At first glance, Sirach\(^1\) appears to be a random collection of wisdom sayings coupled with a few hymns (the most notable of which is the “Praise of the Ancestors” in chaps. 44–50). This cursory reading is likely based on the affinities it has with Proverbs both in form and content, but unlike Proverbs, the purpose of Sirach is much more evident, largely due to a greater knowledge of Ben Sira’s social setting.\(^2\) Scholars generally agree that Ben Sira is responding to the influence of Hellenistic philosophy by attempting to show that true wisdom lies in Jerusalem, not in Athens.\(^3\) Yet Ben Sira is not simply championing Israelite wisdom. Greek influence and the continued presence of the Gentile ruler likely caused many to question the efficacy of traditional Israelite religion, especially fidelity to Torah, the temple, and the

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* Special thanks to Dr. Mark Hamilton for the countless hours he dedicated to helping me improve this article as well as recommending it to this publication. He is a great mentor and friend and an excellent example of one who lives out the connection between the fear of the Lord and wisdom (1:11–20). Any errors in this article are thus due to my own shortcomings and are no fault of his.

\(^1\) To avoid confusion, this paper uses “Sirach” in reference to the work itself and “Ben Sira” in reference to its author.

\(^2\) It is generally agreed that Ben Sira composed his work ca. 180 B.C.E. This is based upon Ben Sira’s possible eyewitness account of the high priest, Simeon II (219–226 B.C.E.) in 50:1–21, the lack of mention of problems that arose in Palestine with the advent of Antiochus IV Epiphanes (175 B.C.E.), and the date of the prologue to the Greek translation of Sirach by Ben Sira’s grandson (132 B.C.E.).

priesthood. The purpose of this paper is to show that Ben Sira attempts to answer these objections through an imaginative theodicy that stresses God's sovereignty over the Gentile ruler and assures peace through fidelity to the Aaronide priesthood, especially the lineage of Simeon. He accomplishes the latter by depicting the Aaronide priesthood with royal attributes, especially aspects of the Davidic covenant, and Simeon's service at the temple as not only the embodiment of wisdom and the cosmos but as the culmination of all of Israel's history. Thus using traditional wisdom as well as Scripture, Ben Sira attempts to preserve Israelite religion and culture as he understood it.

God's Sovereignty over the Gentile Ruler

God's sovereignty is an important theme in Ben Sira. For example, in 1:8, he declares that God is the only one who is "wise," "greatly to be feared," and "seated upon [the] throne," and in 50:15, he avers that God is "the king of all." Furthermore, this key theme interrelates to the problem of the Gentile ruler, who also claimed divine sovereignty. This article will examine two places in Sirach where Ben Sira explores the relationship between God and the Gentile ruler: (1) passages that mention the ruler and (2) passages that mention "the nations."

Sirach 10:1-11:6

Sirach 10:1-11:6 may simply be Ben Sira's ideal depiction of kingship (vv. 1-5) followed by many truisms about the connection between pride and the downfall of a ruler (10:6-18; 11:1-6). Nevertheless, there are several places in this passage in which Ben Sira stresses God's superiority over the Gentile ruler. For example, in verses 4-5 in MS A, Ben Sira claims that the "dominion of the earth" and over "every human" is "in the hand of the God" and that Yahweh not only "raises up the right leader for the time" but "places [God's] majesty upon [lit., before] the lawgiver." Thus the success of kingship is dependent upon Yahweh (vv. 4-5). Though this may simply be a truism of traditional Israelite wisdom, it could also have served to combat the Ptolemaic

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4 Unless otherwise noted, all citations are the author's translation.
5 John G. Snaith, Ecclesiasticus or The Wisdom of Jesus Son of Sirach (CBC; Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1974), 53-58.
6 About two-thirds (or 68 percent) of Sirach is extant in Hebrew MSS. There are six Hebrew MSS of Ben Sira from the tenth to twelfth century C.E. that come mostly from the Cairo Synagoge Geniza (a storeroom for worn-out or discarded MSS) classified as A–F; one from Masada from the early first century B.C.E.; and two from Qumran, one from the first century B.C.E. and the other from the first century C.E. Out of these, the two longest are MSS A and B. Thus most references to the Hebrew text of Sirach come from them. Nevertheless, in spite of the late date for these MSS, MS B, especially its marginal readings, is very close to the Masada MS. For these MSS in Hebrew, cf. Pancratius C. Beentjes, The Book of Ben Sira in Hebrew: A Text Edition of All Extant Hebrew Manuscripts and a Synopsis of All Parallel Hebrew Ben Sira Texts (VTSup 68; Atlanta: SBL, 2006). Also, for an overview of the textual history of Ben Sira, see Skehan and Di Lella, Ben Sira, 51-60.
and Seleucid claim of deity prevalent in Ben Sira’s time period by reminding Israel that there was only one being who truly could claim divinity: Yahweh. Ben Sira further reminds his audience that historically God has overthrown prideful rulers (e.g., Nebuchad-nezzar; Dan 4:28-33) and nations and replaced them with the lowly and the humble (10:14-18; 11:5-6), which may be a not so subtle reminder that Yahweh will do so again to the current Gentile ruler.  

By accentuating God’s sovereignty over the nations, Ben Sira relativizes the power of the Gentile ruler as well by reminding his readers of the fleeting nature of kingship. Some of these references would have been especially poignant because of recent historical events that confirmed their truthfulness. For example, his reference in verse 8 to the passing of sovereignty from nation to nation could recall the passing of Palestine from the Ptolemies to the Seleucids in the battles of Raphia (217 B.C.E.) and Panium (198 B.C.E.), and the mention of death and illness coming upon kings in verses 9-11 could recall the tragic death of Ptolemy IV (203 B.C.E.).  

Thus it is easy to see why Ben Sira needed to stress God’s sovereignty and divine providence in the beginning of what would soon be an extremely tumultuous time for Judea.  

17:17

Sirach 17:17 is another declaration of divine sovereignty and providence, but it also highlights the election of Israel: “He has appointed a ruler for every nation, but Israel is the Lord’s portion.” This verse has been interpreted two primary ways: (1) Other nations have secular rulers, but Israel has God as its sovereign, or (2) pagan nations have angels over them to act as God’s intermediary whereas Israel has immediate access to God because it is Yahweh’s portion. The first interpretation takes up the ideal view of kingship asserted by the Deuteronomist as seen, for example, in Samuel, who bemoans Israel’s request for a ruler because an earthly king usurps God’s rightful role as its sovereign (1 Sam 8:4-9). The second interpretation reflects LXX Deut 32:8-9, which states that, when the Most High divided the nations and scattered humanity, God also established boundaries “according to the number of the angels of God.” This is different from the MT, which reads “sons of Israel” and implies, similar to Dan 10:13-19, that each nation has its own guardian angel. Nevertheless, Deut 32:9’s declaration that the Lord’s portion and allotted inheritance are Israel suggests, unlike Dan 10:13-19, that Israel does not need an angel because the Lord is its intermediary and protector.  

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7 Benjamin G. Wright III, “‘Put the Nations in Fear of You’: Ben Sira and the Problem of Foreign Rule,” in SBL Seminar Papers, 1999 (SBLSP 38; Atlanta: SBL, 1999), 82.

8 Skehan and Di Lella, Ben Sira, 224.

9 Skehan and Di Lella, Ben Sira, 283. The former is preferred by Snaith, Ecclesiasticus, 89, and Wright, “‘Put the Nations in Fear of You,’” 82-83, and the latter by Oesterley, Sirach, 118, and Crenshaw, “The Book of Sirach,” in NIBCOT, 730.

10 Even more fascinating, Qumran MSS 4QDj reads “sons of God.” J. A. Duncan, DJD XIV, 90, col. XII.
Although verbal parallels between Sir 17:17 and LXX Deut 32:8–9 make it possible that Ben Sira has the latter in mind, he does not seem to be overly concerned with angels and the interworking of the spiritual realm unlike the author(s) of Dan 7–12 and 1 Enoch. The only mention of angels in Sirach is in Hezekiah’s eulogy in the “Praise of the Ancestors” that recalls the destruction of the Assyrian army by the angel of the Lord (48:21). Furthermore, in his treatment on Enoch (assuming it is original to Ben Sira), where one would expect for him to mention angels and the spiritual realm, he does nothing of the sort. Instead, he simply recalls Enoch’s uniqueness, repentance, and assumption (44:16; 49:14). Thus internal evidence does not support the second interpretation.

On the other hand, the first interpretation picks up the idea of God’s sovereignty, which is a key theme in the book. Furthermore, Ben Sira’s contention that God appointed rulers for other nations but kept Israel for Godself appears not only to highlight the election of Israel but also to limit the sovereignty of the Gentile ruler by stressing that God is the true sovereign of Israel. Though it is true that God can claim sovereignty over Israel while allowing a Gentile ruler to govern the nation as well (e.g. Isa 44–45), other passages that accentuate divine judgment on the Gentiles (cf. 35:22–36:22 and 39:23 below) demonstrate that this viewpoint was not acceptable to Ben Sira. Thus it is likely that Sir 17:17 extends the Deuteronomist’s conception of Israelite kingship as seen in 1 Sam 8:4–9 (also cf. Deut 17:14–20) to Gentile rule of Israel; that is, the Gentile ruler is usurping God’s authority as Israel’s sovereign.11

35:22–36:22

The theme of God’s sovereignty over the Gentile ruler is especially evident in passages that stress divine judgment on the Gentiles. The strongest of these passages is 35:22–36:22. Ben Sira introduces this passage with a section about God’s punishment on the oppressors of the poor in response to the latter’s prayers (35:14–21). This serves as a foil for God’s punishment upon the unmerciful Gentiles who oppress Israel (35:22–26) as well as an introduction to Ben Sira’s own prayer for justice and retribution (36:1–22). In his prayer, Ben Sira beseeches God to demonstrate divine glory through “new sign(s) [and] wonder(s)” (36:4). Thus he apparently desires that God reenact the plague component of the exodus event upon the Gentile ruler.12 Especially poignant are the phrases “Save us, O God of all, and put your fear upon all the nations” (36:1); “Hasten the end and recall the appointed time” (36:10); and “Put an end to the head of the hostile rulers [lit., “temples of Moab”] who say, ‘There is no one but myself’” (36:12).13 The theme of God’s punishment of

11 Wright, “‘Put the Nations in Fear of You,’” 82–83.
12 Ibid., 84. The phrase “signs and wonders” is often used in conjunction with the Exodus event. Cf. Exod 7:3; Deut 4:34; 6:22; 7:19; 26:8; 29:2; 34:11; Neh 9:10; Jer 32:20; Pss 78:43; 105:27; 135:9.
13 Crushing the “temples of Moab” is an allusion to Num 24:17 and generally
the nations is pervasive throughout the OT (e.g., Pss 9:19–20; 45:5; 59:5; 79:6; 106:47; Jer 10:25; Ezek 39:21; Zeph 3:8), often in conjunction with the promised deliverer (Isa 11:10–12; Jer 30:9–11; Amos 9:11–12; Zech 12:7–9). Like many of these passages, Ben Sira calls on God to act in judgment upon Israel's enemies. Furthermore, Ben Sira connects these events to "visions spoken in [God's] name" and to the trustworthiness of God's prophets (vv. 20–21). Thus he combines the election of Israel and the relativization of the Gentile ruler with psalms and prophecies in order to convey his desire for God to intervene directly into the affairs of Judea, all of which serve not only as a reminder to God of the divine possession of sovereignty but also as a plea for Yahweh to reassert that sovereignty through the liberation of Israel.

39:23

The theme of divine judgment against the nations continues in Sir 39:23. This passage says that God's wrath "drives out the nations [as when] he turned a well watered land into salt." Though at first glance this sounds like a reference to Sodom and Gomorrah (cf. Deut 29:23), others contend that it is a reference to the expulsion of the Canaanites because of the connection between Sodom and Gomorrah and this event in 16:8–9.14 Regardless of which metaphor Ben Sira had in mind, it is clear, in light of the passages mentioned above, that this is a reference to the divine destruction of the Gentiles.15

Summary

It is evident, therefore, that although Ben Sira does not approve of Gentile rule, he ultimately trusts in the sovereignty of God, whom he believes and hopes will relieve Judea from foreign rule. It is true that his assessment is not as extreme as others who were his close contemporaries (e.g., 1–2 Macc, Dan 7–12, and possibly 1 Enoch 6–11; 85:59–90:27). Yet this is more likely due to the rise of Antiochus IV Epiphanes and the events leading to the Maccabean revolt, which Ben Sira certainly did not witness, rather than his lesser concern for Gentile rule. Furthermore, Ben Sira's assessment differs greatly from more congenial depictions of Gentile rule witnessed in earlier Jewish Hellenistic literature.16 Thus it is appropriate to consider Ben Sira's negative depiction of this institution as well as his accentuation of God's sovereignty over it as paving the way for more caustic critiques of Gentile rule in later Hellenistic literature and beyond.

understood as a metaphor for "hostile rulers." Cf. LXX; HALOT 554; and Skehan and Di Lella, Ben Sira, 416.

14 Skehan and Di Lella, Ben Sira, 459.

15 Wright, "'Put the Nations in Fear of You,'" 85.

16 Most of the texts from the early Hellenistic period celebrated the Gentile ruler (who was usually either Alexander or one of the Ptolemies) and showed his eventual congeniality toward, and oftentimes exaltation of, Judaism. Cf. Gruen, Heritage and Hellenism, 189–245.
Fidelity to the Aaronides and Simeon

Though only a few verses specifically mention the priests, they are extremely important to Ben Sira. We will examine these passages as well as his ideal depiction of the Aaronide priesthood, especially Simeon's temple service, in the "Praise of the Ancestors." I will also demonstrate that Ben Sira extends his disapproval of Gentile kingship to Davidic kingship in this hymn, allowing him to exalt the Aaronide temple state, especially the rule of the high priest as embodied most dramatically in Simeon.

7:29-31

Ben Sira’s exhortation of fidelity to the priesthood in 7:29-31 is one of the strongest in the book. MS A reads:

With all your heart, fear God and regard [God’s] priests as holy. With all your strength love your Maker and do not forsake [God’s] ministers. Give glory to God and honor the priests, and give their portion just as you are commanded.

As many have noted, the phrases “love” (1ΠΚ), “with all your heart” (*p!?), and “with all your strength” (*pìN>3 ΠΚ) also occur in the Shema (Deut 6:5), but Sir 7:29-31 reworks the Shema’s implications. This is made evident by its parallelism. Reverence for God is synonymous with reverence for the priests. Thus one fulfills the Shema by honoring the priests. Furthermore, the reworking of this tradition to include the priests shows how significant the priesthood, the cult, and fidelity to this institution were to Ben Sira.

10:1-3

Though Sir 10:1-11:6 partially serves as a critique of Gentile rule, there is also reason to see in the beginning of this passage a reference to the priesthood. Sirach 10:1, in MS A, states, “The judge of a people is the instructor of his people and the dominion of those who have understanding is well ordered.” This description appears to equate the ideal ruler with a sage, an equation that is well attested in Jewish tradition (cf. 1 Kgs 3; Prov 8:15-16; Wis 6:9, 21; 7-10; Let. Aris. 187-292; Pss. Sol. 17:35-37) as well as some parts of Sirach (cf. 38:33). Likewise, understanding is parallel to wisdom, which is a characteristic of scribes/sages (cf. 38:24; 39:12), and in 24:10-12, wisdom not only dwells in Jerusalem, but it also ministers before God at the temple, thus acting as a priest. Therefore, this connection between wisdom and the priests and the fact that the high priest served as a de facto ruler in

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18 Olyan, “Ben Sira’s Relationship to the Priesthood,” 266; Wright, “Fear the Lord and Honor the Priests,” 193; Wright, “Putting the Puzzle Together,” 106.
Ben Sira's Judea suggests that his description of the ideal ruler in 10:1-3 also describes his ideals for the high priesthood.

Sirach 10:2-3 continues Ben Sira's depiction of his ideal ruler by connecting the fate of the city and wisdom of its ruler. These verses in MS A state, "As the people's judge is, so are his officials, and as the head of a city is, so are its inhabitants. An undisciplined [lit., one who lets his hair down] king will destroy a city, but a city becomes inhabitable through the insight of its prince." This association between the fate of the city and the wisdom of the ruler may furthermore be related to two other themes throughout Ben Sira: (1) the connection between wisdom and observing Torah (e.g., 1:25-26; 24:23) and (2) the correlation between infidelity and the destruction of Jerusalem that Ben Sira undoubtedly borrowed from the Deuteronomistic History and Jeremiah (cf. 49:4-7; 2 Kgs 23:25-27; Jer 1:10; 37:11-39:18). Furthermore, studying and teaching Torah is not only the responsibility of a sage (e.g., 38:34), already demonstrated as a key role of Ben Sira's ideal ruler, but also that of the high priest (cf. 45:5, 17), who is the true ruler of Judea in Ben Sira's depiction of Israelite history (see below). Therefore, it seems feasible to suggest that Ben Sira's ideal ruler is not simply a sage but a high priest who keeps Torah and by doing so preserves the tranquility of the city. Nevertheless, Ben Sira must show how his ideal ruler and suggestion for upholding peace throughout Israel should be his reader's as well. This he will demonstrate through the "Praise of the Ancestors."

44:1-50:24

Ben Sira personifies and magnifies his ideal depiction of the priesthood in the "Praise of the Ancestors." He does this predominately through his description of Aaron, Phinehas, and Simeon and his relativization of kingship.

Aaron. Aaron is one of the most important persons in Israelite history for Ben Sira. In his "Praise of the Ancestors," he gives greater amount of attention to Aaron (45:6-22) than to Moses (44:23-45:5) and praises no other person, save Simeon (50:1-21), as much as Aaron. Though he describes both Aaron and Moses as holy men, Levites, and teachers of Jacob, only Aaron is given the priesthood (45:6-7), and even more so, he adorns Aaron with royal characteristics. A glorious description of Aaron's priestly garments ends with God's adorning him with a golden crown (v. 12). The only parallels to this phenomenon in the OT are Ps 21:4[3], where God places the crown upon the king, and Ps 8:6[5], where God crowns humanity as ruler over the world. Likewise, Ben Sira describes the eternal covenant that God established with Aaron (v. 15) as lasting "as long as the heavens endure [lit., 'as the days of heaven']." This phrase comes from Ps 89:30[29], which originally referred to

19 Cf. the description of the high priest by Hecataeus of Abdera (quoted in Diodorus of Sicily 40.3, 5-6) and Let. Aris. 33-40, 51-82, 96b-99.
20 Skehan and Di Lella, Ben Sira, 223.
God's promise to David. Thus with Aaron, Ben Sira establishes a precedence of assigning royal attributes to the high priest.21

Phineas. This precedence carries over to the description of Phinehas. Because of his zeal, Sir 45:24 in MS B states, "a prescription was established for him, a covenant of peace, that he might sustain the sanctuary, that he and his descendants might have the majesty of the priesthood forever." This verse suggests that he is the legitimate successor of the high priest (Num 25:1-15; Ps 106:28-31; 1 Macc 2:54) but the wording of the LXX, "to be benefactor of the sanctuary and of his people," also suggests that he is a political leader as well, not only because the LXX adds the phrase "and of his people" but also because the word the LXX uses for "benefactor" (προστάτως) is a word used in Greek sources to convey the political power of the high priest. For example, Hecataeus of Abdera (quoted in Diodorus of Sicily 40.3-5) uses the noun form of προστάτως when he contends that Moses ordained for Israel not to have a king but for the high priest always to have authority (προστάτης) over the people.22

Furthermore, Ben Sira makes more explicit the connection between the Davidic covenant and the high priest. Not only are Phinehas and his descendants given the majesty of the priesthood, but verse 25 in MS B says they are also given "[God's] covenant with David, the son of Jesse of the tribe of Judah." This differs greatly from the LXX, which appears to be a comparison between the logistics of Davidic and Aaronide succession. Rather, the Hebrew asserts that God has transferred the Davidic covenant to the high priests, an act which at some level justifies the political reality that the high priest governed Judah during much of the Persian and Hellenistic periods.

Simeon. Simeon's eulogy is the largest section in the "Praise of the Ancestors." The terminology that Ben Sira uses in his praise of Simeon's work projects (50:1-4) parallels his description of Hezekiah's reform (48:17-22). Like Hezekiah, Simeon "fortifies the city" (48:17; 50:1, 4), builds a "reservoir" (48:17; 50:2), and protects the city against an enemy (48:18-24; 50:4).23 Additionally, Simeon repairs and expands the temple. Thus Ben Sira


22 The Letter of Aristeas 82 uses this phrase to describe the high priest as well. Furthermore, in the Tobiad romance, Josephus calls Joseph Tobias Israel's προστάτης (cf. Antiq. 12.161, 163, 167). Since Oniad II (Simeon II's predecessor) was the high priest during this time, James C. VanderKam (From Joshua to Caiphas: High Priests after the Exile [Philadelphia: Fortress, 2004], 181) suggests that Oniad II gave the political aspect of the high priesthood to Joseph.

appears deliberately to connect these two figures, thus continuing his assignment of royal attributes to the high priesthood. This theme is further explicated by Ben Sira’s regal description of Simeon (50:5-11), which is reminiscent of the description of Aaron (45:7-13). It is also evident in the majestic aura surrounding the ceremony he performs (50:12-21), at which everyone bows down before him (50:20-21). Moreover, it is distinguished by the continuation of God’s covenant with Phinehas through Simeon in a benediction (50:23-24) in MS B that ends with the words “as long as the heavens endure,” the same description Ben Sira gives to God’s eternal covenant with Aaron (45:15). Furthermore, both Simeon’s and Phinehas’s benedictions promise to bring peace and prosperity to Israel (cf. 45:26 and 50:23-24 in MS B).

Simeon’s service at the temple also embodies wisdom and the cosmos. The former is seen in the similar depiction between Simeon’s garbs and the description of wisdom in the wisdom hymn in Sir 24 and the praise of the cosmos in Sir 43. Like wisdom, Ben Sira compares Simeon to “roses” (cf. 24:14; 50:8), an “olive tree” (cf. 24:14; 50:10), a “cypress” (cf. 24:13; 50:10), a “cedar of Lebanon” (cf. 24:13; 50:12), and a “palm tree” (cf. 24:14; 50:12). The latter is seen in the similarities between Ben Sira’s depiction of Simeon’s garb and his proem about the cosmos in 43:1-33. The proem begins with Ben Sira’s praise of the glory of the sun, the moon and its relationship to the seasons and festal days, the beauty of the stars, and the brightness of the rainbow (43:1-12). Likewise, Ben Sira initially compares Simeon’s entrance from behind the curtain to a “star of light,” “the full moon in the festal days,” “the sun shining on the king’s temple,” and “the rainbow that appears in the clouds.”

Simeon’s embodiment of wisdom and the cosmos is also related to Ben Sira’s depiction of Simeon as the embodiment of several key characters in the “Praise of the Ancestors.” We have already seen the commonality between Simeon and other key figures in Ben Sira’s ideal depiction of Israel’s history by highlighting the similarities between Simeon’s description and those of Hezekiah, Aaron, and Phinehas. Nevertheless, Simeon can also be compared to other figures in the “Praise of the Ancestors.” For example, his building

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24 This ceremony is usually seen as Yom Kippur because of the similarities this passage has with m. Yoma 3:6-8; 6:2. Cf. Oesterley, Sirach, 342-43; Snaith, Ecclesiasticus, 251-53; Crenshaw, “The Book of Sirach,” in NIBCOT, 859; but Skehan and Di Lella (551) prefer the daily whole offering because this passage also has some affinities with m. Tamid 6:3-7.3.

25 Vv. 23-24 in MS B read “May [God] give to you wisdom of heart, and may there be peace among you. May his faithfulness toward Simeon endure, and may he fulfill for him the covenant of Phinehas. So that it may not be cut off from him or from his descendant as long as the heavens endure.” This differs significantly from English translations that tend to follow the LXX, which omits all reference to Simeon and the covenant of Phinehas, instead making it a generic blessing for all of Israel.
projects also recall the description of Zerubabel's and Nehemiah's building projects, which comes directly before Simeon's eulogy (49:11-13). Also, there are several affinities between Simeon and David. Similar to the Chronicler, Ben Sira depicts David as initiating temple worship by placing "singers before the altar to make sweet melodies with their voices" (47:9). Likewise, in Simeon's temple service, singers "praise [God] with their voices. The melody was made sweet with the greatest sound" (50:18). Also, Simeon's eulogy has some affinities with Ben Sira's eulogy of Joshua. Both are praised for lifting up their hands (cf. 46:2; 50:20), Joshua for battle and Simeon to bless the people. Finally, like so many in Ben Sira's hymn, Simeon is described as "glorious" (50:5, 11) as he offers a sacrifice for the people (50:13-16). Thus not only is Simeon the embodiment of wisdom and the cosmos, he is also the embodiment of many of the ideal characters in Ben Sira's depiction of Israelite history. This fact, combined with the length and placement of Simeon's description in the "Praise of the Ancestors," makes it highly probable that Ben Sira viewed Simeon as the telos, toward which all of Israel's history has been leading.

Relativization of Kingship. Ben Sira further heightens the royal description of the priesthood by his relativization of kingship. As in the Deuteronomistic history, the only faithful kings in Ben Sira's estimate were David, Hezekiah, and Josiah (49:4). Nevertheless, even the faithful kings are praised more for their cultic services than for their kingship. As mentioned above, David's importance for Ben Sira is his considerable role in the establishment of the cult (47:9-11), part of which clearly serves as a foreshadow for Simeon's temple service. Thus the future continuation of the Davidic line is not important to Ben Sira. Rather God's faithfulness to David is simply the continuation of the Davidic line after Israel's split with Judah (47:22; 48:15b-16). Likewise, Hezekiah's description is intimately tied with Simeon's, and Ben Sira attributes much of Hezekiah's faithfulness to Isaiah (48:22). He uses cultic images (i.e., incense and perfume; 49:1) in his depiction of Josiah as well. The unfaithfulness of the other rulers brings this institution to an end (49:4), and even the wisest king, Solomon, fell into sin (47:12-22). It is also striking that out of all the ancestors, the only ones he condemns are the kings (47:12-25; 49:4-7) and the only institution he does

26 Beentjes, "'The Countries Marvelled at You,'" 12. This may partly be based on David's preparation for the temple in 1 Chron 22:2-19 and his contribution to the Psalter.
29 Himmelfarb, "The Wisdom of the Scribe, the Wisdom of the Priest, and the Wisdom of the King," 98-99. Also cf. Beentjes, "'The Countries Marvelled at You,'" 9-11, who argues that Ben Sira uses Deut 17:14-20 to measure Solomon's reign.
not ask God to continue in the present time is kingship (cf. the benedictions in 45:26; 46:12; 49:10; 50:23-24). This fact, along with the importance of the priesthood, mentioned above, suggests that, for Ben Sira, kingship was an obsolete institution and that Israel's true rulers were the high priests. 30

Summary

Thus we are in a better position to describe Ben Sira's ideal ruler. For Ben Sira, the ideal ruler is an Aaronide high priest from the line of Phinehas who keeps Torah, embodied quintessentially in Simeon. Ben Sira depicts this temple service as the embodiment of wisdom and the cosmos and the culmination of all of Israel's history. Through this ruler, joy and peace have come to Israel, and it is Ben Sira's conviction and plea that through fidelity to this ruler it will continue.

Conclusion

In *Judaism and Hellenism*, Martin Hengel calls Ben Sira a "social 'preacher'" and labels Sirach an "apologetic-polemical work" that "shows a considerable political interest" (emphasis in original). Furthermore, he goes on to connect Ben Sira's social issues to growing Seleucid oppression and attacks on Onias III (Simeon II's successor) by the Tobians and other priestly factions who were vying for control of Judea. 31 Yet this is simply the culmination of an almost century-long struggle for control of Judea by the Tobians and Oniad that featured several political shifts from Ptolemaic and Seleucid allegiance by both parties as well as many interventions into the affairs of Judea by these Gentile rulers. 32 Thus it is easy to see why many were becoming disillusioned with traditional Israelite religion either through cynicism, the influence of Hellenism, or a combination of the two. In this context Ben Sira's creates an imaginative theodicy that stresses God's sovereignty over the Gentile ruler and assures peace through fidelity to the Aaronide priesthood, especially the lineage of Simeon. Thus Ben Sira paints a picture of his ideal aristocracy: a temple-state whose ruler is not from the line of Judah but an Aaronide who keeps Torah, who is ultimately embodied in the lineage of Simeon. Of course, many others would contend with this picture, especially those who still hoped for a Davidic ruler. Thus Ben Sira recasts Israelite history to demonstrate that his ideal ruler was always Yahweh's intention. He does this by transferring royal features to the Aaronide priesthood, especially aspects of the Davidic covenant, as well as by making

30 Himmelfarb, "The Wisdom of the Scribe, the Wisdom of the Priest, and the Wisdom of the King," 99.
32 VanderKam, *From Joshua to Caipahas*, 112-239; and Gruen, *Heritage and Hellenism*, 189-245, for an assessment of the political situation during the early Hellenistic period.
Simeon not only the embodiment of wisdom and the cosmos but the culmina-
tion of all of Israel’s history. Thus by placing the Aaronide as the rightful
ruler of Israel over and against the Davidic, Sirach stands in the tradition of
Deut 17:8–20, which also relativizes kingship and exalts the priests, and it
also comes close to the priestly messiansim that was prominent in many
Jewish sects, the most famous of which is Qumran (e.g., 1QS a II, 17–22; 1QS
IX, 9–11). Thus politics and religion are deeply interrelated in Ben Sira’s
worldview, placing him firmly in the tradition of the Bible.
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