Israel. Additionally, the verb is actually used of David in Ps 89:20.⁴⁹ What strengthens the possibility that Ben Sira relied on this Psalm in this place is that the end of the section on David in v. 11 seems to be drawn both from Psalm 89 and from 2 Samuel 7 (see below).

Ben Sira's report of David's confrontations with lions and bears forms the transition to his retelling of the Goliath episode; as such it probably alludes to the justification that David gives Saul in 1 Sam 17:34-36 for his willingness to fight the giant.⁵⁰ He relates that whenever a lion or a bear threatened his father's sheep, he would "catch it by the jaw, strike it down and kill it." David's response to Saul in 1 Samuel, however, gives no indication of any playfulness on David's part. For Ben Sira, not only did David overcome these ferocious beasts, he made sport of them, and thus he magnifies David's stature (an intent we see elsewhere in the Praise, cf. Moses and Aaron above).

Verses 4-5 relate David's encounter with the Gittite giant. Ben Sira calls Goliath גִּתִּי, as does 1 Sam 17:51, and he says that David was "in his youth" (בְּיָנוּתוֹ). The Samuel narrative throughout identifies David as a נָעַר (see, for example, 2 Sam 17:33). Ben Sira's summary of the Goliath story features similar language to the biblical text, but it comes in explanations of the consequences of actions that the Bible are intended or about to happen. So, in 1 Sam 17:46, David says to Goliath, "This very day the Lord will deliver you into my hand, and I will strike you down (וַיִּכְוֶהְךָ)." In Ben Sira's retelling, he gives the result, while utilizing the same verb: "In his youth he struck down (וַיִּכְוֶה) a giant." In 1 Sam 17:26, David asks, "What shall be done for the man who kills this Philistine and takes away the reproach (וַיִּסְוֶה הָרָעָה) from Israel?" Ben Sira in 4b reports the result: "And he took away the reproach (וַיִּסְוֶה הָרָעָה) of the people." Although Ben Sira uses the same term for slingshot, קֶלֶב, as the biblical story, the entirety of 4c, d looks to be his moral indictment of Goliath's hubris: "When his hand let fly the sling and he shattered the pride of Goliath." This condemnation of Goliath also reflects Ben Sira's clear distaste for the Philistines, which he exhibits elsewhere (cf. 4:7-7; 50:25-26).

Verses 5 veers away from the story as it is preserved in the MT and looks like Ben Sira's own summarizing interpretation of the longer narrative. 1 Samuel describes Goliath as a "man of war" (אִישׁ מִלְחָמָה), whereas Ben Sira calls him מִלְחָמָה לְבָרִיךְ אֱלֹהִים. Ben Sira says that David "called upon God Most

⁴⁹ See Skehan and Di Lella, *Wisdom of Ben Sira*, 525. See also T.R. Lee, *Studies in the Form of Sirach 44-50* (SBLDS 75, Atlanta: Scholars Press 1986) 214.

⁵⁰ I recognize that the MT of 1 and 2 Samuel have many textual problems of their own and that Ben Sira might well have known a very different version of these stories. In his summary of the story, however, it seems to me that Ben Sira uses languages that could have been found in others versions as well. On this passage, see Xeravits "Figure of David," 30), who calls it the "lion-bear affair" and notes the occurrence of the text in the Syriac Apocryphal Psalms.

High," but he actually never prays in the narrative; he simply claims in his speech to Goliath that God will enable him to defeat the giant. As a result of his trust in God, David was able to overcome this man and "lift up the horn of his people." While none of this vocabulary occurs in the biblical story, the idea of raising or breaking one's "horn" is clearly an important motif in this section.

The Greek and Hebrew of Sirach differ at the beginning of v. 6. The Greek has the generic "they sang of him," whereas the Hebrew gives a specific group, "daughters" (בָּנוֹת), who did the singing. The Hebrew of MS B is close to the MT, which has "women" (נָשִׁים) singers.⁵¹ Whoever Ben Sira imagined singing, he employed the same verb, נָעַר, as the Samuel narrative, and he also supplies the same number of David's vanquished foes, "tens of thousands" (רִבְבֵי). The last clause of v. 6 summarizes David's numerous military campaigns. The claim that David "wiped out the enemy on every side" (וַיִּכְוֶה כָּל צַד מְכַבְּרֵי) does not occur of him in the biblical texts, but one wonders with Skehan and Di Lella if this might not be a reference to 1 Sam 14:47: "He fought against his enemies on every side (וַיִּכְוֶה כָּל צַד מְכַבְּרֵי) — against Moab, against the Ammonites, against Edom, against the kings of Zobah and against the Philistines."⁵² While the actual wording differs between Sirach and 1 Samuel, it is similar enough. One other matter inclines me to think this connection possible here. The last member of the enemies' list in 1 Samuel is the Philistines, and Ben Sira singles them out in the very next clause. Furthermore, the same coalition of enemies is found in 1 Chron 18:1, which employs the same verb as Ben Sira, כָּוַע "to subdue," to describe David's victorious campaigns against the Philistines. After defeating the Philistines in Chronicles he takes on Moab, king Hadadzezer of Zobah and in chapter 19 the Ammonites.

Ben Sira's remarks about the Philistines in 7b and c find no biblical parallels. He notes that David waged war against these enemies of Israel and "broke (שָׁבַר) their horn until today." This last phrase creates two intertextual parallels within Ben Sira's text. First, it recalls the statement in v. 4 that David "shattered (שָׁבַר) the pride of Goliath." Second, it forms a matching opposite with Ben Sira's assessment of v. 5 that David's killing of Goliath "raised the horn of his people."

In v. 8 Ben Sira segues from David the military man toward David the liturgical reformer. He says of the king: "In everything he did he gave praises to God Most High giving glory. With his whole heart he loved his Maker." David as a man of prayer is much more the picture of the Chronicler than of the Deuteronomist, and Ben Sira may have taken this view of David from Chronicles, if he knew these books. Skehan and Di Lella

⁵¹ I would be more inclined in favor of the Greek here if the Hebrew had matched the biblical account. That it does not suggests a more complicated relationship between Hebrew and Greek than simple textual corruption.

⁵² Ben Sira also refers to "enemies on every side" in 46:5 about Joshua. Unfortunately, the Hebrew is not extant in that place.

⁵³ Skehan and Di Lella, *Wisdom of Ben Sira*, 526.

suggest that the phrase “he loved his Maker with his whole heart” is a reference to Deut 6:5.⁵⁴

Verses 9–10 are fragmentary in MS B and in a different order from the Greek. Ben Sira’s remark in v. 9, that David established “stringed music” (רִנְיָוִי) before the altar and “sweet melody” (רִנְיָוִי), might well depend on the traditional superscriptions to the Psalms, many of which contain these terms. The Hebrew is not extant in v. 10a, b, but the Greek makes clear that Ben Sira at least was familiar with the tradition found in 1 Chronicles 23 that David organized the priestly services in the Temple, a task he could accomplish because of the peace his military campaigns had achieved. These verses resume the emphasis on Temple worship that Ben Sira established at the beginning of the section (v. 2).⁵⁵

Ben Sira ends his praise of David with what appears to be an allusion to the Bathsheba incident: “The Lord forgave his sin.” V. 11b, “He raised up his horn forever,” probably goes with 11c and d, which refers to the promise of dynastic rule that Nathan gave to David in 2 Samuel 7. In fact, 11c, d combine a number of elements from 2 Samuel 7 and Psalm 89, both of which treat the divine establishment of a Davidic dynasty. For the phrase “I lifted up his horn” with respect to David, see Ps 89:18, 25 as well as v. 5. According to Ben Sira, God gave to David אֲרָמֵי כִּוְנָה, “statute of kingship,” a phrase that does not occur in either biblical passage and appears to be Ben Sira’s own articulation of what God promised to David. For the phrase “established (אֲרָמֵי) his throne” in v. 11d, see 2 Samuel 7.⁵⁶

Although not a covenant in 2 Sam 7, God’s promise to David does take the form of a covenant (אֲרָמֵי) in a number of other places. On his deathbed in 2 Sam 23:5, God’s promise becomes a covenant in David’s mouth, and Ps 89:3 and 28 refer to a covenant between God and David. Of course, Ben Sira only mentions a covenant with David in 45:25 at the end of the section on Phinehas, where he employs it as a contrast to the priestly covenant made with Aaron, in effect downplaying the Davidic covenant in favor of the priestly one.⁵⁷ Géza Xeravits has also argued that despite the reference to a covenant with David in 45:25, by not mentioning the covenant in 47:1–11, by qualifying David’s “horn” as eternal in v. 11, and by leaving unqualified the “statute of kingship,” Ben Sira actually does not extend God’s promise of a throne to any succeeding dynasty.⁵⁸

⁵⁴ Skehan and Di Lella, *Wisdom of Ben Sira*, 526.

⁵⁵ Xeravits, “Figure of David,” 32. He (36–38) argues against those who see messianic references in the section on David. I agree with him that arguments in support of messianism here are weak.

⁵⁶ Psalm 89:4 has the verb “establish,” but it refers to David’s descendants: “I will establish (אֲרָמֵי) your descendants forever, and I will build (אֲרָמֵי) your throne.” For a history of interpretation of the promise in 2 Samuel 7, see W.M. Schniedewind, *Society and the Promise to David: The Reception History of 2 Samuel 7:1–17* (New York: Oxford University Press 1999).

⁵⁷ Himmelfarb, “Wisdom of the Scribe,” 96.

⁵⁸ Xeravits, “Figure of David,” 35.

Furthermore, by invoking the promise to David in this last verse, Ben Sira creates a sort of inclusio for the entirety of 47:1–11. In 47:1 the prophet Nathan, who was active in David’s time, introduces the section, and v. 11 highlights Nathan’s two most conspicuous prophetic pronouncements: (1) his confrontation with David about the sin with Bathsheba and his announcement that God had forgiven that sin and (2) his revelation of the promise of monarchical rule in 2 Samuel 7.

In his praise of David, Ben Sira most likely drew from a variety of places in his textual repertoire. He focuses on several central themes: David’s military prowess, his love of God, especially as expressed through his composition of psalms, his impact on the Temple service and his kingship. Yet, by mentioning his kingship only once in these eleven verses, Ben Sira essentially relegates the monarchy to a subsidiary position. David was a beloved figure and the first king, and Ben Sira really cannot get around that. The monarchy, however, presents a bit more of a problem, since there was no king in Ben Sira’s time. Interestingly Ben Sira mentions David twice more (48:15 and 49:4) in connection with his righteous behavior (apparently despite his tryst with Bathsheba), but he does not express any nostalgia for a Davidic monarch. In fact, he seems perfectly content with a high priest who fulfills the role of king.⁵⁹ Indeed, in 49:4 where Ben Sira notes that of all the kings only David, Hezekiah and Josiah were righteous, he also observes, “all of them [i.e. the Davidic kings] were great sinners.” As a result of their abandonment of the Law, God “gave their power (אֲרָמֵי) to another and their glory to a foreign nation,” a transparent reference to the Babylonians who ended the Davidic dynasty. The passage also draws the reader back to the section on David by the use of אֲרָמֵי. David’s “horn” might be raised forever, but that of his descendants was forfeit due to their wickedness.

CONCLUSIONS

As I began to work on the Praise of the Ancestors for this paper, I was not entirely certain of the direction I would take. Because of the three studies that I discussed above, I have thought a lot more about texts, what forms they took and how they functioned and were employed in antiquity. All too often, I know that my modern conceptions of a text have exerted too much influence on how I think about ancient texts. As a result I have often swung the pendulum too far in the direction of being extremely, maybe even overly, suspicious of modern claims that ancient authors had in mind any specific texts. This suspicion was reinforced in my Ph.D. dissertation, however, when I looked at what relation if any the translation of Ben Sira’s grandson had with the Septuagint. In that study I was reacting to Rudolph Smend’s imaginative construction of a translator sitting with text in hand

⁵⁹ For more argumentation, see Wright, “Ben Sira on Kings” and Himmelfarb, “The Wisdom of the Scribe.”

consulting individual passages as they came up, and I found in my work that this picture made no sense for Ben Sira's grandson.⁶⁰

The *Praise of the Ancestors*, and particularly the examples that I have examined in this paper, however, show that Ben Sira certainly knew the Israelite textual tradition extraordinarily well. The specific details of the language and contexts in the *Praise* I think demonstrate that much at least. We cannot, though, attribute every place where our Hebrew texts reflect biblical passages to some later harmonization or corruption. That effort would strain credibility. The passages I have examined here lend credence to a model of ancient learning that suggests that ancient scribes had mastered their textual inheritance, that indeed they were "inscribed on their minds." In his own performance, Ben Sira shows himself to be a gifted oral communicator. Although his teaching became enshrined in a "book" very early (perhaps/probably by Ben Sira himself) since his grandson certainly translated a written version into Greek, the language and forms of his teaching indicate that he most likely delivered it orally. He built his *Praise of the Ancestors* on the foundation of the Israelite textual tradition that he had learned. Yet, he had his own interests, agendas and ideological commitments, and he used those texts that he had mastered as resources for pursuing them. They provided the raw material for his work. However "agnostic" (to use Newsom's term) Ben Sira's relationship was to the "biblical" texts, they dominated his own work at the same time that he strove to co-opt them for his own purposes. And yet, I think with Najman that Ben Sira, were we able to ask, would have seen his book as an "authentic expression" of those texts. His grandson perhaps said it best in the Prologue to his Greek translation when he says that when his grandfather "had acquired considerable proficiency in them [i. e. the Law, the Prophets and the other books], he was himself also led to write something pertaining to instruction and wisdom, so that by becoming familiar also with his book those who love learning might make even greater progress in living according to the law."

Ben Sira certainly participated in a whole range of conversations in his contemporary world, and he taught young men who would go out and be part of that world. Through various devices Ben Sira tried to ensure that his students would accept his values and ideas as their own.⁶¹ Identifying the possible texts he knew constitutes only a preliminary step in any attempt to discover how he performed the texts, and even more importantly to work out how he constructed his own discourse(s) that created the figured world in which he and his students lived and that left a legacy through both his words and his students' lives. How does his use of texts reveal his interests? How does the way he manipulates the language of his texts provide clues to

⁶⁰ R. Smend, *Die Weisheit der Jesus Sirach erklärt* (Berlin: Georg Reimer 1906) LXIII cited in Wright, *No Small Difference*, 120.

⁶¹ For one analysis of how he does this, see B.G. Wright, "From Generation to Generation: The Sage as Father in Early Jewish Literature," in *Biblical Traditions in Transition: Essays in Honour of Michael A. Knibb* (eds. C. Hempel and J.M. Lieu, JSJSup 111, Leiden: Brill 2006) 309-32.

his ideological commitments and concerns? In this paper I have only touched on this fascinating issue, since not only does Ben Sira take interpretive approaches to individual figures, but his understanding of these ancient worthies fits into several larger themes in the *Praise of the Ancestors* and indeed in the book as a whole. Ben Sira was situated at a very significant moment in Judean history, and if we pay close attention to the larger discourse of his book, we find that his use of texts opens one window not only into his own views, but also into the broader concerns of Jews, or at least a particular segment of elite Jews, in the early second century BCE.