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Tripartite Creation in Sirach 16:26–17:4

Jeremy Corley

Introduction

In summer 2015 Pope Francis captured public attention with his encyclical letter on the environment, entitled *Laudato Si': On Care for our Common Home*. In a section dealing with the biblical accounts, the letter comments on Gen 1:28, where God tells humanity to subdue the earth and have dominion over all the animals. Pope Francis firmly states (§67) that “nowadays we must forcefully reject the notion that our being created in God’s image and given dominion over the earth justifies absolute dominion over other creatures”¹. In response to what the letter calls a “distorted anthropocentrism”, it asserts (§69): “Each creature possesses its own particular goodness and perfection ... Each of the various creatures, willed [by God] in its own being, reflects in its own way a ray of God’s infinite wisdom and goodness. Humanity must therefore respect the particular goodness of every creature”².

Pope Francis draws on many generations of Judeo-Christian creation theology, ultimately rooted in biblical texts such as Genesis 1–3. In fact, reflections on God’s providential ordering of the world range from ancient biblical and Stoic pronouncements to modern theories of intelligent design and faith-based ecological concern. The belief that God has providentially arranged the cosmos is expressed at various points in the Bible, even though the Greek noun *πρόνοια* (“providence”), favored by the Stoics, occurs in this sense only eight times in the later portions of the LXX³. Despite the word’s absence from the Greek version of Ben Sira, the concept is present in the sage’s thought, as

¹ POPE FRANCIS, *Laudato Si'*, 39.

² POPE FRANCIS, *Laudato Si'*, 40-41.

³ The term refers to divine providence in Wis 14:3; 17:2; LXX Dan 6:18; 3 Macc 4:21; 5:30; 4 Macc 9:24; 13:19; 17:22. However, both NT instances of the word refer to human foresight (Acts 24:3; Rom 13:14), as in 2 Macc 4:6. Instead of the Vulgate numeration, this article will use the verse numbers of the Masoretic Text for the protocanonical books and the LXX verse numbers for the deuterocanonical writings.

Aitken notes in his article on the subject: “God’s works have been arranged in good order (16:26-27; 39:12-35) and the works of creation all have their own purpose (39:16)”⁴.

God’s providential care for creation is the subject of three sections: Sir 16:24–17:14; 39:12-35; 42:15–43:33⁵. Whereas Sir 39:12-35 praises God’s justice in the ordering of the world, Sir 42:15–43:33 celebrates God’s marvels evident in creation. In the passage from Ben Sira being discussed here (16:26–17:4), the sage outlines God’s providence in the making of heavenly bodies (connected with the angels), animals and plants, and finally human beings. Because the sage’s writing gives most attention to human beings (17:1-14), his view of humanity has been frequently studied, whereas much less study has been given to his teaching on the origin of other created things⁶. Hence this article will focus on the creation of the three elements specified in the poem: the heavenly host (four bicola in 16:26-28), the animals and plants (two bicola in 16:29-30), and finally human beings (four bicola in 17:1-4).

Context and Structure of Sirach 16:26–17:4

Sirach 16:26–17:4 is the central portion of 16:24–17:14, which itself forms an important subsection within the long poem on God, sin and mercy in Sir 15:11–18:14⁷. After an imagined opponent’s objection that God could not be concerned with a mere human being (16:17-23), Ben Sira’s response is a subunit of twenty bicola recalling the creation (16:24–17:14). Following the call to attention (16:24-25), Sir 16:26–17:4 deals progressively with three stages of creation, according to Duesberg and Auvray: “Ben Sira follows the order of the narrative of Genesis 1: creation of the stars, of the plants and animals, of

⁴ AITKEN, *Divine Will*, 286.

⁵ See PRATO, *Il problema*, 266-283; 62-115; 116-208; BURTON, *Sirach*, 115-123, 163-171, 172-189. The creation theme recurs in other pericopes (e.g., Sir 1:1-10; 18:1-14; 24:1-34; 33:7-15; 40:1-17; 41:1-13).

⁶ On Sir 17:1-14 see, for instance, ALONSO SCHÖKEL, *Vision*; LEVISON, *Portraits*, 35-38; KAISER, *Mensch*; WICKE-REUTER, *Providenz*, 152-160.

⁷ PRATO, *Il problema*, 266; cf. GILBERT, *God*, 124-128.

humanity”⁸. Thereafter Sir 17:6-14 considers the gift of human faculties and the life-giving law. Hence we may divide the poem into six stanzas⁹:

- I. Call to attention (16:24-25)
- II. Creation of the heavenly host (16:26-28)
- III. Creation of the plants and animals (16:29-30)
- IV. Creation of humanity (17:1-4)
- V. Divine gift of human faculties (17:6-10)
- VI. Divine gift of the Torah (17:11-14)

Although pre-exilic Israelite writings often envisaged a three-decker universe consisting of the heavens above, the earth below, and the waters under the earth (cf. Exod 20:4; Deut 5:8; Ps 24:1-2), a different classification of the creation into three parts appears in some Second Temple Jewish texts (e.g., Psalm 148; LXX Dan 3:52-90): the heavenly bodies (frequently connected with the angels), the animals together with plants on earth, and humankind. This rather anthropocentric view appears within the treatment of creation in Sir 16:26–17:4. Such a tripartite classification of creation in Sir 16:26–17:4 reflects a threefold progression of first heaven and then earth and humanity, found in Psalm 148¹⁰.

Table 1

Divine Providence	Psalm 148	Sirach 16:26–17:4
Heavenly bodies	148:1-6	16:26-28
Earth	148:7-10	16:29-30
Human beings	148:11-14	17:1-4

Besides the structural similarity, there are also some parallels of vocabulary between Psalm 148 and Sir 16:26–17:4.

⁸ DUESBERG – AUVRAY, *L’Ecclésiastique*, 80 (my translation).

⁹ HASPECKER, *Gottesfurcht*, 151, n. 57; SEGAL, *Sēper*, 102-103. Note that Sir 17:5, absent from the earliest Greek manuscripts but found in the Lucianic witnesses, is a later addition; cf. PRATO, *Il problema*, 276, n. 156; SKEHAN – DI LELLA, *Wisdom*, 282.

¹⁰ MARBÖCK, *Jesus Sirach 1–23*, 215. Ben Sira’s sequence of heaven-earth-humanity matches Psalm 148, although the psalm exhibits a clear bipartite structure, with vv. 1-6 dealing with heaven and then vv. 7-14 concerned with earth (including humanity); cf. WATSON, *Chaos*, 209. In this article all biblical translations are mine.

Table 2

Greek Sirach 16:26–17:4

By the Lord's judgment (conj.: creation) his works exist from the beginning, and from their making he defined their destinies. He arranged forever his works, and their rulings for their generations... And forever they shall not disobey his utterance (16:26-28).
He placed the fear of him upon all flesh, and to have dominion over beasts and birds (17:4).

LXX Psalm 148

Let them [= the heavens] praise the name of the Lord, for he himself spoke and they came to be; he himself commanded and they were created. He established them forever, and forever and ever. He gave a decree, and they will not transgress (148:5-6).
The beasts and all the cattle, reptiles and winged birds (148:10).

A tripartite arrangement of creation (as heaven-earth-humanity) is also evident in the Song of the Three Young Men in the Greek text of Daniel (Dan 3:52-90)¹¹.

Table 3

Divine Providence	Greek Daniel 3	Sirach 16:26–17:4
Heavenly bodies	3:52-73	16:26-28
Earth	3:74-81	16:29-30
Human beings	3:82-90	17:1-4

In addition, the layout of Ben Sira's argumentation in 16:26–17:4 has a general parallel in Stoic thinking, as evidenced in Cicero's treatise on the nature of the gods (*De natura deorum*, hereafter *ND*)¹².

Table 4

Divine Providence	Cicero, <i>De natura deorum</i>	Sirach 16:26–17:4
Stars of heaven	2.102-119	16:26-28
Earth	2.120-132	16:29-30
Human beings	2.133-167	17:1-4

¹¹ MARBÖCK, *Jesus Sirach 1–23*, 215. Parallels of the Greek canticle with Psalm 148 are noted by MARTTILA, *Reinterpretation*, 165, and DI LELLA, *Analysis*, 58-61, although Greek Dan 3:64-73 mentions the meteorological phenomena with the heavenly bodies, whereas Ps 148:8 includes them in the context of the earth.

¹² WICKE-REUTER, *Providenz*, 184. Cicero's treatise refers back to some teachings of Chrysippus (who died ca. 206 B.C.), even though the Latin work was written around 76 B.C.

After an introductory celebration of the beauty of the earth and sea (*ND* 2.38-40 §§98-101), Cicero begins a long section on the sun, moon, and stars (*ND* 2.40-46 §§102-119), before concluding: “If anyone is not impressed by this coordination of things and this harmonious combination of nature to secure the preservation of the world, I know for certain that he has never given any consideration to these matters” (*ND* 2.46 §119)¹³. Cicero then turns his attention from things celestial to things terrestrial (*ND* 2.47 §120), and he concludes that his findings show that everything in this world is governed by divine intelligence and wisdom (*ND* 2.53 §132). After treating other earthly creatures, Cicero then moves on to human beings. Considering reason (*ratio*) to be the highest endowment of humanity (cf. Sir 17:6-7), Cicero asks (*ND* 2.53-54 §133)¹⁴:

For whose sake then shall one pronounce the world to have been created? Doubtless for the sake of those living beings which have the use of reason; these are the gods and humankind, who assuredly surpass all other things in excellence, since the most excellent of all things is reason... And that humanity has been cared for by divine providence will be more readily understood if we survey the whole structure of humanity and all the conformation and perfection of human nature.

Thus, Cicero offers a lengthy philosophical argument for divine providence in the ordering of the heavens, earth, and human life, while Ben Sira provides a concise theological description of the providential creation of the heavenly beings, the earthly creatures and then humankind. Let us now consider these three elements in their sequence.

¹³ RACKHAM, *Cicero*, 237 (this and the next Ciceronian quotation are slightly modified by me).

¹⁴ RACKHAM, *Cicero*, 251.

Heavenly Bodies (Greek Sirach 16:26-28; Vg 16:26-29)

The creation of God's heavenly works is described in Sir 16:26-28. Unfortunately only six Hebrew words of our section survive in the last extant line of MS A: "When God created his works from the beginning, for their life..."¹⁵. Here I present my translation of the Greek text, where I follow Ziegler's critical edition, except where he emends the major uncials.

- ²⁶By the Lord's judgment his works exist from the beginning¹⁶,
and from their making he defined their destinies.
²⁷He arranged forever his works¹⁷,
and their rulings for their generations.
They neither hunger nor become weary¹⁸,
and they do not cease from their works.
²⁸Each one does not oppress its neighbor,
and forever they shall not disobey his utterance.

Because of the complex textual situation for Ben Sira, I now present the Syriac text for comparison. The text used is Ceriani's edition of the Ambrosian Codex (known as 7a1)¹⁹. While the general message of the section is similar to

¹⁵ For the extant Hebrew text see BEENTJES, *Book*, 47; BEN-HAYYIM, *Book*, 24; SEGAL, *Sēper*, 102. The Greek text of 16:26–17:4 is from ZIEGLER, *Sapientia*, 200-201.

¹⁶ Ziegler echoes Smend (*Weisheit*, 153) in conjecturing κτίσει ("creation"), matching Hebrew and Syriac, where Greek reads κρίσει ("judgment"), followed by Latin. See LXX Ps 111[110]:7: "The works (ἔργα) of his hands are truth and judgment/justice (κρίσις)".

¹⁷ Ziegler follows Codex Sinaiticus in reading τὰ ἔργα αὐτῶν ("their works"), matching Latin and Syriac, where the other Greek uncials read τὰ ἔργα αὐτοῦ ("his works"), matching LXX Gen 2:2. Reversing v. 27a and v. 27b by comparison with the Greek, the Latin text reads a form of v. 27b as the conclusion of v. 26: "and their beginnings among his peoples".

¹⁸ The Greek verbs in vv. 27c-28a are in the aorist, which I understand as a gnomic aorist, hence translated here with the present tense (BDF §333). For the verb ἐπείνασαν ("they hunger"), the conjectural reading ἐπόνεσαν ("they grow tired") is proposed by SEGAL, *Sēper*, 104. However, the depiction here of heavenly creatures neither hungering nor becoming weary matches the description of God in LXX Isa 40:28, where the same two verbs appear: cf. PRATO, *Il problema*, 270.

¹⁹ CALDUCH-BENAGES – FERRER – LIESEN, *Wisdom*, 128-129; see 39-51 on the characteristics of this version.

the Greek, there are some differences of detail, such as the expansion of v. 27c (Greek) into two cola in the Syriac.

- ²⁶When God created his works from the beginning,
 he allotted their laws among their creatures.
²⁷And he set their works until the end,
 and their authority to all generations of the world.
 They do not hunger and they do not thirst,
 and they do not become weary and they do not toil,
 and they are not lacking in their strength.
²⁸They do not hate one another,
 and until eternity they do not transgress his word.

Just as Sir 39:33 asserts that God’s ordering of the universe provides for the needs of each created thing, so Sir 16:26-28 seeks to show that divine providence is clearly evident from the creation, and the world is governed by the divine command. For the act of creating, Ben Sira utilizes the verb ברא, a term reserved in the Bible for God’s activity (e.g., Gen 1:1; Sir 15:14)²⁰. The language employed for the creation of God’s works in 16:26a echoes phraseology found earlier in 15:14a:

16:26a (Hebrew MS A): כּבֵּרָא אֱלֹהִים מֵעֲשִׂי מֵרֵאשִׁית
 When God created his works from the beginning...

15:14a (Hebrew MS B): הוּא מֵרֵאשִׁית בִּרְא אָדָם
 He himself from the beginning created humanity/Adam...

While 15:14a focuses on the making of humanity or Adam (singular, probably a collective), 16:26a mentions the creation of God’s works (plural, מעשיו).

Although Ben Sira does not define God’s works in 16:26, the next two verses suggest that he is referring here mainly to the heavenly luminaries; for instance, Gilbert says that “in 16:27-28 he seems to refer to the stars”²¹. Likewise,

²⁰ WESTERMANN, *Genesis 1–11*, 98; WENHAM, *Genesis 1–15*, 14. Elsewhere the Hebrew MSS sometimes employ the verb חָלַק, which can mean “assign” or “allot” (e.g., Sir 16:16; 45:22), but which can also mean “create” (e.g., Sir 31:13, 27); cf. PRATO, *Il problema*, 389-91; O’CONNOR, *Language*, 223-226.

²¹ GILBERT, *God*, 125, echoing SMEND, *Weisheit*, 153; cf. PRATO, *Il problema*, 268-271; WICKE-REUTER, *Providenz*, 148; RICKENBACHER, *Weisheitsperikopen*, 147-148.

Argall explains 16:26-28: “When Ben Sira looks up at the first of God’s works, the luminaries, he sees that they are ordered by God”²². Similarly, the context in Sir 42:15–43:12 suggests that the same term מעשיו (“his works”) principally denotes the lights of heaven in the Masada text of Sir 42:15: “By the utterance of the Lord are his works”. By way of contrast, Marlow considers that “his works” in 16:26 refer to “the formation of the earth as well as the heavens”²³. Certainly the heavenly bodies are regarded as God’s works in the Psalter: “For I will see the heavens, works (ἔργα) of your fingers, moon and stars which you founded” (LXX Ps 8:4; cf. 19[18]:2; 102[101]:26), although LXX Ps 8:7 also describes earthly creatures as “the works (ἔργα) of your hands”.

By contrast with Enochic texts, Ben Sira’s angelology tends to be restrained, so that Fletcher-Louis affirms: “Sirach is remarkably uninterested in the angelic realm”²⁴. Indeed, the major Greek uncials only once employ the term ἄγγελος (angel, 48:21) to describe the destruction of King Sennacherib’s army fighting against Hezekiah: “His angel wiped them out” (cf. Isa 37:36; 2 Kgs 19:35), but the Hebrew text here mentions no angel: “He [= God] routed them with a plague”. In addition, the Lucianic MSS use the word in 43:26, the sole case where the extant Hebrew text has מלאך (messenger or angel). When the Hebrew text of 43:26 declares: “For his sake a messenger (מלאך) succeeds, and because of his words it performs [his] will”, the term מלאך seems to denote not an angel but rather God’s messenger, perhaps everything created (Ps 104:4) or the divine word (Ps 147:15) or possibly the divinely-guided mariner (Ps 107:23)²⁵. Yet despite avoiding use of the term מלאך in the sense of angel, Ben Sira elsewhere refers to the heavenly court of angels with other expressions such as God’s “holy ones” or “hosts” or “works”. For instance, the Masada text of

²² ARGALL, *I Enoch*, 136; for angels as ruling the stars see 136, n. 377.

²³ MARLOW, *What am I*, 43; cf. WÉNIN, *De la création*, 149-150; SHEPPARD, *Wisdom*, 74, n. 8.

²⁴ FLETCHER-LOUIS, *Cosmology*, 80. Unlike various other Second Temple writings (e.g., Tobit, Daniel, *I Enoch*), Ben Sira says nothing about revelations to individuals by named angels. Instead, he speaks of the heavenly host glorifying God (cf. 42:17) and reliably operating the luminaries (cf. 43:8-10).

²⁵ PRATO, *Il problema*, 138, 197-198; CALDUCH-BENAGES, *God*, 86. Codex Sinaiticus of 43:26 says: “On account of him its task/purpose (τέλος) is success, and by his word everything is composed”, while most Lucianic MSS read in the first colon: “On account of them his messenger (ἄγγελος) succeeds”. Note that an emended text of 43:26 is given by ZIEGLER, *Sapientia*, 330.

42:17 speaks of the angels: “God’s holy ones (קִדְשֵׁי אֱלֹהִים) have not sufficed to recount all his wonders. The Lord has strengthened his hosts (צְבָאוֹי) to stand firm before his glory”²⁶.

If 16:26 refers to God’s heavenly works, does the word מַעֲשָׂיו (“his works”) denote the stars or the angels or both? Kugel claims that the term refers to “the angels in heaven”²⁷. Whereas modern readers distinguish between the inanimate stars and the angelic figures, the heavenly bodies were sometimes connected with angelic beings in Second Temple period Jewish writings. Such a conception is highly developed in the *Astronomical Book* (= *1 Enoch* 72–82), in which the archangel Uriel reveals to Enoch the heavenly meteorological phenomena. Just as *1 Enoch* attests the ancient Jewish belief (common in apocalyptic texts) linking heavenly luminaries with angels, so the New Testament Apocalypse describes a star fallen from heaven to earth, representing a rebel angel (Rev 9:1)²⁸. Commenting on Rev 9:1, Adela Yarbro Collins explains: “Pagans believed that stars were divine beings; Jews identified them as angels”²⁹.

According to Genesis 1, light is created on the first day (Gen 1:3), whereas the heavenly luminaries are created on the fourth day (Gen 1:16)³⁰. However, the *Book of Jubilees* (2nd century B.C.) speaks briefly of the origin of various angels – understood as controlling meteorological phenomena – as actually occurring on the first day of creation (*Jub.* 2:2-3)³¹:

For on the first day he created the heavens, which are above, and the earth, and the waters and all of the spirits which minister before him: the angels of the presence, and the angels of sanctification, and the angels of the spirit of fire, and the angels of the spirit of the winds, and

²⁶ PRATO, *Il problema*, 160-162; CALDUCH-BENAGES, Hymn, 125-126; ARGALL, *1 Enoch*, 144; CORLEY, *Traditions*, 55.

²⁷ KUGEL, *Traditions*, 49, n. 5.

²⁸ YARBRO COLLINS, *The Apocalypse (Revelation)*, 1006. For earlier concepts of astral deities see SMITH, *Astral Religion*, 191-195.

²⁹ KUGEL, *Traditions*, 76. This connection already appears within the first divine speech in Job 38:6-7: “On what were its [= the earth’s] bases sunk, or who set down its cornerstone, when the stars of morning cried out together, and all the sons of God [= heavenly beings] shouted for joy?”.

³⁰ WESTERMANN, *Genesis 1–11*, 112; KUGEL, *Traditions*, 47-48.

³¹ WINTERMUTE, *Jubilees*, 55. Cf. KUGEL, *Traditions*, 76; FRECHETTE, *Blessing*, 125-127.

the angels of the spirit of the clouds and darkness and snow and hail and frost, and the angels of resounding and thunder and lightning, and the angels of the spirits of cold and heat and winter and springtime and harvest and summer, and all of the spirits of his creatures which are in heaven and on earth... Then we saw his works and we blessed him.

Early Enochic literature also has a developed angelology, which Ben Sira may have known³². For instance, the *Astronomical Book* (*1 Enoch* 72–82, probably 3rd century B.C.) explains in some detail how phenomena of astronomy and meteorology result from the workings of angelic figures, and also describes the angels ruling over the stars. The *Astronomical Book* begins by referring to the ordered pattern of the lights of heaven under the leadership of the angel Uriel: “The book about the motion of the heavenly luminaries, all as they are in their kinds, their jurisdiction, their time, their name, their origins, and their months which Uriel the holy angel who was with me (and) who is their leader, showed me” (*1 Enoch* 72:1)³³. Similarly, although the exact wording of Sir 16:26 differs between the textual traditions, the verse suggests an element of predestination in the notion that God assigned to his angelic creatures their “laws” (Syriac) or “destinies” (Greek).

Thereafter, the Greek text of Sir 16:27 speaks of God’s arrangement of his creation: “He arranged (ἐκόσμησεν) forever his works (τὰ ἔργα αὐτοῦ), and their rulings for their generations”. This affirmation is reminiscent of LXX Gen 2:1-2: “The heaven and the earth and all their arrangement (κόσμος) were completed; and on the sixth day God completed his works (τὰ ἔργα αὐτοῦ) which he made”. The Hebrew text of Gen 2:1-2 differs slightly: “And the heavens and the earth and all their host (צבאם) were completed; and on the seventh day God had completed his commission which he had done (עשה)”. Kugel comments on Gen 2:1: “The phrase ‘hosts of heaven’ is frequently used in the Bible for angels (see, for example, 1 Kgs 22:19). This verse [= Gen 2:1] thus seemed to imply that the creation of those ‘hosts of heaven’ had been finished by (at least) the end of the sixth day”³⁴. Ben Sira’s thought seems to fit into this line of interpretation.

³² Several scholars think that Ben Sira was aware of some early Enochic texts; cf. CALDUCH-BENAGES, Hymn, 131; ARGALL, *1 Enoch*, 8-13; CORLEY, Traditions, 52-59.

³³ Translation from NICKELSBURG – VANDERKAM, *1 Enoch*, 96. Cf. CORLEY, Traditions, 58; ARGALL, *1 Enoch*, 50-52.

³⁴ KUGEL, *Traditions*, 48 (referring also to Ps 104:2-5; Job 38:7). In Deut 4:19 and Isa 40:26 the term “host” refers to the stars; cf. WENHAM, *Genesis 1–15*, 35; WESTERMANN, *Genesis 1–11*, 169.

According to the Greek of Sir 16:27, God “arranged forever his works, and their rulings for their generations”. The mention of “rulings” (ἄρχαίς) echoes the Genesis statement about the sun ruling the day and the moon ruling the night: “God made the two great luminaries, the greater luminary for rulings (ἄρχαίς) of the day and the lesser luminary for rulings (ἄρχαίς) of the night, and the stars” (LXX Gen 1:16)³⁵. Similarly, Hebrew Ben Sira refers to the moon as “the government of designated times and an eternal sign” (Sir 43:6 MS B)³⁶. In the Syriac formulation of Sir 16:27, God “set their works until the end, and their authority to all generations of the world”. Building on the first creation story in Genesis, Sir 16:27 suggests divine predetermination of the role of the celestial host. The heavenly bodies are probably understood as linked to the angels, as in the Qumran *Hodayot* (1QH 9:10-15)³⁷:

You formed every spirit, and [their] work [you determined], and the judgment for all their deeds. You yourself stretched out the heavens for your glory, and all [...] you determined according to your will, and powerful spirits according to their laws, before they came to be holy angels [and ...] eternal spirits in their dominions: luminaries according to their mysteries, stars according to [their] paths, storm [winds] according to their task, shooting stars and lightning according to their service, and storehouses devised for their purposes [...] according to their mysteries.

In fact, the eternal function of the heavenly luminaries (Sir 16:26-28) contrasts with the limited lifespan of earthly human beings (17:1-2).

The heavenly luminaries are depicted as sentinels in Bar 3:34-35: “The stars shone out in their guard duties and rejoiced. He called them and they said, ‘We are present’. They shone out with rejoicing for the one who made them” (cf. 1QS 10:1-4). Likewise, Ben Sira’s later poem on God’s marvels in creation (Sir 42:15–43:33) seems to refer to angels keeping watch when it depicts the stars. The Masada text of Sir 43:9-10 declares:

The beauty of the heavens and the splendor of the starry array

³⁵ PRATO, *Il problema*, 269; SHEPPARD, *Wisdom*, 74; SEGAL, *Sēper*, 104; BEENTJES, *Rereading*, 210; cf. DINES, *Creation*, 12. By way of contrast, Peters (*Buch*, 142) interprets the “rulings” as referring not only to the stars but also to all parts of the creation.

³⁶ PRATO, *Il problema*, 178-179.

³⁷ Translation from SCHULLER – NEWSOM, *Hodayot*, 31 (using their numbering system). In apocalyptic thought the stars were considered to be controlled by angels, according to SCHREINER, *Sirach 1–24*, 93.

are a shining adornment in the heights of God.

By the word of Adonai it [= the starry array] stands as a statute,
and it does not sink down in their [= the heavens'] watches.

Moreover, at the end of the portrait of the moon, Hebrew MS B for Sir 43:8cd refers to the host (צבא) in the firmament of heaven: “Instrument of the host [in charge] of the water-skins on high, making the firmament shine with its splendor”³⁸.

When the Syriac text of 16:27 asserts that God’s works neither hunger nor thirst, the claim scarcely applies to human beings or animals, but fits well with the heavenly bodies³⁹. According to Kugel, “the idea that these celestial creatures never need food or rest and do not interfere or overlap with one another in their heavenly missions – all these are elsewhere frequently asserted to be true of angels”⁴⁰. A belief that angels do not eat occurs already in the Samson narrative, where the angel says to Manoah: “If you detain me, I will not eat from your loaves” (LXX Judg 13:16 Codex Vaticanus). Within the Book of Tobit, an explanation for Raphael’s seeming to eat is given in his farewell speech: “All the days I appeared to you, and I did not eat nor drink, but you yourselves were beholding a vision” (LXX Tob 12:19 Codex Vaticanus).

The statement that God’s works never cease from their labors (Sir 16:27) agrees with the sage’s later claim that the stars never relax in their watches (43:10). According to Prato, the stars are regarded as God’s heavenly army⁴¹. Indeed, Ben Sira marvels at the harmonious organization of the heavenly bodies: “Each one does not oppress its neighbor, and forever they shall not disobey his utterance” (16:28 Greek). The notion that the heavenly bodies (such as the sun) do not transgress the divinely-determined limits matches a theme already found in Fragment B 94 of the 5th-century B.C. philosopher Heraclitus: “Helios [= the sun] will not overstep his limits, otherwise the Erinnyes, the scourges of fate, will search him out”⁴².

³⁸ If it belongs with what precedes, Sir 43:8cd refers to the moon; so PRATO, *Il problema*, 180, n. 118; SKEHAN – DI LELLA, *Wisdom*, 493. However, this colon may belong with 43:9-10 on the stars; so SEGAL, *Sēper*, 395. The term צבאיו (his hosts) refers to God’s angels in Sir 42:17.

³⁹ PRATO, *Il problema*, 269-270.

⁴⁰ KUGEL, *Traditions*, 49, n. 5. Cf. CORLEY, *Traditions*, 57.

⁴¹ PRATO, *Il problema*, 270.

⁴² HENGEL, *Judaism*, 1.201; cf. WICKE-REUTER, *Providenz*, 184, n. 166.

In another poem Ben Sira describes how various phenomena (including those associated with meteorology) obediently fulfill God's purpose, even in bringing retribution to humans: "When he commands them they rejoice, and in their prescribed task they do not rebel against his utterance" (Sir 39:31, Hebrew MS B). The obedience of meteorological phenomena is also the focus of Ps 148:8 (MT): "Fire and hail, snow and smoke, stormy wind performing his word". Similarly, Ps 147:18 (MT) declares that God's command brings an end to freezing conditions: "He sends out his word and melts them".

Sirach 16:28 celebrates the harmonious operation of God's works, whereby the stars follow their predestined courses. According to the Greek, "each one does not oppress its neighbor", while the Syriac text states: "They do not hate one another"⁴³. The non-interference of each created thing is also noted in *1 Clement* 20:1-2 (ca. 96 A.D.): "The heavens move at his direction and obey him in peace. Day and night complete the course assigned by him, neither hindering the other"⁴⁴.

Stoic philosophers emphasized the harmonious obedience of all things to the natural law. For instance, the *Hymn to Zeus* (SVF 1.537), composed by the Stoic philosopher Cleanthes (who died ca. 230 B.C.), speaks of the obedience of the heavenly bodies to the Deity: "This whole universe, spinning round the earth, truly obeys (πειθεται) you wherever you lead, and is readily ruled by you" (lines 7-8)⁴⁵. Moreover, the notion of the perfect operation of all created things appears in Chrysippus' understanding of divine providence, as reported by Cicero: "In fact there is nothing else besides the world that has nothing wanting, but is fully equipped and complete and perfect in all its details and parts" (*ND* 2.13 §37)⁴⁶. As an example, the regular movements of the heavenly bodies serve for Cicero as an indication of divine providence (*ND* 2.38 §97)⁴⁷:

Who would not deny the name of human being to a man who, on seeing the regular motions of the heaven and the fixed order of the stars and

⁴³ This verse has an anthropomorphic formulation according to WICKE-REUTER, Ben Sira, 276. Although the Syriac form of v. 28a could have been influenced by Hebrew prohibitions against hating addressed to human beings (Lev 19:17; Sir 28:7), it perhaps looks more like a Christian expression based on Matt 5:43-44.

⁴⁴ HOLMES, *Apostolic Fathers*, 73.

⁴⁵ THOM, *Cleanthes*, 69; cf. WICKE-REUTER, *Providenz*, 53-54.

⁴⁶ RACKHAM, *Cicero*, 159.

⁴⁷ RACKHAM, *Cicero*, 217.

the accurate interconnexion and interrelation of all things, can deny that these things possess any rational design, and can maintain that phenomena, the wisdom of whose ordering transcends the capacity of our wisdom to understand it, take place by chance?

Elsewhere Ben Sira inculcates human obedience to God: “Those who fear the Lord will not disobey his utterances” (οὐκ ἀπειθήσουσιν ῥημάτων αὐτοῦ, 2:15). It is likely that Ben Sira draws an implied contrast with the frequent disobedience of human beings by mentioning the obedience of the heavenly luminaries: “Forever they shall not disobey his utterance” (οὐκ ἀπειθήσουσιν τοῦ ῥήματος αὐτοῦ, 16:28). Such obedience is presumed in the Letter of Jeremiah: “Sun and moon and stars are very obedient, being bright when sent out for a need” (Bar 6:59[60]). So also one of the *Psalms of Solomon* (1st century B.C.) declares: “Our God is great and glorious, living in the highest (heavens), who arranges the stars into orbits (to mark) time of the hours from day to day. And they have not deviated from their course, which he appointed them... And they have not wandered, from the day he created them, from ancient generations” (*Pss. Sol.* 18:10-12)⁴⁸. Moreover, the *Book of the Watchers* advises: “Contemplate all (his) works, and observe the works of heaven, how they do not alter their paths; and the luminaries of heaven, that they all rise and set, each one ordered in its appointed time; and they appear on their feasts and do not transgress their own appointed order” (*1 Enoch* 2:1)⁴⁹.

A contrast between nature’s obedience and human disobedience appears in various Jewish writings of the second and first century B.C. For instance, a Qumran text known as *1QFestivalPrayers* (1Q34bis 3.2.1-4) recalls that God made “the great light for day-time” and the heavenly lights operate “without their laws being broken”, whereas “the offspring of humanity has not understood all that you have given them as an inheritance, and they do not know you, so as to do your word, and they act more wickedly than anything”⁵⁰. Similarly, the *Testament of Naphtali* states: “Sun, moon, and stars do not alter their order; thus you should not alter the Law of God by the disorder of your actions” (*T. Naphtali*

⁴⁸ WRIGHT, *Psalms of Solomon*, 669-670; cf. PRATO, *Il problema*, 271.

⁴⁹ NICKELSBURG – VANDERKAM, *1 Enoch*, 21. Parallel noted by PRATO, *Il problema*, 271; SHEPPARD, *Wisdom*, 73, n. 6; ARGALL, *1 Enoch*, 159; WICKE-REUTER, *Providenz*, 150.

⁵⁰ This Qumran quotation is adapted from GARCÍA MARTÍNEZ – TIGCHELAAR, *Scrolls*, 1.145.

3:2)⁵¹. Likewise, the *Book of the Watchers* also draws a contrast between the obedience of non-human creatures and the disobedience of sinful human beings: “Contemplate all the trees... Contemplate all these works... They all carry out their works for him, and their works do not alter, but they all carry out his word... But you have not stood firm nor acted according to his commandments” (*I Enoch* 5:1-4)⁵².

Nevertheless, other passages in Enochic literature speak of disobedience on the part of some angelic figures. The *Book of the Watchers* includes a section on the fallen angels (*I Enoch* 6–11), while the *Astronomical Book* speaks of an angelic rebellion: “Many heads of the stars will stray from the command and will change their ways and actions, and will not appear at the times prescribed for them” (*I Enoch* 80:6)⁵³. According to one of the Qumran *Hodayot*, there will be judgment for heavenly as well as earthly creatures: “[The] host of heaven you will judge in heaven, and the inhabitants of the earth upon the earth. And also [in Sheol] below you will judge” (1QH 25:13-14, partly echoing Isa 24:21)⁵⁴. Ben Sira also seems to hint at angelic disobedience, since the Syriac text of Sir 17:32 (“God judges the hosts of heaven”) may refer to the punishment of some disobedient angelic leaders of the stars⁵⁵.

Later in the poem, Ben Sira speaks of commands about how to treat other people: “He commanded each one of them about a neighbor” (17:14b Greek). Here the concern for proper respect for one’s neighbor parallels the heavenly luminaries, which do not crowd out their neighbors: “Each one does not oppress its neighbor” (16:28a Greek)⁵⁶. Like the heavenly luminaries, the inhabitants of earth are also called to live in harmony. Hence Argall notes that the heavenly

⁵¹ KEE, *Testaments*, 812; cf. PRATO, *Il problema*, 271.

⁵² NICKELSBURG – VANDERKAM, *I Enoch*, 21-22; cf. ARGALL, *I Enoch*, 159.

⁵³ NICKELSBURG – VANDERKAM, *I Enoch*, 111. A punishment for angelic disobedience is described in *I Enoch* 10:1-15, while *I Enoch* 18:14 reports how the “end of heaven and earth” has become “a prison for the stars and the host of heaven”.

⁵⁴ SCHULLER – NEWSOM, *Hodayot*, 75.

⁵⁵ ARGALL, *I Enoch*, 137, 159; cf. SKEHAN – DI LELLA, *Wisdom*, 285; CORLEY, *Traditions*, 61. Moreover, the Greek text of Sir 16:7 declares that God “was not propitiated over the ancient giants who rebelled in their might”, with the giants being understood from Gen 6:1-4 as children of fallen angels and human women; cf. CORLEY, *Traditions*, 63-64. However, the Hebrew text of Sir 16:7 may refer to Israel’s history; cf. GOFF, *Ben Sira*, 651.

⁵⁶ GILBERT, *God*, 127; CALDUCH-BENAGAS, *God*, 82; WICKE-REUTER, *Providenz*, 151; MARBÖCK, *Jesus Sirach 1–23*, 216.

luminaries serve as a model for human beings: “Just as ‘each’ (ἕκαστος) luminary is ordered not to crowd ‘its neighbor’ (τὸν πλησίον αὐτοῦ, 16:28a), so also God gives commands ‘to each’ (ἐκάστῳ) Israelite ‘pertaining to his neighbor’ (περὶ τοῦ πλησίον, 17:14b)”⁵⁷. Argall explains: “By observing the luminaries, Ben Sira has learned a lesson for humankind, and for Israel in particular”⁵⁸.

Animals and Plants (Greek Sirach 16:29-30; Vg 16:30-31)

God’s making of the non-human creatures on earth is briefly described in Sir 16:29-30. Here I supply my translation of the Greek text.

²⁹And after these things the Lord looked upon the earth,
and he filled it with his good things.

³⁰With the soul of every living thing he covered its surface,
and to it is their return.

As with Sir 16:26-28, I now offer the Syriac text of 16:29-30 for comparison, since there are evident differences in vv. 29b and 30b. More clearly than the Greek, the Syriac text distinguishes the creation of plants (v. 29) from the making of the animals (v. 30).

²⁹And after these things he looked forth upon the earth,
and he blessed it with all its crops.

³⁰With the souls of all living things (= beasts) he filled its surface⁵⁹,
and he gathered into its midst all their works.

As in some biblical texts (e.g., Ps 65:10-14; 104:14-30), Ben Sira regards the animals and plants as signs of God’s providential care. In some ways, this has parallels to Stoic thought. After referring to celestial phenomena, Cicero continues: “To come now from things celestial to things terrestrial, which is there among these latter which does not clearly display the rational design of an

⁵⁷ ARGALL, *1 Enoch*, 137.

⁵⁸ ARGALL, *1 Enoch*, 136; cf. GILBERT, Ben Sira, 93.

⁵⁹ The Syriac echoes Gen 1:22 with the sequence “bless” (v. 29b) and “fill” (v. 30a), but the Greek has the sequence “fill” (v. 29b) and “cover” (v. 30a). On the Latin form of v. 30a see the discussion of the verse.

intelligent being?” (*ND* 2.47 §120)⁶⁰. The Roman author gives many examples of the providential ordering of animal and plant life, noting, for instance, that nature “has provided with beauteous plenty, for each species of animal, that food which is suited to it” (*ND* 2.47 §120)⁶¹. Finally, Cicero concludes this section: “Thus every line of reasoning goes to prove that all things in this world of ours are marvellously governed by divine intelligence and wisdom for the safety and preservation of all” (*ND* 2.53 §132)⁶².

In a comparable fashion, Ben Sira moves from heavenly to earthly phenomena. Sirach 16:29 continues with “after these things”, presumably referring back to the creation of God’s heavenly works in vv. 27-28. Sheppard states: “The phrase ‘after these things’ marks a new stage in the creation commentary. Now God surveys the earth and fills it with living things (v. 30). This event may be intended to echo the divine decision, ‘Let the earth bring forth living creatures’ in Gen 1:24 (also cf. 1:20)”⁶³.

The Greek text’s mention of the creation of “good things” (16:29) seems to refer to the making of the various kinds of plants (Gen 1:12). To be sure, the Greek wording of Sir 16:29b (“he filled it with his good things”) could apply to both plants and animals, since Genesis calls both categories “good” (Gen 1:12.25), while Ps 104(103):24 MT speaks of God filling the earth with his works: “How great are your works, O LORD! You have made all of them in wisdom; the earth is filled with your property”. However, it is probably better to see the Greek text of 16:29b as denoting plants, matching the Syriac: “He blessed it with all its crops”, just as Ps 104(103):28 MT speaks of God’s providential gift of food: “You give to them; they harvest it. You open your hand; they are satisfied with what is good (טוב)”⁶⁴.

The statement that the Lord “looked upon (ἐπέβλεψεν) the earth” (Sir 16:29) loosely echoes the phrase: “God saw that it was good” (e.g., Gen 1:12), as well as the declaration on the sixth day: “God saw all that he had made, and behold, it was very good” (Gen 1:31). By way of contrast, the Deity elsewhere

⁶⁰ RACKHAM, *Cicero*, 237.

⁶¹ RACKHAM, *Cicero*, 239.

⁶² RACKHAM, *Cicero*, 251.

⁶³ SHEPPARD, *Wisdom*, 75.

⁶⁴ SEGAL, *Sēper*, 104. The Greek verb in the phrase “he filled (ἐνέπλησεν) it with his good things” (16:29) echoes LXX Ps 104(103):28: “they are filled (ἐμπλησθήσεται) with kindness”.

looks on the earth with stern judgment, as in Sir 16:19 (Hebrew MS A): “Even the bases of the mountains and the foundations of the world really quake at his gazing (בְּהִיטוֹ = ἐν τῷ ἐπιβλέψαι) towards them”. Hence, the God who looks benevolently upon the crated world (16:29) is the same God whose look can inspire trembling (16:19).

After the reference to plants in Sir 16:29, the next verse describes the creation of the animals. Whereas the Syriac version uses a plural formulation, “the souls of all living things”, the Greek uncials employ the singular phrase ψυχὴν παντὸς ζῴου (“the soul of every living thing”), echoing LXX Gen 1:21: πᾶσαν ψυχὴν ζῴων ἐρπετῶν (“every soul of creeping living things”; cf. LXX Gen 1:24)⁶⁵. The Greek term ζῴον (“living thing”) generally refers to an animal (e.g., Ps 104[103]:25; Sir 43:25; Wis 7:20)⁶⁶. However, the Latin text of Sir 16:30 differs somewhat from the Greek: “The soul of every living thing was naked before his face, and in it again is their reversion”. Whereas the Greek of v. 30a uses the verb “covered” (ἐκάλυψεν), the Latin strangely has the contrasting verb “was naked”, perhaps alluding to the discovery of human nakedness after the primeval sin (Gen 3:10-11) before the subsequent wearing of clothes as a covering (3:21)⁶⁷. Unlike human beings, animals wear no clothes.

Although God’s creatures cover the earth in fulfillment of his blessing (Gen 1:22), nevertheless they will return to the earth. Here the sage echoes Ps 104(103):29 MT: “You hide your face; they are dismayed. You gather their breath in; they expire, and to their dust they return”. While the Greek of Ben Sira refers concisely to death, the Syriac employs the imagery of gathering (or confining) to the earth: “he gathered into its midst all their works”, possibly through a faint echo of Job 24:23-24. The Greek of Sir 16:30 parallels the mortality of animals and of humans, since both classes of beings return to the

⁶⁵ PRATO, *Il problema*, 269, n. 137; SHEPPARD, *Wisdom*, 74; BEENTJES, *Rereading*, 210.

⁶⁶ While the Greek idiom of covering the surface of the earth occurs in the Book of Judith (2:7.19; 5:10; 7:18), in Sir 16:30 it may represent the Hebrew verb מָלַא (“fill”), as in 37:3; cf. SMEND, *Weisheit*, 155. He explains the double accusative with ψυχὴν (“the soul”), found in most Greek uncials here, as derived from the Hebrew idiom.

⁶⁷ Because the Latin text of v. 30a differs significantly, Smend (*Weisheit*, 155) suggests that the translator read the verb “uncovered” (ἀπεκάλυψεν) instead of “covered” (ἐκάλυψεν). Alternatively, the Latin wording may allude to the NT statement about God’s word: “Nor is any creature invisible before his sight, but all things are naked and open to his eyes” (Heb 4:13).

earth in death. Whereas Sir 16:30 describes the mortality of animals by saying: “To it [εἰς αὐτήν] is their return [ἀποστροφή]”, 17:1 explains human mortality in the words: “Again he made him return [ἀπέστρεψεν] to it [εἰς αὐτήν]”. If the Greek wording reflects a Hebrew Vorlage, the noun “return” (ἀποστροφή) may represent the Hebrew term תשובה (“return”), which originally (as here) had a geographical sense (cf. 1 Sam 7:17). A similar idea of mortality appears in 1QH 18:5-6: “What, then, is a mortal being (אדם) – he is only dirt (האדמה), pinched-off clay, whose return (תשובתו) is to dust”⁶⁸. A comparable saying (expanded to cover “everything”) occurs in Sir 40:11 (Hebrew MS B): “Everything from the earth will return (ישׁוּב) to the earth”.

Human Beings (Sirach 17:1-4, Greek and Vg)

God’s creation of human beings is outlined in Sir 17:1-4, before being developed in the following verses. Here I offer my translation of the Greek text of vv. 1-4.

- ¹The Lord created man from earth⁶⁹,
and again he made him return to it.
- ²A number of days and a time he gave to them,
and he gave them authority over the things upon it.
- ³In accordance with themselves he clothed them with strength,
and according to his image he made them.
- ⁴He placed the fear of him upon all flesh,
and to have dominion over beasts and birds.

As with previous sections, I now offer the Syriac text of 17:1-4 for comparison, since there are some divergences from the Greek. Most significantly, unlike the Greek, the Syriac has no mention of God’s image in v. 3.

⁶⁸ SCHULLER – NEWSOM, *Hodayot*, 57. Compare Job 34:15.

⁶⁹ Greek has ἄνθρωπον (“man, human being”), presumably representing אדם (“man, human being, Adam”). Verse 1a is followed in Latin by vv. 3b, 1b, 3a, and then v. 2. See the table in PRATO, *Il problema*, 272. Seemingly the Latin translator wishes to mention humanity’s creation in God’s image before introducing the notion of human mortality.

- ¹God from the earth created man⁷⁰,
and he will indeed turn him back into its midst.
- ²A number of days he allotted to them so that they will be existing⁷¹,
and he gave them authority over everything.
- ³In his wisdom he clothed them with strength,
and he covered them with fear.
- ⁴And he placed the fear of them upon all flesh,
upon the living things (= beasts) and upon the winged things (= birds).

After describing the heavenly bodies and the earthly non-human creatures, Sir 17:1 mentions God's creating of human beings, who have been blessed by divine providence more greatly than the animals. Using the generic term ἄνθρωπον ("human being"), the text reflects the story of the creation of Adam from the earth (Gen 2:7) rather than the making of Eve from Adam's side (2:21-22) – though after Sir 17:4 the Latin adds a gloss that echoes Gen 2:18: "He created from himself a helper resembling himself". Even though humanity's creation from the earth recalls Gen 2, the Greek wording of Sir 17:1 ("The Lord created man from earth") differs somewhat from LXX Gen 2:7 ("God fashioned the man, dust from the earth"). Closer to Gen 2:7 is the description of the creation of human beings in Sir 33:10 (Hebrew MS E)⁷².

[וגם איש] כלי חמר ומן עפר נוצר אדם

[And also man is] a vessel of clay, and from dust humanity was fashioned.

Whereas the Hebrew texts of Gen 2:7 and Sir 33:10 both employ the verb "fashion" (יצר = πλάσσω), the Greek of Sir 17:1 has the verb κτίζω, used in the sense of "create" as elsewhere in the LXX (e.g., Deut 4:32; Sir 39:29; Wis 2:23)⁷³.

⁷⁰ In v. 1a, the term "man" could refer to "humanity" (collective) or to "Adam" (singular).

⁷¹ The supplementary phrase "so that they will be existing" could also be translated "so that they might arise", implying a belief in the resurrection; so SEGAL, *Sēper*, 105.

⁷² Completion of the manuscript lacuna is from SEGAL, *Sēper*, 206. On Sir 17:1-2 see CORLEY, *Creation*.

⁷³ The verb κτίζω could represent the Hebrew verb ברא in 17:1 as in other texts (e.g., Deut 4:32; Ps 104[103]:30; Sir 39:29), especially since the Syriac has a cognate verb here.

Immediately afterwards, the Greek text of Sir 17:1b describes the return of humanity to the earth in death: “Again he made him return (ἀπέστρεψεν) to it”. The wording echoes the verb ἀποστρέφω (“return, turn back”) used in LXX Gen 3:19: “Until your return (ἀποστρέψαι) to the earth from which you were taken; for earth you are, and to earth you shall depart”. The Hebrew root שׁוּב (“return, turn back”) also denotes the return of mortal humanity to the earth in Sir 40:1 (Hebrew MS B): “Great preoccupation did God [mg: the Most High] assign, and a heavy yoke upon the sons of men, from the day of his going forth from his mother’s womb until the day of his return (שׁוּבו) to the mother of everyone living”⁷⁴. The notion of human beings returning to the earth echoes the psalmist’s plea: “Do not make humanity return (ἀποστρέψης) to humiliation, and you said: ‘Turn back (ἐπιστρέψατε), sons of men’” (LXX Ps 90[89]:3). Likewise, Qoh 3:20 refers to human mortality: “Everyone goes to one place; everyone came to be from the dust, and everyone returns (שׁוּב/ἐπιστρέφει) to the dust”. Similarly, at the conclusion of the pessimistic depiction of old age, Qoh 12:7 says: “And let the dust return (שׁוּב/ἐπιστρέψη) to the earth as it was, and the spirit will return (שׁוּב/ἐπιστρέψη) to God who gave it”.

While Sir 17:1 speaks of humanity returning to the earth in death (using the verb ἀποστρέφω from Gen 3:19), Ben Sira ignores the context of Gen 3, where death is regarded as a divine punishment for the primeval human sin⁷⁵. Instead, Ben Sira describes death as completing a predetermined tally of days allotted to each human being, as in Hebrew MS D of 37:25: “The life of a mortal is days, a number (ימים מספר)”⁷⁶. Whereas the Syriac text of 17:2 uses the phrase “a number of days”, the Greek has literally the Hebraism “days of number” (= ימי מספר), found elsewhere (Sir 33:9 MS E; 41:13 MS B)⁷⁷. Thereafter, the additional Greek mention of a “time” (καρὸν) may be an addition in imitation of Qoh 3:2. In Sir 17:2, it seems that the sage is influenced, not so much by Gen 1–3, but rather by Psalm 90(89), which speaks of human beings having a fixed number of days before they return to the dust: “The days of our years – in them are seventy years, but if with strength, eighty years” (LXX Ps 90[89]:10). The

⁷⁴ PIWOWAR, *Vergogna*, 37–45.

⁷⁵ SHEPPARD, *Wisdom*, 76; BEENTJES, *Rereading*, 213.

⁷⁶ This idiom, borrowed from Num 9:20, denotes a tally of days few enough to be counted.

⁷⁷ The usage is comparable to the phrase מתי מספר (men of number: Gen 34:30; Deut 4:27; Jer 44:28; Ps 105:12; 1 Chr 16:19), which the LXX renders in various ways.

implication is that if God set a fixed term for mortal human life, death is not to be feared, because it is his providential decree when the right time comes (cf. Sir 41:3-4)⁷⁸.

Though humanity shares mortality with other creatures on earth, the difference between human beings and the rest of the earthly creation is highlighted in the Greek of Sir 17:2: “He gave them authority over the things upon it”. This phraseology echoes God’s words concerning the human species in LXX Gen 1:26 (cf. 1:28): “Let them rule over the fishes of the sea and the birds of heaven and the cattle and all the earth and all the creeping things creeping upon the ground”. Although Gen 2:16 MT employs the verb צוה (command), the language of ruling (משל) is applied to Gen 2:16-17 within a Qumran “Rewritten Bible” text about the creation of Adam: “He gave him dominion (המשילו) to eat the fruit... with the exception of eating from the tree of knowledge” (4Q422 1.9-10)⁷⁹. Similarly, one manuscript of 4QInstruction relates the notion of ruling (drawn from Ps 8:7) to Adam’s care of the garden in Gen 2:15: “And he has given you authority (המשילכה) over it, to till it and care for it” (4Q423 2.i.2). God’s gift to humanity of authority over creation in the Greek text of Sir 17:2 also recalls the thought in LXX Ps 8:7: “You set him over the works of your hands; you subjected all things beneath his feet”.

The Greek text of Sirach 17:3 says of humanity that God “clothed them (ἐνέδυσεν αὐτοὺς) with strength”, with an echo of LXX Gen 3:21 where the same two words appear. It is possible that whereas Gen 3:21 narrates: “The LORD God made for Adam and for his wife garments of skin (עור), and he clothed them”, Ben Sira plays on the assonant word עוז (“strength”)⁸⁰. The Syriac of Sir 17:3b differs from the Greek by mentioning the motif of fear when it says: “he covered them with fear”⁸¹. If this idiom of covering in the Syriac text of Sir 17:3b is understood as a parallel to clothing (cf. Ezek 16:10), the phrase suggests that human beings were filled with fear of God as a punishment (cf. Ezek 7:27), as a result of eating the forbidden fruit. The echo of Genesis is clear, since Gen 3:9

⁷⁸ Building on Gen 1:26-28, Ps 8:6 states that human beings are less than God, and hence as his creatures they are dependent on God; cf. ŠTRBA, Prečo, 75-79.

⁷⁹ This Qumran quotation is from GARCÍA MARTÍNEZ – TIGCHELAAR, *Scrolls*, 2.885, and the next is from 2.887. Cf. Collins, *Wisdom*, 59, n. 54 and 125.

⁸⁰ SHEPPARD, *Wisdom*, 76, n. 15.

⁸¹ It is slightly possible, however, that the statement signifies that human beings became fearsome in the eyes of animals, as in Gen 9:2.

reports Adam’s words to God: “I was afraid, because I was naked”, while Gen 3:21 narrates that God clothed Adam and Eve.

Although the Greek MSS of Sir 17:3a say: “In accordance with themselves (καθ’ ἑαυτοῦς) he clothed them with strength”, Ziegler conjectures καθ’ ἑαυτὸν (“in accordance with himself”), matching the Latin wording: “in accordance with himself (*secundum se*) he clothed him with power”⁸². Nevertheless, the reading of the Greek uncials also makes sense in teaching that God has granted human beings “a strength that befits them”, as Di Lella asserts, adding: “The point of v. 3a is that God has given human beings all the strength they need in order to fulfill the purposes of their creation, viz., to subdue the earth”⁸³.

Unlike the Syriac, the Greek text of Sir 17:3b speaks of the creation of humanity in the divine image: “according to his image (κατ’ εἰκόνα αὐτοῦ) he made (ἐποίησεν) them”. This statement echoes LXX Gen 1:26-27: “And God said: Let us make man (ποιήσωμεν ἄνθρωπον) according to our image (κατ’ εἰκόνα ἡμετέραν) and according to [our] likeness... And God made man (ἐποίησεν... τὸν ἄνθρωπον); according to God’s image (κατ’ εἰκόνα θεοῦ) he made (ἐποίησεν) him”⁸⁴. The same motif is repeated at the end of the flood narrative in LXX Gen 9:6: “For in God’s image (ἐν εἰκόνι θεοῦ) I made man (ἐποίησα τὸν ἄνθρωπον)”. Using different terminology, Cleanthes’ *Hymn to Zeus* also refers to the human likeness to the Deity: “For we have our origin in you, bearing a likeness (μίμημα) to God, we, alone of all that live and move as mortal creatures on earth” (vv. 4-5)⁸⁵. The concept of human beings as the image of the sun-god goes back to ancient Egyptian texts such as the *Instruction Addressed to King Merikare*: “He made breath for their noses to live. They are his images, who came from his body”⁸⁶.

⁸² Smend (*Weisheit*, 154-55) suggests that the original Hebrew text had the word כדמותו (“according to his likeness”), which the Syriac misread as בחכמתו (“in his wisdom”) and the Latin understood as *secundum se* (“in accordance with himself”).

⁸³ SKEHAN – DI LELLA, *Wisdom*, 281-282.

⁸⁴ Since the Greek echo of Gen 1:27 fits Ben Sira’s context, it seems that for some reason the Syriac has removed this motif and instead copied the theme of fear from the following verse.

⁸⁵ THOM, *Cleanthes*, 40.

⁸⁶ LICHTHEIM, *Ancient Egyptian Literature*, 1.106; cf. WESTERMANN, *Genesis I–II*, 35. However, in many ancient Near Eastern creation texts it was the king rather than all

While the Book of Genesis does not define the sense of the “image of God” in humanity, much Christian theology has been influenced by Greek philosophy to say that the image resides in the human reasoning capacity. This interpretation is clearly stated in Philo’s teaching on the creation: “The resemblance (εἰκὼν) is spoken of with reference to the most important part of the soul, namely, the mind (νοῦν)” (*Opif.* 69)⁸⁷. In a comparable fashion, Joseph Ratzinger (Pope Benedict XVI) has recently taught: “To be the image of God implies relationality... Indeed, to the question as to what distinguishes the human being from an animal, as to what is specifically different about human beings, the answer has to be that they are the beings that God has made capable of thinking and praying”⁸⁸.

The Syriac text of Sir 17:4 declares: “He placed the fear of them upon all flesh, upon the living things [= beasts] and upon the winged things [= birds]”. Whereas humanity’s dominion over the animals echoes the Genesis creation narrative (Gen 1:28), the fear of humans on the part of animals recalls the story of Noah, as we can see if we compare the Greek version: “The trembling at you and the fear (φόβος) shall be upon all the beasts of the earth and upon all the birds of heaven and upon all the things moving upon the earth and all the fishes of the sea” (LXX Gen 9:2). As a result, every creature ruled by human beings stands in fear of them, just as humanity created by God stands in fear of him⁸⁹.

However, the Greek of Sir 17:4 has an ambiguity regarding the motif of fear: “He placed the fear (φόβον) of him upon all flesh, and to have dominion over beasts and birds”. On the basis of the context, with its echo of Gen 9:2, scholars generally state that Ben Sira is referring to the fear toward humanity felt by animals⁹⁰. However, the singular pronoun (“fear of him”) suggests that Ben Sira is speaking of fear toward God, since the Greek text of Sir 17:2-10 designates human beings in the plural (“of them”). If so, the idea would be that

humanity that was believed to have been created in the divine image; cf. WALTON, *Genesis 1*, 78-83.

⁸⁷ YONGE, *Works*, 10; cf. WESTERMANN, *Genesis 1–11*, 149. Cicero also asserts that the world was created “for the sake of those living beings which have the use of reason, [...] since the most excellent of all things is reason” (*ND* 2.53 §133); cf. RACKHAM, *Cicero*, 251.

⁸⁸ RATZINGER, *In the Beginning*, 47-48.

⁸⁹ SAUER, *Jesus Sirach*, 141.

⁹⁰ HASPECKER, *Gottesfurcht*, 152; PRATO, *Il problema*, 275; SHEPPARD, *Wisdom*, 75; SKEHAN – DI LELLA, *Wisdom*, 276.

human beings are intended as God's deputies to lead all creatures to a true obedience and fear of God.

Conclusion

In 16:26–17:4, Ben Sira draws on the Jewish creation traditions, especially from Genesis and the Psalms. The overall structure follows the threefold progression of heaven-earth-humanity found in Psalm 148 and the canticle in Greek Daniel 3, though a similar sequence also appears in Cicero's treatise on the nature of the gods (*De natura deorum*). From such parallels, we suggest that Sir 16:26-28 may refer to the creation of the heavenly (and even angelic) beings before humanity. We also note that Sir 17:1-2 ostensibly presents death as something natural, unconnected with human sin, although the idea of returning to the earth echoes the language of God's punishment of Adam in Gen 3:19. Building on the Genesis creation accounts, Ben Sira lays stress on the ordered system of the universe, found among the angels controlling the heavenly bodies – an ordered system whose obedience human beings would do well to imitate.

Besides developing biblical precedents, Ben Sira's teaching also matches two elements of Stoic philosophy. First, the Deity's ordering of the obedient heavenly bodies, while following biblical teaching (e.g., Psalm 104[103]) and Second Temple Jewish texts (e.g., *Hodayot*, *1 Enoch*, *Testament of Naphtali*), also has clear parallels in Stoic cosmology (e.g., Cleanthes' *Hymn to Zeus*; Cicero, *De natura deorum*). Second, the description of human beings having a limited number of days, presented as a natural phenomenon rather than as a result of a primeval sin, agrees with Psalm 90(89), but also matches Stoic ideas of divine providence.

Overall, Sir 16:26–17:4 offers a positive presentation of humanity as belonging to God's providential creation. Marlow relates Ben Sira's poem to the modern environmental crisis⁹¹:

Does Sir 16:26 –17:14 present an exploitative view of the human role and function within the world? In my opinion the answer is 'no', since in Sirach's theology, human creation in God's image and with the mandate of exercising dominion is placed firmly within the context of

⁹¹ MARLOW, What am I, 49-50.

human transience and finitude, of moral responsibility for ‘neighbor’, and of the bigger picture of cosmic world order.

Along with other biblical passages on creation, the thought of Sir 16:26–17:4 is echoed in the fifth Preface of the Sundays in Ordinary Time: “For you laid the foundations of the world and have arranged the changing of times and seasons; you formed man in your own image and set humanity over the whole world in all its wonder, to rule in your name over all you have made and forever praise you in your mighty works, through Christ our Lord”⁹². From the doctrine of creation Ben Sira draws a moral lesson. God’s wonderful providence to human beings in creation serves as an invitation for them to act according to moral principles, which are already inscribed in the “book” of the created world⁹³.

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⁹² *Roman Missal*, 448.

⁹³ My thanks are due to Bradley C. Gregory and the two anonymous journal reviewers for helpful comments.

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Summary

Sirach 16:26–17:4 builds on Jewish creation traditions from Genesis and the Psalms. The overall structure follows the sequence of heaven-earth-humanity found in Psalm 148, the canticle in Greek Daniel 3, and Cicero's treatise *De natura deorum*. From such parallels, we suggest that Sir 16:26-28 refers to the creation of the heavenly bodies, linked to the angels. God's ordering of the obedient heavenly bodies, while following biblical teaching (e.g., Psalm 104[103]) and Second Temple Jewish texts (e.g., *Hodayot*, *1 Enoch*, *Testament of Naphtali*), also has clear parallels in Stoic cosmology (e.g., Cleanthes' *Hymn to Zeus*; Cicero, *De natura deorum*). Sirach 17:1-2 presents death as something natural, unconnected with human sin, although the idea of returning to the earth echoes the language of God's punishment of Adam in Gen 3:19. The description of human beings having a limited number of days, presented as a natural phenomenon, agrees with Psalm 90(89), but also matches Stoic ideas of divine providence.

Keywords: angels, creation, Genesis, Sirach, Stoic cosmology.

Zhrnutie

Sir 16,26–17,4 stavia na židovskej tradícii o stvorení z knihy Genezis a Žalmov. Celková štruktúra nasleduje sekvenciu nebesá–zem–ľudstvo prítomnú v Ž 148, v chválospeve v gréckej verzii Dan 3 a v Cicerovom traktáte *De natura deorum*. Na základe daných paralel predpokladáme, že Sir 16,26-28 hovorí o stvorení nebeských telies v spojení s anjelmi. Božie usporiadanie nebeských telies v ich poslušnosti v sebe odráža nielen biblické učenie (napr. Ž 104[103]) a židovské texty z obdobia Druhého chrámu (napr. *Hodayot*, *1 Henoch*, *Nefstaliho testament*), ale nachádza tiež jasné paralely v kozmológii stoicizmu (napr. Kleantov *Hymnus na Dia*; či Cicerov *De natura deorum*). Sir 17,1-2 predstavuje smrť ako niečo prirodzené, nie spojené s hriechom človeka, hoci v myšlienke opätovného návratu na zem zaznieva jazyk potrestania Adama Bohom z Gn 3,19. Opis ľudských bytostí s obmedzeným počtom dní života je tu prezentovaný ako prirodzený fenomén, ktorý je v zhode so Ž 90(89), ale zodpovedá tiež stoickým ideám o božskej prozreteľnosti.

Kľúčové slová: anjeli, stvorenie, Genezis, Sirach, stoická kozmológia.

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