

Ben Sirach's Non-mention of Ezra

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The absence of Ezra from Ben Sirach's¹ "Praise of the Fathers" (Sir 44,1-50,24)² poses a perennial exegetical puzzle. To date, the most extended treatment of the problem remains that of P. HÖFFKEN³. Like many previous authors, HÖFFKEN sees Sirach's non-mention of Ezra as both deliberate and ideologically motivated. He does, however, propose a somewhat novel thesis as to just what Sirach found unacceptable in the figure of Ezra as known to him from the Chronist's presentation⁴, i.e. Sirach's priestly sympathies were offended by the prominence accorded the Levites throughout the account of Ezra's undertakings in Ezra 7-10; Nehemiah 8-9⁵. In recent years HÖFFKEN's proposal has frequently been cited en passant as a possible explanation for Ezra's absence from Sirach's panegyric⁶. To my knowledge, however, no one has yet attempted a critical evaluation of the argumentation underlying the proposal. This article aims then first to provide such a critique and then to proffer an alternative explanation for the phenomenon.

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- 1 For the sake of brevity, I shall henceforth speak simply of "Sirach".
 - 2 In this segment see: J.D. MARTIN, Ben Sira's Hymn to the Fathers A Messianic Perspective, OTS 24 (1986) 107-123; T.R. LEE, Studies in the Form of Sirach 44-50 (SBL Diss. Series 75), Atlanta, 1986; B.L. MACK, Wisdom and the Hebrew Epic: Ben Sira's Hymn in Praise of the Fathers, Chicago, 1986.
 - 3 Warum schwieg Jesus Sirach über Esra?, ZAW 87 (1975) 184-202.
 - 4 HÖFFKEN presupposes the (now highly controverted) theory of a "Chronicist History" encompassing Chronicles and Ezra-Nehemiah. I shall adopt this presupposition as my own in what follows.
 - 5 HÖFFKEN, op. cit., 187-195. It may be noted that HÖFFKEN's suggestion was anticipated by A. THOMSON, An Inquiry concerning the Books of Ezra and Nehemiah, AJSL 48 (1932) 99-132, pp. 127-128 who attributes Sirach's non-mention of Ezra to the offense caused to his priestly sympathies by the reference to Ezra's penalizing the priests who had contacted mixed marriages in Ezra 10,5.
 - 6 So e.g., A.H.J. GUNNEWEG, Zur Interpretation der Bücher Esra-Nehemia, SVT 32, Leiden, 1981, 146-161, p. 150, n.9; M. SAEBO, Esra/Estraschriften, TRE 10, Berlin-New York, 1982, 374-386, p. 380.

In my view HÖFFKEN's thesis is open to question from the side both of the Book of Sirach and the "Chronistic History". I begin with the former. Two points concerning its "Praise of the Fathers" seem clear. The segment does highlight the glories and prerogatives of the Aaronide priestly line over the course of Israel's history (see 45,6-26; 50,1-21, cf. 7,29-31; 36,17). In addition, apart from the reference to Aaron as stemming from "the tribe of Levi" in 45,6, it never mentions the "Levites" as such. It is not all equally clear, however, that underlying these data there is a conscious, polemical intention of denigrating the Levites and denying them any role in the Jewish cult as HÖFFKEN avers. In this connection it needs to be kept in mind, first of all, that the "Praise of the Fathers" is a highly condensed and simplified version of Israel's history for whose numerous omissions of persons and events one would be hard put to find, in each and every instance, an "ideological" explanation- e.g., its non-mention of high priests like Eleazar, Zadok, Azariah (2 Chr 26,17-20) and Hilkiah surely does not signify any negative stance towards them. In addition, if Sirach really were so concerned to "negate" Levitical claims as HÖFFKEN opines, one might well expect a more explicit articulation of that "anti-Levitism" in the line e.g., of Ezek 44,10-16 where exaltation of "the Levitical priests, the sons of Zadok" goes hand in hand with a disparagement of the "Levites". The legitimacy of this expectation is confirmed by the observation that, in his references to the Northern Kingdom in its relation to the prerogatives of David's line, Sirach does give expression to a quite explicit polemic (see 47,21-25, cf. 48,15). By contrast, Sirach nowhere singles the Levites out for abusive treatment. Sir 45,18 is a case in point. Here, reference is made to the story of the Levite Korah's assault on Aaronide prerogatives narrated in Numbers 16. To be noted, however, is the fact that, unlike his "source" (see Nu 16,1.7.8.10) Sirach makes no mention of the "company of Korah"'s status as "sons of Levi", just as, in contrast to Nu 16,1, he cites Korah only in second place after his fellow-conspirators, the laymen Dathan and Abiram⁷. Here then Sirach would have had a per-

7 The fact too that in 45,18a Sirach uses the same term "outsiders" (*zrym*) to designate both the Levite Korah and the laymen Dathan and Abiram could suggest that his "pro-Aaronide polemic" is directed, not specifically against the Levites, but against any and all persons who would challenge Aaron's prerogatives.

fect opportunity to play up his purported anti-Levitism, and yet fails to do so. Accordingly, I suggest that Sirach's aim of exalting the Aaronide priesthood is not at all intended by him as a denial of the traditional roles and rights of the Levites- these simply lay beyond his purview in writing⁸.

Questions regarding HÖFFKEN's thesis also arise from the side of the Chronistic History. Initially, it may be admitted that, in the Chronist's presentation of Ezra's initiatives, considerable attention is accorded the Levites. They are consistently mentioned alongside the "priests", and even figure in contexts where the priests do not (see e.g., Ezra 9,15-20; Neh 8,7.9.11; 9, 4-5). In this sense then one might speak of the Chronistic Ezra as a figure concerned with promoting the interests of the Levites. What HÖFFKEN seems to overlook, however, is that, in the Chronistic History, Ezra is hardly unique in this regard- the very same can be said e.g., of David (1 Chronicles 15-16; 22-26), Hezekiah (2 Chronicles 29-31), Josiah (2 Chr 35,1-19); Zerubbabel and Jeshua (Ezra 3,8-13) and Nehemiah (see e.g., Neh 13,13.30) in their dealings with the two groups, the priests and the Levites. How then on HÖFFKEN's supposition can it be explained that Sirach found no difficulty in citing these other, equally "pro-Levite" figures in his panegyric?

Finally, a more general consideration concerning the attempt by HÖFFKEN- as also the comparable attempts by other authors- to trace Sirach's non-mention of Ezra to some ideological antagonism seems in order. The consideration bears on the "flexibility" evidenced by Sirach in the "Praise of the Fathers". At several junctures in that piece Sirach cites figures about whom his Biblical sources recorded features which he would certainly have found ideologically problematic. In such cases, his procedure is to simply ignore the problematic aspects associated with a given figure, concentrating rather on those dimensions which he found compatible with his wider conceptions. E.g., in 48,22-25 he alludes to Isaiah. He does so even though he certainly would have had

8 This point should be kept in mind in one's evaluation of HÖFFKEN's claim that Sirach's failure to cite the tithes due the Levites and their traditional juridical role when speaking of the priestly tithes and office as teachers of the Law in 45,20-22 and 45,17 respectively bespeaks his intention of "negating" the position of the Levites in Jewish life and worship: why, in a section focussing on Aaron and his line, should Sirach have felt any need to advert to the status and claims of the Levites- legitimate as those may be?

difficulties with e.g., the kultfeindlich words recorded in Isa 1,10-20 or the promise of cultic office for Gentiles in 66,21. The presence of such offending elements in Sirach's Isaiah tradition did not preclude his receiving mention since that same tradition also recorded other points concerning Isaiah (his miracle working and words of comfort for the distant future) which did fit in with Sirach's understanding of "prophecy"⁹. Why then, even admitting an element of ideological incompatibility between them of the sort advanced by HÖFFKEN, should not Sirach have proceeded similarly in the case of Ezra who as a priest (Ezra 7,5) and scribe (7,6) according to his sources could not but have stirred his sympathies¹⁰?

In light of the above considerations one wonders whether the approach exemplified by HÖFFKEN, of taking ideological conflict as the key to the mystery of Ezra's absence from the "Praise of the Fathers" is not something of a dead end. On the other hand, however, the oft-made alternative suggestion, i.e. that Sirach does not mention Ezra simply because the "Ezra material" of our OT was not yet a part of his "canonical" Bible¹¹ seems equally tenuous all the more since, as HÖFFKEN points out, Sir 45,17 appears to reflect the description of Ezra in Ezra 7,10¹². Are we left then simply with an insolvable mystery? In concluding this study, I wish to briefly expose another, "intermediate" approach to the problem, elements of which can be found here and there in the literature. A starting point for this approach which readily suggests itself is to focus on what Sirach does- and does not- have to say concerning those "contemporaries" of Ezra whom he does cite, i.e. Zerubbabel, Jeshua and Nehemiah (Sir 49,11-13). Doing this, one notes that Sirach speaks of the trio exclusively in terms of their activity as "builders", the first two of the Temple, Nehemiah of Jerusalem's walls and houses. Particularly in the case of Ne-

9 On Sirach's conception of "prophecy", see H. STADELMANN, Ben Sira als Schriftgelehrter (WUNT 2:6), Tübingen, 1980, 188-216 and MACK, op.cit., 28.

10 On Sirach himself as likely a "priest-scribe" see STADELMANN, op.cit., 12-26 and J.F.A. SAWYER, Was Jeshua Ben Sira a Priest?, Proceedings of the Eighth World Congress of Jewish Studies, Division A, Jerusalem, 1982, 65-71.

11 A recent proponent of such a view is G. GARBINI, Storia e Ideologia nell'Israele antico, Brescia, 1986, 208-235.

12 Op.cit., 192.

hemiah, such a portrayal involves a highly selective, "reductionist" reading of the Biblical source material which records a far more wide-ranging activity by this figure (see the account of Nehemiah's "reforms" in Nehemiah 5 and 13). Why, though, should Sirach have opted for this particular, restrictive presentation of the three personages? I suggest that he does so with an eye to his subsequent portrayal of the High Priest Simon which opens with an extended description of his building projects on behalf of both Temple and city (50,1-4)¹³. Specifically, Sirach wishes his readers to view Zerubbabel, Jeshua and Nehemiah above all in their capacity as "forerunners" of Simon who carries forward their building endeavors in comprehensive fashion, just as he intends us to see the latest period of Jewish history he records as a time characterized by the "physical" reconstruction and securing of Temple and city- this making possible the undisturbed celebration of cultic occasions as described in the continuation of Sirach's depiction of Simon 50,5-21. In terms of such intentions, however, the Ezra known to Sirach from his Biblical sources would- all his sympathetic features notwithstanding- have appeared to him as simply "unusable" seeing that those sources relate nothing of a building activity by Ezra. Sirach's non-mention of Ezra would then be a matter, not of any odium theologicum, but of a (reluctant) self-limitation on his part in view of his overarching intentions in depicting the post-Exilic period as a whole¹⁴.

13 On the problem of the function of the intervening 49,14-16 with their reference to various figures of early times, see LEE, op.cit., 10-11, 230-234.

14 Elements of the above proposal are put forward by e.g.: K. GALLING, Studien zur Geschichte Israels im persischen Zeitalter, Tübingen, 1964, 129, n. 3; J.A. EMERTON, Recension of U. KELLERMANN, Nehemia, JTS 23 (1972) 171-185, p. 185; J.G. SNAITH, Ecclesiasticus (CBC), Cambridge, 1974, 247 and STADELMANN, op.cit., n. 1 and 214.