The Wisdom of the Nations and the Law of Israel: 
Genealogies of Ethnic Difference in Ben Sira and 
the Mekhilta

Joshua Ezra Burns

It is my honor to offer this essay in tribute to John Collins. Once as my teacher 
and now as my colleague and professional mentor, John has been an unfailing 
source of inspiration and support. Words fail to express my admiration for a 
man whose knowledge and erudition are exceeded only by his dedication to 
his students. To say that the lessons I learned under Professor Collins’s tutelage 
come back to me each time I stand before my own students is no exaggeration. 
I therefore can think of no better way to show my gratitude than to engage his 
work on classical Jewish wisdom literature, which was the subject of the very 
first course I took with John upon commencing my graduate studies at Yale.

Of principal interest to my investigation is a much-studied passage in Sir 24 
addressing the source of Israel’s wisdom. Ben Sira’s account of how the Jews 
came to attain their intellectual quotient is widely assumed in contemporary 
scholarship to speak to the inalienable ethnic bias of a Hellenized Jew other-
wise quite receptive to cultural exchange with people of other nationalities. 
My purpose in this essay is to place that assessment of Ben Sira’s sapiential 
reasoning in dialogue with a classical rabbinic exegetical narrative offering 
a corresponding account of how the Jews came to possess the Torah. I shall 
argue that Ben Sira and the author of the rabbinic legend, though speaking of 
different revelatory events, shared a common sensibility as to the basis of the 
distinction between Israel and the nations inscribed in the Hebrew Scriptures. 
I thereby aim to contextualize Ben Sira’s seemingly regressive sense of Israel’s 
unique genius within an incipient Jewish discourse of ethnic difference.

1 Ben Sira on the Wisdom of Israel (Sir 24:1–12)

The passage in Sirach of interest here appears in a chapter widely seen as the 
focal point of a book otherwise lacking for obvious organizational coherence. 
Appearing just about midway through Ben Sira’s collection of abstract ethi-
cal advices is a paean to wisdom more elaborate than any other in a treatise 
steeped in sapiential language. Its remarkable content and central place-
ment in his treatise suggest that Ben Sira intended the poem to function as
sometime of a programmatic statement of what he believed was the single, unimpeachable source of his and all the world’s wisdom.\(^1\) The pertinent verses read as follows:

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\begin{align*}
24:1 & \text{ Wisdom will praise her soul, and in the midst of her people she will boast.} \\
24:2 & \text{ In an assembly of the Most High she will open her mouth, and before his power she will boast.} \\
24:3 & \text{ “I came forth from the mouth of the Most High, and like a mist I covered earth.} \\
24:4 & \text{ I encamped in the heights, and my throne was in a pillar of cloud.} \\
24:5 & \text{ A circle of sky I encircled alone, and in the deep of abysses I walked.} \\
24:6 & \text{ In the waves of the sea and in all the earth and in every people and nation I led.} \\
24:7 & \text{ With all these I sought repose, and in whose inheritance I would settle.} \\
24:8 & \text{ Then the creator of all commanded me, and he who created me put down my tent and said, ‘Encamp in Jacob, and in Israel let your inheritance be.’} \\
24:9 & \text{ Before the age, from the beginning, he created me, and until the age I will never fail.} \\
24:10 & \text{ In a holy tent I ministered before him, and thus in Zion I was firmly set.} \\
24:11 & \text{ In a beloved city as well he put me down, and in Jerusalem was my authority.} \\
24:12 & \text{ And I took root among a glorified people, in the portion of the Lord is my inheritance.} \(^2\)
\end{align*}
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\(^{2}\) Adapted from the translation of Benjamin G. Wright in *A New English Translation of the Septuagint* (ed. Albert Pietersma and Benjamin G. Wright; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 738–39. I use the Greek text for lack of surviving witnesses to the original Hebrew of chapter 24. All subsequent quotations from Sirach will follow Wright’s edition of the Greek text except in reference to the Hebrew manuscripts.