

Comparing Ben Sira beyond the Hebrew Bible

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1. Introduction

“Citations and Allusions in the Hebrew Bible” is the name of the EABS (European Association of Biblical Studies) Research Group which in this volume presents results regarding Wisdom Literature. The description of the Research Group begins with the following statement: “The notion that texts within the Hebrew Bible refer to each other and that neglect of such references leads to an imperfect understanding of a given text has garnered much attention in recent years.”¹ To this perspective “within the Hebrew Bible”, this paper aims to add a perspective beyond the Hebrew Bible. A prime example for an ancient Hebrew text outside the Hebrew Bible which is often placed in the category of “Wisdom Literature” is the Book of Ben Sira.² Ben Sira is also a prime example for a text usually thought to contain many citations of and allusions to texts in the Hebrew Bible. This paper presents key results of a comparison of texts in Ben Sira with texts in and beyond the Hebrew Bible regarding citations and allusions.

2. Ben Sira

The Book of Ben Sira is not included in the Hebrew Bible, but in other Bibles such as the Greek Septuagint. The Book of Ben Sira was written in Hebrew in the early 2nd century BCE and translated into Greek probably later in the same century. It was then mainly transmitted in Greek and in other languages such as Syriac and Latin. Hebrew manuscripts containing large parts of the Book of Ben Sira were rediscovered at the end of the 19th century CE near Cairo in a Genizah, and in the mid-20th century CE near the Dead Sea in Masada and in caves close to Qumran. The Hebrew manuscripts of Ben Sira which were found among the Dead Sea Scrolls date from the 1st century BCE

¹ Krause / Focken / Bühner, Citations.

² Ben Sira is included in recent handbooks on “Wisdom Literature”, cf. Bledsoe, Ben Sira; Gregory, Sirach; Wright, Ben Sira. Wright, Ben Sira, 583, calls Ben Sira “the paradigmatic example of Wisdom Literature in the Second Temple period”. The term “Wisdom Literature” has come under comprehensive criticism as a modern category without a clear definition, cf. Adams / Goff, Introduction, 1-2.4.6; Dell / Millar / Keefer, Introduction, 4; Kynes, Obituary, esp. 1-2.25-26.246.253; Kynes, Wisdom, esp. 2.11-12.

to the 1st century CE, those found in the Genizah near Cairo date from the 10th to the 13th century CE.³ Photographs and transcriptions of the Hebrew Ben Sira manuscripts are now publicly available online and form the textual basis for the comparisons in this paper.⁴

The Book of Ben Sira is usually seen to contain many citations of and allusions to the Hebrew Bible. Such a view is expressed by Schechter in the 1899 edition of Genizah manuscripts of Ben Sira: “In fact the impression produced by the perusal of B[en] S[ira]’s original on the student who is at all familiar with the Hebrew Scriptures is that of reading the work of a post-canonical author, who already knew his Bible and was constantly quoting it.”⁵ Later researchers also adopt such views. For example, Di Lella notes more than a hundred years later: “That Ben Sira was completely immersed in the traditions of Israel’s history and sacred literature is a commonplace in biblical studies. Even a casual reading of the book would convince one of that. ... Indeed, for the source of Ben Sira’s many references to Israel’s history we need look no farther than the earlier books of the OT.”⁶ However, upon closer inspection, only a casual but not a closer reading is a convincing argument for such a view. First, the Hebrew Book of Ben Sira does not actually contain any explicit citations of texts in the Hebrew Bible.⁷ Second, Ben Sira describes many figures – such as Elijah or Isaiah – which also appear in the Hebrew Bible, but the descriptions contain many differences to the Hebrew Bible in words and contents. These differences are usually explained as especially creative allusions to the Hebrew Bible. For example, Witte notes: “Ben Sira cites selections especially from the Torah and the Prophets, though the term ‘citation’ must be understood broadly as an allusion to the Torah and the Prophets, combining afresh the formulas and motifs from the Jewish texts that had become canonical and integrating them into his own wisdom argumentation.”⁸ Similarly, Beentjes describes Ben Sira as “a creative author who in a very selective and conscious way adopted and elaborated the Holy Scriptures of his day into his own book”.⁹ However, such views depend on a comparison of Ben Sira with the Hebrew Bible only. For example, Reiterer writes: “In order to collect these elements specific to Ben

³ On the textual history of the Book of Ben Sira cf. Brodersen, *Beginning*, 1-2.6-10.35-38; Wright, *Ecclesiasticus*, 187-198.

⁴ Cf. Rendsburg / Binstein, www.bensira.org.

⁵ Schechter, *Introduction*, 26.

⁶ Di Lella, *Praise*, 151-152 (“OT” stands for “Old Testament”). For further examples of such views cf. Brodersen, *Beginning*, 22-25.

⁷ This is also noted by Kraft, *Scripture*, 211.

⁸ Witte, *Aspects*, 17.

⁹ Beentjes, *Ben Sira*, 123.

Sira, the statements ... will here be compared with the references from the TaNaK. ... The comparison will allow us to represent on the one hand the agreements, and on the other hand the differences, and thus to find what is characteristic of Ben Sira.”¹⁰ And Beentjes explicitly argues that combinations of words not shared with the Hebrew Bible are Ben Sira’s inventions, for example regarding a combination of two words in Sir 50,24: “This unique word combination which occurs nowhere else in the entire Old Testament is a creation of Ben Sira himself.”¹¹

At the same time, Ben Sira is usually seen as the oldest extant evidence for the canon of the Hebrew Bible. For example, Berlejung states: “For the first time in Sir. 44-50 (ca. 180 BCE), one encounters the idea of a fixed collection of biblical books.”¹² And McDonald lists Ben Sira at the top of a chronological list of sources for the formation of the biblical canon.¹³ Given the lack of older sources for the canon of Hebrew Bible as a whole and the lack of explicit citations in the Book of Ben Sira, there is a high danger of circular reasoning: a restriction to the canon of the Hebrew Bible as the only possible reference text for Ben Sira presupposes and at the same time proves the use of the canon of the Hebrew Bible. For example, Goshen-Gottstein writes on Sir 44-49: “Once we become aware of the canonical dimension ..., many other facts corroborate the canonical concerns”.¹⁴ However, the rediscovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls from the mid-20th century CE onwards provided material evidence for the existence of texts not included in the canon of the Hebrew Bible at Ben Sira’s time.¹⁵ For example, among the oldest Dead Sea Scrolls manuscripts is 4Q208 (4QEnastr^a ar) from the end of the 3rd or the beginning of the 2nd century BCE which preserves a text overlapping with 1 Enoch 73.¹⁶ If Ben Sira is compared to 1 Enoch, similarities with 1 Enoch are found.¹⁷ But if Ben Sira is compared to the Hebrew Bible only, only similarities with the Hebrew Bible are found.

¹⁰ Reiterer, *Role*, 29.

¹¹ Beentjes, *Praise*, 129. For further examples of such views cf. Brodersen, *Beginning*, 23.127-133.

¹² Berlejung, *Sources*, 17.

¹³ McDonald, *Canon*, 431. For further examples of such views cf. Brodersen, *Beginning*, 1-6.10-14.

¹⁴ Goshen-Gottstein, *Praise*, 241. For a detailed analysis of Goshen-Gottstein’s line of argument cf. Brodersen, *Beginning*, 132-133.

¹⁵ For an overview of such texts cf. Brodersen, *Beginning*, 44-52.

¹⁶ Cf. Drawnel, *Astronomical Book*, esp. 28-30.73; Webster, *Index*, 378.

¹⁷ For examples of similarities between Ben Sira and 1 Enoch cf. Brodersen, *Beginning*, 33.49-51.146-153.

In a monographic study on “Ben Sira and the Beginning of the Biblical Canon”,¹⁸ I have compared key passages in the Book of Ben Sira to possible reference texts both in and beyond the Hebrew Bible which are close to Ben Sira in language, time, and place. In particular, I included texts among the Dead Sea Scrolls in this comparison.¹⁹ The following two examples will illustrate the main methodological implications of such a comparison beyond the Hebrew Bible.

3. Citation of Mal 3,23-24 in Sir 48,10?

As noted above, the Hebrew Book of Ben Sira does not contain any explicit citations of texts in the Hebrew Bible. There is one verse which is often regarded as the only exception to this rule: Sir 48,10.²⁰ This verse reads as follows:²¹

Sir 48,10	הכתוב נכון לעת להשבית אף לפני[...] להשיב לב אבות על בנים ולהכין ש[בטי ישראל]:	The one written as set for a time to make quiet the anger befo[re ...], to turn back a heart of fathers to sons, and to set up the tr[ibes of Israe]l.
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The beginning of Sir 48,10 with the **הכתוב** “the one written”, a qal passive participle of **כתב** “to write” with an article, is often regarded as a citation formula introducing a citation of Mal 3,23-24. For example, Crenshaw writes: “In v. 10, Ben Sira uses the formula for citing Scripture, ‘it is written,’ with reference to Mal 3:23-24”.²² But in the wider context of Sir 48,10, the participle **הכתוב** “the one written” stands in a row of participles which all refer to Elijah, whose name is mentioned in Sir 48,4. Noting this, Wright translates the first participle in Sir 48,10 as also referring to Elijah: “The one who is certainly appointed (or enrolled) for the time”.²³ In addition, in the Dead Sea Scrolls the participle **כתוב** “written” in combinations such as **כאשר כתוב** “as

¹⁸ This monograph (Brodersen, *Beginning*) is available online with open access: <https://www.mohrsiebeck.com/buch/the-beginning-of-the-biblical-canon-and-ben-sira-9783161619922>.

¹⁹ Cf. Brodersen, *Beginning*, 33-34.

²⁰ For a comprehensive discussion of a possible citation of Mal 3,23-24 in Sir 48,10 see Brodersen, *Beginning*, 134-142.

²¹ For the Hebrew text see Rendsburg / Binstein, www.bensira.org, Genizah Manuscript B XVII verso.

²² Crenshaw, *Book of Sirach*, 851. For further examples of such views cf. Brodersen, *Beginning*, 134.

²³ Wright, *Eschatology*, 320.

what (is) written” or ככתוב “as written” is indeed used to mark citations.²⁴ But with an article, הכתוב “the one written” does not refer to texts but to persons in a record. For example, IQS (Rule of the Community) describes the punishment for a man’s wrong behaviour against רעהו הכתוב לפניו “his companion, the one recorded before him”.²⁵ Since הכתוב “the one written” in Sir 48,10 is not used as a citation formula elsewhere and stands in a row of participles all referring to Elijah, it is most likely to mean “the one recorded” with reference to Elijah.

Even if there is no marked citation, there could still be an allusion to the text often thought to be cited in Sir 48,10, Mal 3,23-24. Indeed, Sir 48,10 and Mal 3,23-24 in the Masoretic Text share the combination of words השיב לב אבות על בנים “turn back a heart of fathers to sons”, a combination which appears nowhere else in the Hebrew Bible. A few words of Mal 3,23-24 are even fragmentarily preserved in the Dead Sea Scrolls manuscript 4Q76 (4QXII^a) which dates to the middle of the 2nd century BCE.²⁶ However, the shared words are less unique than a restriction to the Hebrew Bible suggests. For example, 4Q521 (Messianic Apocalypse) contains the phrase נכון באים “(it is) set: coming are fathers to sons”, sharing the combination of words אבות על בנים “fathers to sons” as well as נכון “set” with Sir 48,10. The word שבט (which apart from one letter is reconstructed in Sir 48,10) also appears in 4Q521 a few lines later (there translated with the alternative meaning “sceptre”).²⁷ Of the combination of five words shared with Mal 3,23-24, three words are thus also shared with 4Q521, which additionally shares two words not found in Mal 3,23-24 with Sir 48,10.

Regarding shared content, only the second of the three tasks assigned to Elijah in Sir 48,10 – “to make quiet the anger”, “to turn back a heart of fathers to sons”, and “to set up the tribes of Israel” – is shared with the Book of Malachi. The words שבת “to quiet”, אף “anger”, שבט “tribe”, and כון “to set” are not used at all in the Book of Malachi. In particular, the third task in Sir 48,10, להכין ש[בטי ישראל]ל “to set up the tr[ibes of Israe]l”, is not found anywhere in the Book of Malachi, and not assigned to Elijah anywhere in the Hebrew Bible. The usual solution for this problem is a search for possible reference texts – a search which is restricted to the Hebrew Bible. Such a

²⁴ Cf. Metzenthin, קתב, 457-458.

²⁵ Cf. Qimron / Charlesworth, Rule, 30-31. The manuscript IQS is dated to the early 1st century BCE, its content to the middle of the 2nd century BCE, cf. Qimron / Charlesworth, Rule, 2.

²⁶ Cf. Fuller, 4QXII^a, 221.228; Pl. XLI.

²⁷ See Puech, Qumrân, 18-19. The manuscript 4Q521 is dated to the early 1st century BCE, its content to the second half of the 2nd century BCE, cf. Puech, Qumrân, 3.5.37.

search then leads to Isa 49,6 as the reference text for this third task. For example, Beentjes writes: “To what biblical passage, however, does Ben Sira refer? For nowhere in the Hebrew Bible it is said that it is Elijah who will restore the tribes of Israel! No doubt Ben Sira hints at Isa 49:6, a line that belongs to the Second Song of the Servant.”²⁸ But the phrase in Isa 49,6 in the Masoretic Text, *להקים את-שבטי יעקב* “to raise up the tribes of Jacob”, only shares the word *שבט* “tribe” (as well as the preposition *ל*) with Sir 48,10.²⁹ At the same time, the word *שבט* “tribe” is shared within the Book of Ben Sira itself with Sir 36,13, a verse which calls to God: *אסוף כל שבטי יעקב* “Gather all tribes of Jacob!”³⁰ While Sir 48,10 might refer to this task of God in the Book of Ben Sira itself,³¹ one shared word may also not suffice to identify an intratextual allusion to Sir 36,13. But restricting the search for possible allusions to the Hebrew Bible leads to the complicated assumption of an allusion to a task of God’s servant in Isa 49,6, while a task of God in the Book of Ben Sira itself in Sir 36,13 is not even taken into account.

In Sir 48,10, no citation formula can be substantiated. An allusion to Mal 3,23-24 is possible since there is a shared combination of five words, but three out of those words are also shared with 4Q521 outside the Hebrew Bible, and most of the contents of Sir 48,10 are not found in the Book of Malachi. The content of setting up the tribes of Israel is often seen as an allusion to Isa 49,6, but such views rest on one shared word which is also used for a similar content in the Book of Ben Sira itself.

4. Allusion to Isa 40-66 in Sir 48,24-25?

In Sir 48,17-25, the Book of Ben Sira describes the figure of Isaiah as a prophet under king Hezekiah.³² In the Hebrew Bible, Isaiah and Hezekiah are

²⁸ Beentjes, *Prophets*, 215. For further examples of such views cf. Brodersen, *Beginning*, 135-137.

²⁹ The oldest Dead Sea Scrolls manuscript preserving Isa 49,6 is 1QIsa^a from the late second century BCE, cf. Ulrich, *Index*, 192-193; Webster, *Index*, 385.402.430. In 1QIsa^a, Isa 49,6 also shares *ישראל* “Israel” with Sir 48,10 as the phrase there reads *להקים את שבטי ישראל* “to raise up the tribes of Israel”, cf. Burrows, *Dead Sea Scrolls*, Pl. XLI.

³⁰ Cf. Rendsburg / Binstein, www.bensira.org, Genizah Manuscript B VI verso.

³¹ Thus Wright, *Eschatology*, 320.

³² For a comprehensive discussion of possible allusions to the Book of Isaiah in Sir 48,17-25 see Brodersen, *Beginning*, 165-177.

mentioned together in Isa 1-39, often called “First Isaiah”,³³ for example in the first and last verses of these chapters, Isa 1,1 and Isa 39,8. In the Book of Ben Sira, the description of Isaiah ends with the following two verses:³⁴

Sir 48,24	ברוח גבורה חזה אחרית וינחם אבלי ציון:	With a spirit of might he saw the end and he comforted the mourning ones of Zion.
Sir 48,25	עד עולם הגיד נהיות ונסתרות לפני בואן:	Until eternity he declared happening things and hidden things before their coming.

These two verses, Sir 48,24-25, are usually seen as an allusion to all of “Second Isaiah” (Isa 40-55) and “Third Isaiah” (Isa 56-66). For example, Wright comments on אבלי ציון “the mourning ones of Zion” in Sir 48,24: “May be an allusion to Isa. 40:1, and if it is, then Ben Sira most likely knew all 66 chapters of Isaiah as a single work attributed to the 8th century BCE prophet.”³⁵ Such an assumed allusion to all 66 chapters of the Book of Isaiah ultimately rests on three shared words. Isa 40,1 only shares one word with Sir 48,24: נחם “to comfort”. The same word נחם “to comfort” and a combination of two words, אבלי ציון “mourning ones of Zion”, are shared with Isa 61,2-3. The combination אבלי ציון “mourning ones of Zion” in Isa 61,3 does not appear anywhere else in the entire Hebrew Bible. This unique occurrence within the Hebrew Bible is usually seen as proof for a reference to Isa 61,2-3 in Sir 48,24. For example, Beentjes speaks of a “deliberate quotation from Is 61,3”.³⁶

However, Sir 48,24 also contains another combination of two words: ברוח גבורה “with a spirit of might”. This combination is not used anywhere in the Book of Isaiah or the whole Hebrew Bible. Sir 48,25 also contains the forms נהיות “happening things” and נסתרות “hidden things”, of which the latter is not used anywhere in the Book of Isaiah, the former nowhere in the entire Hebrew Bible.³⁷ Such differences from the Hebrew Bible are usually explained as Ben Sira’s own creation. For example, Beentjes writes on Sir

³³ On scholarly discussions regarding a division of the Book of Isaiah into “First Isaiah” (Isa 1-39), “Second Isaiah” (Isa 40-55), and “Third Isaiah” (Isa 56-66) cf. the overview in Schmid, *Book of Isaiah*, 404-406.

³⁴ For the Hebrew text see Rendsburg / Binstein, www.bensira.org, Genizah Manuscript B XVIII verso.

³⁵ Wright, *Wisdom*, 2342. For further examples of such views cf. Brodersen, *Beginning*, 167.

³⁶ Beentjes, *Relations*, 202. For further examples of such views cf. Brodersen, *Beginning*, 170-171.

³⁷ While נהיות “happening things” is not used anywhere in the Hebrew Bible, נסתרות “hidden things” appears in Deut 29,28 and Ps 19,13, cf. Brodersen, *Beginning*, 171.

48,16: “expressions which occur nowhere else in the entire Old Testament can be found here. The most plausible inference is that they reflect the author’s own creative style.”³⁸ However, comparing Ben Sira beyond the Hebrew Bible suggests a different explanation. The combination *ברוח גבורה* “with a spirit of might” does not appear at all in the Hebrew Bible. But this exact combination is preserved on a small fragment of 4Q372 (4QNarrative and Poetic Composition^b, also called 4QapocrJoseph^b).³⁹ Similarly, *נהיות* “happening things” and *נסתרות* “hidden things” are hardly or never used in the Hebrew Bible, but frequently in texts among the Dead Sea Scrolls.⁴⁰

Both Isa 40-66 and 4Q372 contain numerous words and contents not present at all in Sir 48,24 in addition to each containing one combination of two words which is shared with Sir 48,24. If there was no presupposition that Isa 40-66 formed a part of the canon of the Hebrew Bible which Ben Sira used, a combination of two words shared with Sir 48,24 would not suffice to prove an allusion to twenty-seven whole chapters of the Book of Isaiah. Words shared between Sir 48,24-25 and ancient texts outside the Hebrew Bible make it unlikely that Ben Sira invented all these words by himself as additions to a canonical Hebrew Bible. It is more plausible that Ben Sira can be situated within a much wider repertoire of words and contents, a repertoire partly extant in the Dead Sea Scrolls.

5. Conclusions and Implications

Comparing Ben Sira beyond the Hebrew Bible to other ancient texts leads to different results than comparing Ben Sira to the Hebrew Bible only. In addition to leading to a better understanding of texts in the Book of Ben Sira itself, these results have methodological implications for the study of citations and allusions.

The first example discussed in this paper, a possible citation of Mal 3,23-24 in Sir 48,10, illustrates two methodological implications. First, possible citation formulas have to be evaluated in their ancient contexts where what to modern eyes looks like a citation formula may have a different meaning. Second, possible intratextual connections within texts outside the Hebrew Bible have to be taken into account. The second example discussed in this

³⁸ Beentjes, Hezekiah, 149. For further examples of such views cf. Brodersen, *Beginning*, 167.

³⁹ Cf. Schuller / Bernstein, 4QNarrative and Poetic Composition^b, 192; Pl. XLIX. The manuscript 4Q372 is dated to the middle of the 1st century BCE, cf. Schuller / Bernstein, 4QNarrative and Poetic Composition^b, 165.

⁴⁰ Cf. Bartelmus, *נהיות*, 767; Becker, *נסתרות*, 1123-1126; Clines, *Dictionary*, Vol. II, 539-540; Clines, *Dictionary*, Vol. VI, 202-203.

paper, a possible allusion to Isa 40-66 in Sir 48,24-25, demonstrates further implications. First, words or combinations of words not shared with the Hebrew Bible may well be shared with other extant ancient texts. Second, words or combinations of words shared with a very long text do not necessarily suffice to point to a reference to the entirety of this text.

In addition to the statement quoted in the introduction of this paper, “that texts within the Hebrew Bible refer to each other and that neglect of such references leads to an imperfect understanding of a given text”,⁴¹ the case of Ben Sira shows that neglecting possible references to texts beyond the Hebrew Bible can also lead to an imperfect understanding. Therefore, extant texts beyond the Hebrew Bible should be taken into account in studies of possible citations and allusions.

Summary

The Book of Ben Sira is a prime example for a wisdom text outside the Hebrew Bible. This paper argues for analyzing possible allusions in the Book of Ben Sira without a restriction to the Hebrew Bible as the only point of comparison. Two case studies illustrate that a comparison with texts beyond the Hebrew Bible – especially among the Dead Sea Scrolls – uncovers new possibilities for understanding texts in Ben Sira.

Zusammenfassung

Das Buch Jesus Sirach ist ein Paradebeispiel für Weisheitsliteratur außerhalb der Hebräischen Bibel. Dieser Aufsatz argumentiert für eine Analyse möglicher Anspielungen im Sirachbuch ohne eine Einschränkung auf die Hebräische Bibel als einzigen Vergleichspunkt. Zwei Fallstudien veranschaulichen, dass ein Vergleich mit Texten über die Hebräische Bibel hinaus – insbesondere mit Qumrantexten – neue Verständnismöglichkeiten aufdeckt.

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⁴¹ See Footnote 1.

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