1 Introduction

The past decades have seen an immense progress in the study of the book of Ben Sira, which has been amply documented in an avalanche of overviews, dictionaries, congress volumes, Festschriften, and doctoral theses, as listed in the appendix to this article. It is impossible, therefore, even to try to present here an overall view of all those recent publications and their specific topics.

Just one general remark, however, is in order here. The discovery of fragments of a Hebrew Ben Sira scroll at Masada in 1964 by Yigael Yadin,1 the publication of these fragments,2 as well as the publication of the great Psalms Scroll from Qumran Cave 11, containing parts of the Hebrew text of Sir. 51:13–30, were crucial landmarks in the study of the book of Ben Sira.3

The Ben Sira texts from Masada and Qumran provide conclusive evidence that the Hebrew text of the mediaeval Ben Sira manuscripts, which had been discovered in the Cairo Genizah in 1896 and later on in a number of libraries, reflects to a high degree Second Temple forms of the text. As a result, it was no longer necessary to spend nearly all research time to defend the reliability of the Hebrew Ben Sira manuscripts.

As a result, from the mid-sixties of the twentieth century onwards, a major shift in the study of the book of Ben Sira took place. Text critical problems no longer monopolized the conversation; scholarly research shifted towards theological and literary topics. The first substantial fruits of this ‘theological turnover’ were Josef Haspecker’s dissertation and Johann Marböck’s Habilitationsschrift.4 Since then, a continuous current of literary, historical, theological, and sociological studies were brought to the fore.

This paper will pay attention to a couple of notions that have a *theological* impact, have amply been discussed in the past and for some reason have recently been discussed anew. It concerns the topics of (1) Ben Sira and priesthood and (2) Ben Sira’s correlation of Wisdom and Torah.

2 Ben Sira and Priesthood

Without a shadow of doubt, even a cursory reading of the book of Ben Sira brings to light ‘the author’s outspoken enthusiasm regarding the Jerusalem priesthood and the Temple cult’. In particular, passages such as Sir. 7:29–31 (‘Fear God, revere his priests’), Sir. 34:21–35:12 (the offering of sacrifices), Sir. 45:6–25 (Aaron and Phinehas), and Sir. 50:1–24 (Simon, the High Priest) are solid evidence to substantiate this view. ‘It is obvious that Ben Sira held the priesthood and the cult in very high esteem. In the hymn of the fathers a disproportionate amount of space is devoted to the priesthood in the person of Aaron and Phinehas and… the tribute to Simon is perhaps the most glowing piece of all’.

The question of why Ben Sira was focused in such a way on priesthood and cult has triggered a vivid debate that has already been going on for a long time. It is all about the issue of whether Ben Sira was a priest himself or not. As a matter of fact, an early hint is already found in the colophon of the Greek translation of the book of Ben Sira. Whereas the majority of manuscripts in Sir. 50:27 have the rendering ‘Jesus, son of Sirach Eleazar, the one from Jerusalem’ (ὁ Ιεροσολυμίτης), in Codex Sinaiticus (prima manus) we find ἱερεύς ὁ σολυμειτης.8

Among the advocates that Ben Sira was a priest are, for instance, Gerhard Maier, John Sawyer, Burton Mack, Helge Stadelmann, and Saul Olyan.9 Other

---

8 For the rather complicated and divergent versions of this colophon, see F.V. Reiterer et al., *Bibliographie zu Ben Sira* (BZAW, 266), Berlin 1998, 1–10.