Wisdom of Ben Sira: Timelessness in Support of the Temple-State

On the basis of parallels between chs. 1 and 24 on the one hand and chs. 44 and 50 on the other, I concluded in the previous chapter that the Praise of the Fathers describes the men of piety as the recipients of the Wisdom that originated at creation. In addition, the Praise of the Fathers suggests that Simon the High Priest is the most recent representative of those men of piety.

Linking Simon to previous recipients of the Wisdom of creation helps to situate him in several larger historical trajectories. Simon stands in a long line of men of piety, and, in even broader temporal terms, his possession of Wisdom symbolizes the completion of the process of creation itself. Ben Sira also connects him with the tabernacle, the cultic site where itinerant Wisdom first set down roots. Placing Simon and his temple within the context of earlier individuals and institutions that can themselves be traced back to a beginning at creation minimizes the temporal discontinuity of the exile. If the temporal process that began with creation has continued with Simon, then the exile and the Second Temple period did not constitute a new beginning.

I labeled as “timelessness” the conception of temporality that Ben Sira uses to establish continuity between the past and present. The presence of Wisdom in Simon is neither unprecedented, given the earlier line of men of piety, nor surprising, given the affinity between Wisdom and the cult. Something genuinely unprecedented—the conclusion of Wisdom’s wanderings and subsequent flourishing—did not occur until Wisdom initially settled in the tabernacle. As we will see, that did not mark Wisdom’s final resting spot. Instead, the sins of the Judahites force her to resume her travels, and she does not finally settle down again until the time of Simon. So long as she continues wandering, “one temporal cycle may be meaningfully compared to another.” Accordingly, Ben Sira describes the reigns of Aaron, Solomon, and Simon in similar ways. The exile, then, does not represent a rupture in time but rather the resumption of Wisdom’s travels, as she temporarily departs from Jerusalem before returning again. This movement from the nations back to the cult resembles the same process that culminated in the building of the tabernacle. Only then will the process of creation end, a characterization of history that enabled Ben Sira to provide unity to all of Jewish history.

An analysis of the Praise of the Fathers itself, beginning with Enoch and concluding with Simon, will reinforce my contention that Ben Sira seeks to
describe history as timeless. First, however, I must devote some attention to the politics of Ben Sira’s day: what about Ben Sira’s historical context can explain the far-reaching claims that he makes about Simon?

1  The Politics of Second-Century BCE Palestine

Second Temple Palestine operated as a temple-state, with the high priest and his circle possessing ultimate religious and political power.1 Associated with the priestly elite was a class of scribes, men who were economically dependent upon the circle of the high priest but whose expertise also gave them a measure of independence.2 Ben Sira’s praise of Simon suggests that he was one such scribe, ensuring the legacy of the priestly class with whom he was aligned. However, as is clear from the earlier clashes between Ezra and Nehemiah and the priests during the Persian period, the priesthood consisted of numerous factions all vying for power, and these circles, too, were supported by scribal

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2 See Horsley and Tiller, “Ben Sira and the Sociology of the Second Temple,” 85–86, 99–103. Aside from the evidence in Ben Sira for this relationship between the priestly aristocracy and the scribes, Horsley and Tiller, 99, draw attention to the decree of Antiochus III that exempts from taxation the gerousia, priests, and scribes. It should be noted that that document does not address the high priest himself, a fact that led Bickerman, “Charte séleucide,” 32, to downplay his authority. However, James C. VanderKam, *From Joshua to Caiaphas: High Priests After the Exile* (Minneapolis, Minn.: Fortress, 2004), 188, observes that, because the official practice was not to address the high priest, “we should not draw large consequences from it regarding the ruling authority in Judea at the time.” The political authority enjoyed by the circles of the high priest helps explain the puzzling relationship between wisdom, which traditionally had been associated with the palace, and temple. The high priest, in his capacity as political leader, supported the scribal class, which had formerly depended upon the patronage of the king. On the relationship between the scribe and the royal court, see R. N. Whybray, “The Sage in the Israelite Royal Court,” in *The Sage in Israel and the Ancient Near East* (ed. John G. Gammie and Leo G. Perdue; Winona Lake, Ind.: Eisenbrauns, 1990), 133–39.