Marko Marttila


The title of this study says much about Marttila’s understanding of Ben Sira—that the sage’s assessment of foreign nations reveals something about his relationship to Hellenistic culture. Specifically, M. argues, Ben Sira is much more favorable to foreign nations than previous scholars (in the interests of full disclosure, me being one) have thought, and this attitude reveals his middle position with respect to Hellenism. He adapts rather than opposes or assimilates. M. examines several major passages (Sirach 17, 24, 36, 44-50) along with a number of minor ones that in his view reveal Ben Sira’s attitude toward foreign nations, concluding in each case that Ben Sira had a “neutral” (232) at worst or “favourable” (228) at best attitude toward them. In the interests of space, I will focus on two methodological issues that affect M.’s case.

In his introductory chapter, M. reviews prior scholarship, and here some methodological confusion begins. He initially presents the issue in terms of Ben Sira’s acceptance of or opposition to Hellenism, which he sees as primarily a matter of culture. He presents the possible reactions to Hellenistic culture as “isolation, assimilation or adaptation” (31). For M., “Ben Sira is a representative of the middle way” (31). Yet, M. explicitly distances himself from this debate by saying that he will not treat Ben Sira’s relation to Hellenism but rather the sage’s attitude toward foreign nations “on a wider scale” (32). These categories do not remain separate throughout his study, however. So, when discussing the three nations whom Ben Sira condemns in 50:25-26, he reverts to the language of culture: “It was easier for Ben Sira to accept the influences of Hellenistic wisdom and civilization and understand the value of other nations on a general level, but obviously the three neighbours posed the greatest threat concerning the practice of religion” (213). In his final paragraph he returns again to cultural concerns: “To sum up, Ben Sira did not live between two cultures…but he was deeply rooted in Judaism. This does not, however, mean that Ben Sira was hostile towards Hellenism. The case was rather vice versa, Ben Sira seems to have been quite open toward foreign influences…” (232). M. seems to conflate Ben Sira’s willingness to adapt to Hellenistic cultural influences and his attitude toward foreign nations more generally. Although this overlap of categories remains largely submerged, I think it pushes M.’s readings of Ben Sira in a more positive direction than is warranted with respect to the nations.

A good example is M.’s analysis of Sir 36:1-22. While he makes a good argument that this prayer was not a later insertion into the book, he reads 36:5—
“They will know, just as we know, that there is no God beside you”—more positively than the verse’s context allows. He argues that 36:5 leaves the door open for foreign nations to abandon idolatry and worship Yahweh; here divine punishment is education. Taken on its own, one might read the text as M. does. Yet, the following verses invoke the Exodus narrative, and they employ imperatives that request God to “give new signs and work new wonders… rouse your anger and pour out your wrath; subdue an adversary and drive away an enemy.” In Exodus, God reveals God’s might so that the Egyptians would know who God is (cf. Exod 14:18). Yet, they are nonetheless destroyed in the sea. Sirach 36:5 does not imply education for the nations; it is part of an Exodus motif that results in divine defeat of them.

This leads to a second methodological issue. M. pictures Ben Sira in most places as drawing on specific passages from Hebrew scripture, claiming that Ben Sira “knew his Bible” (59). Once a text has been identified, it becomes the exegetical lens through which Ben Sira is interpreted. As M. writes: “[T]he biblical background is the most important source for understanding Ben Sira’s teachings” (232). Perhaps the most critical passage is Deut 4:5-8, which claims that Israel’s wisdom and understanding will attract the nations. In the two places that M. invokes this passage, he assumes rather than demonstrates its influence, even though he explicitly makes it a centerpiece of his main argument (100). In his discussion of Sirach 17, he contends that Ben Sira “deliberately endeavors to erase the border between Israel and other nations,” suggesting that “[p]erhaps, Ben Sira was at this point affected by Deut 4:5-8 which is the only passage in Deuteronomy where the foreign nations admire how wise and perceptive the people of Israel are” (58). The argument gets somewhat circular, since M. moves from arguing that Sirach 17 is throughout about the nations and positive toward them (a point of considerable scholarly debate) and that Deut 4:5-8 “perhaps” affected the passage to using Deut 4:5-8 as an analytical tool for discovering Ben Sira’s positive attitude. He also sees in Deuteronomy 4 a “synthesis” of wisdom and law that undergirds Ben Sira’s claims in chapter 24. For M., Deuteronomy 4 “has obviously affected Ben Sira” (98), arguing, based on Wisdom’s residence in Jerusalem, that for Ben Sira Israel was “a wise and perceptive people” (100). Yet, in light of the centrality of this passage for his argument, he does not show convincingly how these verses, other than in their general contours and in Ben Sira’s likely knowledge of Deuteronomy as a whole, lie at the heart of Ben Sira’s attitude toward foreign nations.

These select examples illustrate the difficulties M. has in making his case. While I agree with him on any number of points, especially on the authenticity of chapter 36, I am not persuaded by his overall thesis. I completely concur