From the early years after the people of Israel returned from exile in Babylon to the land of their forefathers, the conduct of the priesthood that served in the Temple constituted the principal reason for the dissatisfaction of some Jews with the worship of God in Jerusalem, and it became a lightning rod for criticism. Upon his return to Palestine, for example, the scribe Ezra in the fifth century BCE found that the priests and the Levites, as well as ordinary Israelites, had married foreign women, and stopping this practice became one of the cornerstones of his religious reforms (Ezra 9–10). The post-exilic prophet known as Malachi excoriated the priests for offering defective animals as sacrifices in the Temple cult (Mal 1:6–14). He further indicted them for divorcing their wives and producing polluted offspring with other women (2:13–16).¹

In the turbulent political world of the late third to early second century BCE, it should not be a surprise to see that the priesthood and thus the Temple are still seen by some as corrupt institutions that God would punish or replace. The discovery and publication of the literature of the Qumran yahad brought into bold relief a group that rejected the Jerusalem priesthood.² But already for several decades before the


² On the origins of the Qumran community and its relationship with the priests in Jerusalem, see J.C. VanderKam, The Dead Sea Scrolls Today (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans,
Maccabean Revolt, prior to the composition of the sectarian literature from Qumran, there was a lively, oftentimes acrimonious, war of words being waged in Palestine over the legitimacy of the Jerusalem priesthood. Some of the critical voices from this period, like the anonymous authors/compilers of The Book of the Watchers (1 Enoch 6–36), the Astronomical Book (1 Enoch 72–82) and the Aramaic Levi Document, have been identified and their criticisms outlined by scholars. Other Jews, however, did not see the priesthood in such a negative light, but, in fact, believed that God's approbation rested on those who served in the Jerusalem Temple.

In the early second century BCE, perhaps the most prominent of those who supported the Jerusalem priests was a Jerusalemite named Jesus ben Eleazar ben Sira. Indeed, many scholars of the Wisdom of Jesus ben Sira have commented on his positive valuation of the Jerusalem priests and cult. One scholar, H. Stadelmann, has tried to make the case that Ben Sira was himself a priest. In this paper, however, I want to go another step. I believe that a case can be made on the basis of certain pieces of circumstantial evidence, that Ben Sira's positive view of the Jerusalem priesthood did not take shape in an ideological vacuum, but that he was deeply engaged in that ongoing war of words as one who actively took the side of the Temple priests in polemical opposition against those who criticized them.

The argument of this paper is that Ben Sira was aware of and intended some passages to respond polemically to complaints that had been lodged against the Jerusalem priestly establishment and those who sup-

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4 See, for example, T. Maertens, L’ éloge des pères (Ecclesiastique XLIV–L) (Bruges: Abbaye de Saint-André, 1956) 121, 156; G. Maier, Mensch und freier Wille: Nach der jüdischen Religionsparteien zwischen Ben Sira und Paulus (WUNT 12; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1971) 52–4.