David in the Wisdom of Ben Sira

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A Brief Presentation

This seminar paper is an abridged form of a fuller article that I have offered to *the Scandinavian Journal of the Old Testament* to be published later this year. Since 2005 I have concentrated in my studies on the Wisdom of Ben Sira. During this process my main question has been: What was Ben Sira's role towards the foreign nations? My monograph on this issue has gradually reached its final phase, and the present seminar paper has emerged as a by-product of this larger topic. Ben Sira's Praise of the Ancestors (Sir 44-50) is one of the most important textual units for my monograph, and it is truly a fascinating text, as we have here an author whose lifetime can be dated with a remarkable accuracy, and moreover, this author surveys the history of his people by using different sources.

David is one of the most significant figures in the Old Testament. His story is told in the books of Samuel and 1 Kings, as well as in a rewritten form in 1 Chronicles. Furthermore, David is described as the father of Israelite psalmody, as numerous psalm superscriptions bear his name. Even the prophetic books contain references to David several times. Because of this background it is interesting to examine Ben Sira's passage on David. Of course, Ben Sira is a selective historian, as all the historians are. It is impossible to repeat everything that is told in the sources; one has to choose those aspects that are of importance for his own topic. Therefore, it is fruitful to see what kind of picture of David results from Ben Sira's composition (Sir 47:1-12).

It seems that Ben Sira attempted to do justice to two main streams of the Davidic tradition. First, adhering to the Deuteronomistic portrayal of David, Ben Sira emphasizes his military victories (Sir 47:3-7). The second feature heavily focuses on David's role as the founder of the cult (Sir 47:8-10). Although scholarly opinions are divided at this point, I would like to argue that Ben Sira derived this picture of David from Chronicles.

In addition to this compact passage on David, Ben Sira refers to him in a few separate sentences. Because of the limits of the paper I was not able to pay so much attention to those references (they will be included in the published article). It is, however, noteworthy that Ben Sira mentions David for the first time in Sir 45:25 as the last covenantal partner with God. Nevertheless, one gets the impression that David's covenant was inferior to Phinehas' covenant. Ben Sira seems to have accepted the *status quo* of his own time. Davidic monarchs belonged to the past, and according to Ben Sira, the optimal figurehead of the people was the high priest in whom both the religious and the political leadership were combined. The admiration of the high priest explains why Ben Sira's picture of David is devoid of Messianic expectations although he wrote in an era when various apocalyptic visions began to blossom.