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Elijah among the Former Prophets in Hebrew Ben Sira 48:1-12

Jeremy Corley

Within the Praise of the Ancestors, Ben Sira 48:1-12 celebrates Elijah, one of the mightiest biblical prophets¹. Although Elijah appears in the Former Prophets of the Hebrew Bible (1 Kgs 17–2 Kgs 2), he is a somewhat unusual character within the Book of Kings (as in Ben Sira), because he has no clear affiliation to the Jerusalem temple. Admittedly, his sacrifice on Mount Carmel is offered at the time of the evening sacrifice (המנחה, 1 Kgs 18:36; cf. 2 Kgs 16:15; Dan 9:21)². However, according to strict Deuteronomic legislation, sacrifice should only have been offered in the single approved sanctuary (Deut 12:5-7), identified with the Jerusalem temple. Whereas for the Deuteronomistic author the local altars should be destroyed, as Hezekiah and Josiah did (2 Kgs 18:22; 23:12-20), the destruction of local altars serves for Elijah as a sign of the people's sin (1 Kgs 19:10)³. However, as a supporter of the Jerusalem temple, Ben Sira ignores this aspect of Elijah.

As a worker of miracles, Elijah is a remarkable prophetic character. To be sure, at the opening of the Former Prophets, Joshua is credited with several miracles, and Sir 46:4 refers to his causing the sun to stand still (Josh 10:12-13). Nevertheless, within the books from Joshua to Kings, the figures of Elijah and Elisha stand out for the abundance of their miracles. It is noteworthy that Ben Sira highlights Elijah's miraculous deeds, including his remarkable heavenly ascent⁴. Since he went up to heaven (2 Kgs 2:1-18), the conclusion of the prophet Malachi speaks of his future return (Mal 3:23-24 [4:5-6]) – also mentioned in a fragmentary Qumran Aramaic document (4Q558 1.2.4). However, instead of

¹ I am grateful to Blažej Štrba and his colleagues for the kind invitation to the Former Prophets conference in Bađin (December 2019) and for comments on an earlier form of this article. I am also grateful to the participants at the Catholic Biblical Association of America online Deuterocanonical Seminar (August 2020) for suggestions.

² GRAY, *I & II Kings*, 389.

³ DHARAMRAJ, *Prophet*, 65-66.

⁴ KOSKENNIEMI, *Miracle-Workers*, 31-36.

recording any deeds of this northern prophet, the Chronicler only refers to a warning letter he sent to King Jehoram of Judah (2 Chr 21:12-15). Within deuterocanonical literature, the farewell speech of Mattathias to his sons refers briefly to Elijah's zeal for the law and his ascent into heaven (1 Macc 2:58).

Ben Sira's account of Elijah occurs within the Praise of the Ancestors (Sir 44:1–50:24), a long poetic composition celebrating Israel's heroes of faith from the Genesis patriarchs until the recent high priest Simeon II. The poem on Elijah (48:1-12) occurs in the middle of the section on the Former and Latter Prophets (46:1–49:10). This section of 120 bicola begins with Joshua (46:1: "Moses' servant in prophecy") and ends with "the Twelve Prophets" (49:10). A canonical concern is evident in 46:1–49:10, because (as Sid Leiman observes) it "reflects the Masoretic sequence of books: Joshua, Judges, Samuel, Kings, Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, and the Twelve Minor Prophets"⁵.

Despite his concern for the Law of Moses, Ben Sira's Praise of the Ancestors is marked by its greater emphasis on the subsequent biblical history described in the Former Prophets. The major part of Ben Sira's Prophets section, beginning in Sir 46:1, traces the biblical story throughout the Former Prophets. In fact, the first of the Latter Prophets, Isaiah, does not receive a mention till the second part of the poem on Hezekiah (48:20-25). Near the end of the section, Jeremiah receives two bicola (49:7), Ezekiel two bicola (49:8-9), and the "Twelve Prophets" one bicolon (49:10). Yet among the major figures in the Former Prophets, Ben Sira focuses on several wonderworkers – especially Joshua, Samuel, Elijah, and Elisha. It is noteworthy that the poem on Elijah alludes to the first of the Latter Prophets (Isa 49:6 in Sir 48:10), who will soon be introduced (Sir 48:20).

Strikingly, the poem on Elijah also includes two major allusions to the last of the Minor Prophets (Mal 3:19.23-24 [4:1.5-6] in Sir 48:1.10)⁶. Besides their poetic value, this double allusion to the final chapter of Malachi has a canonical purpose in drawing the diverse Hebrew prophets more closely together as a defined group. While it is likely that both the inclusion of Joshua with the Former Prophets and the collection of the "Twelve Prophets" (Sir 49:10) into a unit predate Ben Sira, the sage's poetic activity contributes to the growing prophetic identity of the two bookends framing the Prophets in the classification of the Hebrew Bible.

⁵ LEIMAN, *Canonization*, 150; cf. STADELMANN, *Ben Sira*, 190.

⁶ BEENTJES, *Elijah*, 93.

Ben Sira's interest in the Former Prophets contrasts with the general lack of interest evident in the preserved Qumran documents. For instance, whereas the Dead Sea Scrolls preserve more than 20 fragmentary copies of Genesis and at least six fragmentary copies of Jeremiah, there are only three of the Book of Kings (4Q54; 5Q2; 6Q4). Admittedly, the story of the heavenly ascent (2 Kgs 2) is reflected in the *Paraphrase of Kings* (4Q382) and in the *Elisha Apocryphon* (4Q481a), which also names Elisha once (4Q481a 2.3)⁷. Whereas the Qumran Hebrew non-biblical documents attest the full name of Moses about 75×, surprisingly the full name of Elijah is never attested in the Hebrew non-biblical writings from Qumran, even if an Aramaic Vision text (4Q558) mentions his name. In addition, 4Q521 (*Messianic Apocalypse*) attributes the miraculous works of Isa 61 to an eschatological figure, perhaps denoting Elijah, because of a reference to raising the dead and a possible echo of the prophet's prayer to shut the heavens⁸.

Elijah is also virtually absent from the works of Philo, but his treatise on God's immutability mentions that the widow Tamar (= the widow of Zarephath) met an unnamed "prophet" and "man of God" (*Mut.* 136-138). However, Josephus writes at length about Elijah (*Ant.* 8.319-9.185), although Louis Feldman notes that Josephus had ambivalent feelings toward him⁹. On the one hand, since the prophet was a biblical zealot, Josephus could hardly aggrandize him because of his own dependence on the Roman imperial family. On the other hand, Josephus could not afford to downgrade such a powerful biblical hero, although he downplays the miracles associated with him.

This study will focus mainly on the preserved Hebrew text of Sir 48, found in Genizah MS B. I will be using the text edition of Moshe Segal, who reconstructs the missing text in a few lacunae (e.g., 48:11b-12b), and for the Greek text, I use Joseph Ziegler's edition¹⁰. A few significant differences between the Greek and Hebrew texts of this passage will also be noted¹¹.

⁷ FELDMAN, *Dead Sea Scrolls*, 54-61 (on 4Q382), 151-55 (on 4Q481a).

⁸ COLLINS, *Scepter*, 117-122.

⁹ FELDMAN, *Josephus' Portrait*, 61-86.

¹⁰ SEGAL, *Sefer*, 330; ZIEGLER, *Sapientia*, 350-51. The Hebrew poem is found in a leaf of MS B (XVII Verso, MS.Heb.e.62) containing Sir 47:23-48:12, housed at the Bodleian Library in Oxford, but available online at the Ben Sira website. In this article, all biblical translations (including Ben Sira) are mine unless otherwise noted. When distinguishing between textual forms of Ben Sira, H^B = Hebrew MS B; G = Greek; S = Syriac.

¹¹ On major differences between the Greek and Hebrew texts, see BEENTJES, *Elijah*, 98; KOSKENNIEMI, *Miracle-Workers*, 265.

Elijah as a Fiery Prophet Against Idolatry (Sir 47:25–48:3)

- H^B: ²⁵ And its [= Israel's] sin grew very great,
and to every evil it sold itself,
¹ Until there arose a prophet like fire,
and his words were like a burning furnace.
² And he broke for them the staff of bread,
and in his zeal, he made them few.
³ By God's word he stopped up heaven,
and he brought down three instances of fire.
- G: ²⁵ And they sought out every wickedness,
until vengeance came upon them.
¹ And there arose Elijah, a prophet like fire,
and his word burned like a torch,
² Who brought upon them a famine,
and by his zeal made them few.
³ By the Lord's word he held back heaven,
and likewise three times brought down fire.

Ben Sira's depiction of Elijah is set within a description of the idolatry that ensued after Solomon's death and the division of the kingdom. When Sir 47:23 states that "Rehoboam caused the people to go wild by his policy (or advice: *עצתו*)," it echoes the monarch's harsh behaviour in 1 Kgs 12:13-14: "He abandoned the advice (*עצת*) of the elders that they had advised him, but he spoke to them according to the advice (*עצת*) of the youths." Thereafter, Sir 47:23 goes on to say that Jeroboam son of Nebat "sinned and caused Israel to sin," echoing 1 Kgs 14:16, where the prophet Ahijah declares that God will give up Israel "on account of the sins of Jeroboam, which he sinned and which he caused Israel to sin." Ben Sira proleptically traces the theological cause for the exile of the Northern Kingdom (722 BCE) back to the idolatry of Jeroboam son of Nebat two centuries earlier (47:23-25), even before mentioning the ninth-century BCE prophets Elijah and Elisha¹². Nevertheless, 48:15 emphasizes that although Jeroboam was guilty for his idolatry (47:23), the whole Northern Kingdom

¹² BEENTJES, *Elijah*, 92.

deserved punishment for its lack of repentance after the preaching and wonderworking by Elijah and Elisha¹³.

The sage's introduction to Elijah has further reminiscences of phraseology from the Book of Kings: "And its [= Israel's] sin (חטאתו) grew very great, and to every evil (רעה) it sold itself (התמכר)" (Sir 47:25). The mention of sin echoes the Deuteronomist's repeated verdict on the northern kings Nadab and Baasha: "He did what was evil in the Lord's eyes and walked in the way of his father/Jeroboam and in his sin (חטאתו) by which he made Israel sin" (1 Kgs 15:26.34). The final verb echoes the Deuteronomistic narrator's comment on Elijah's adversary Ahab: "Surely, there was no one like Ahab, who sold himself (התמכר) to do what was evil (הרע) in the eyes of the Lord" (21:25). The same verb also recalls the Deuteronomistic explanation for the exile of the Northern Kingdom: "And they sold themselves (ויתמכרו) to do what was evil (הרע) in the Lord's eyes to provoke him" (2 Kgs 17:17).

The preserved Hebrew text of Sir 47–48 has a series of three usages of the construction "until" (עד - אשר). The first and the third instances, which have negative overtones (47:25; 48:15), provide the framing context for the sage's depiction of Elijah, emphasized by the term "sin" (חטאת). According to 47:23–24: "Rehoboam caused the people to go wild by his policy, until there arose *Let-There-Be-No-Memory-For-Him*, Jeroboam son of Nebat, who sinned and caused Israel to sin. And he placed an obstacle for Ephraim, to drive them away from their soil." In 47:23, the phrase "until there arose" (עד - אשר - קם) leads to a description of Jeroboam's sin, regarded as the long-term theological cause for the exile. The second use of the phrase, which is positive, occurs in 48:1: "until there arose" (עד - אשר - קם). Interestingly, the Elijah story employs the same construction in 1 Kgs 17:17: "The son of the woman, the mistress of the house, became ill, and his illness was very strong until (עד - אשר) there was no breath left in him." In the third instance of this construction (Sir 48:15), the people's evil deeds lead to their exile: "They did not cease from their sin, until (עד - אשר) they were torn away from their land." Here the sage echoes 2 Kgs 17:22–23: "The sons of Israel walked in all Jeroboam's sins that he committed, and did not depart from them, until (עד - אשר) the Lord removed Israel from before him."

Although the Greek translation of Sir 48:1 begins a new poem: "And there arose Elijah, a prophet like fire," such delimitation does not work for the

¹³ HILDESHEIM, *Prophet*, 78–79.

corresponding Hebrew poem, because the opening phrase: “until there arose” (קם - אש - דע) depends grammatically on the preceding clause¹⁴. While similar at first glance, in fact the Hebrew and Greek texts of 48:1b differ significantly. Using the imagery of a furnace from Mal 3:19 [4:1], the Hebrew states that “his words were like a burning furnace.” By way of contrast, the Greek employs the imagery of the torch or lamp from Isa 62:1 LXX, saying that “his word burned like a torch (ὡς λαμπάς).” Whereas the Hebrew reference has overtones of judgment, the Greek allusion moves towards overtones of salvation, although the echo of Isa 62:1 in 1QM 11:10 occurs in the context of judgment on enemies.

Reflecting the many references to fire in the earlier biblical account (1 Kgs 17–2 Kgs 2), Ben Sira aptly dubs Elijah “a prophet like fire” (Sir 48:1). This fiery comparison recalls the three instances when Elijah brought down lightning from the sky (v.3)¹⁵. The first case was the lightning (called the “fire of the Lord”) that came down on the sacrifice at Mount Carmel, ahead of the torrential rainstorm (1 Kgs 18:38)¹⁶. The second and third instances refer to the bolts of lightning that fell on the messengers sent by King Ahaziah (2 Kgs 1:9-14). The motif recurs when Sir 48:9 refers to the “fiery troops” (אש - גדודי) that brought Elijah up to heaven¹⁷.

Fire is elsewhere a symbol of divine revelation, since God is called a “consuming fire” (Exod 24:17; Deut 4:24; 9:3). Deuteronomy describes the Deity speaking at the fiery Horeb theophany: “You saw no form on the day when the Lord spoke to you at Horeb from the midst of the fire” (Deut 4:15). Arising from their encounter with God, the prophets speak the divine word. Since Elijah is a prophet, there is a fitting echo of God’s depiction of his word as being “like fire” (כאש, Jer 23:29). Indeed, when Jeremiah tried to stop speaking the divine word, “it became in my heart like a burning fire (כאש - בערת), imprisoned in my bones” (20:9).

Fire symbolizes judgment in Mal 3:19 [4:1] as elsewhere (cf. Deut 9:3; Ps 21:10), and the sage’s poem mentions the “judgments of vengeance” heard by

¹⁴ BEENTJES, *Elijah*, 92. Treatment of the Elijah poem begins with 47:25 in SKEHAN – DI LELLA, *Wisdom*, 533; cf. GILBERT, *Les relectures*, 19.

¹⁵ DHARAMRAJ, *Prophet*, 162-63.

¹⁶ Tractate *Yoma* quotes this verse to illustrate one of the six kinds of fire – the kind that consumes both solids and liquids (*b. Yoma* 21b). Reference courtesy of Vincent Skemp.

¹⁷ DHARAMRAJ, *Prophet*, 183.

Elijah at Horeb (Sir 48:7)¹⁸. Using an inverted quotation, the statement in Sir 48:1, that Elijah's words were "like a burning furnace (בוּעַר - כְּתִנּוֹר)," reverses the phrase in Mal 3:19 [4:1], describing the day of judgment "burning like a furnace (כְּתִנּוֹר - בְּעַר)"¹⁹. The motif of fiery judgment recurs in a story about Elijah's birth, found in the *Lives of the Prophets* (1st century CE or later):

When he was to be born, his father Sobacha saw that men of shining white appearance were greeting him, and wrapping him in fire, and they gave him flames of fire to eat. And he went and reported (this) in Jerusalem, and the oracle told him, "Do not be afraid, for his dwelling will be light and his word judgment, and he will judge Israel [with sword and fire]." (*Liv. Pro.* 21:2-3)²⁰

Within Sir 48:2 Elijah's breaking of the staff of bread alludes to his calling of a prolonged drought (1 Kgs 17:1; Jas 5:17), thereby causing famine for Israel (1 Kgs 18:3; Luke 4:25). When Sir 48:2 says of Elijah: "In his zeal, he made them few (הַמְעִיטִים)," it refers to the way the zealous prophet diminished the people through the famine, and then killed the prophets of Baal at the end of the contest on Mount Carmel (1 Kgs 18:40)²¹. Elijah's zealous temperament (1 Kgs 19:14) is recalled in Mattathias' farewell speech to his sons: "Elijah, because of zeal for the law, was taken up into heaven" (1 Macc 2:58). The imagery of fire (Sir 48:1.3) can represent zeal (Ezek 36:5; Ps 79:5), which was a major feature of Elijah's character²².

Ben Sira explains the cause of the famine in 48:3: "By God's word he stopped up heaven." In 1 Kgs 8:35 Solomon prays that God will hear the people's plea "when heaven is stopped up (בְּהֶעָצַר - שָׁמַיִם) and there is no rain because they have sinned towards you, and they pray towards this place." While the sage stresses that this action occurred "by God's word" (בְּדִבְרֵי - אֵל), the biblical prophet announces that the drought will happen "in accordance with my word" (לְפִי - דְּבַרִי), because his two subsequent moves during the drought happen

¹⁸ STADELMANN, *Ben Sira*, 197. Although fire can represent divine wrath (Jer 4:4; 21:12), the returning Elijah's role will be "to put an end to anger before the wrath" (Sir 48:10).

¹⁹ BEENTJES, *Elijah*, 93.

²⁰ HARE, *The Lives*, 396. Reference courtesy of Kelley Coblenz Bautch.

²¹ There is an ironic overtone in the sage's assertion that Elijah made the sinful Israelites few, in view of Elijah's zealous complaint that he alone is left (1 Kgs 19:10.14).

²² HILDESHEIM, *Prophet*, 92; SCHORCH, *Elijah*, 98-101. Previously, Sir 45:23 speaks of the zeal of Phinehas, and some rabbinic texts identified Phinehas with Elijah (*Tg. J. Exod* 6:18; *Pirqe R. El.* 29); cf. SCHORCH, *Elijah*, 106-109.

because the word of the Lord came to him (17:2.8), and later his two prophetic messages to King Ahab also occur because the Lord's word came to him (21:17.28). Moreover, just as Sir 48:3 has just stated that the closure of the heavens happened "by God's word" (אל - בדבר), so 1 Kgs 16:34 stresses that the death of Hiel's two sons occurred "in accordance with the Lord's word" (יהוה - כדבר), made through an earlier figure Joshua, whom Ben Sira considers prophetic (Sir 46:1). Just as King Ahab thinks it a little thing to follow the way of Jeroboam and turn to Baal worship (1 Kgs 16:31), so Hiel of Bethel thinks it a minor matter to leave Bethel and rebuild Jericho (v. 34)²³.

Elijah's Mighty Works (Sir 48:4-6)

- H^B: ⁴ How awesome you were, Elijah!
 Happy is anyone who may boast like you!²⁴
⁵ The one raising a corpse from death,
 and from Sheol, by the Lord's favour!
⁶ The one bringing down kings to the pit,
 and nobles down from their beds!
- G: ⁴ How you were glorified, Elijah, in your marvels!
 And who is to boast like you?
⁵ The one who raised a corpse from death,
 and from Hades at the word of the Most High!
⁶ The one bringing down kings to destruction,
 and honoured ones from their bed!

Although the Greek has already named Elijah (Sir 48:1), he remains unnamed in the Hebrew till 48:4, just as the Hebrew text of 46:13 postpones naming Samuel and 47:12 delays naming Solomon. Interestingly, Josephus also delays naming Elijah, since he is first introduced in the *Antiquities* as "a certain prophet of the most high God" from the city of Tishbe in the country of Gilead (*Ant.* 8.319)²⁵. Only later does Josephus specify that the prophet is "Elias" [=

²³ CONROY, Hiel, 210-18.

²⁴ Emendation of relative pronoun אשר ("that") to אשרי ("happy"). A similar emendation is widely proposed in 48:11 (see below).

²⁵ KOET, Elijah, 181.

Elijah], when King Ahab tells his steward Obadiah that he had sent men throughout the entire land to look for “the prophet Elias,” but they had not found him (*Ant.* 8.329). The Greek of Sir 48:4a shows concern with social honour when it exclaims about Elijah, “how you were glorified,” imitating a comparable expression from the praise of Joshua and Simeon (“how he was glorified”: 46:2; 50:5). This motif of honour occurs in the Hebrew of 48:4b with the verb “be honoured” or “show oneself splendid” or “boast” (יתפאר)²⁶. The verb occurs in the divine promise to Israel: “You are my servant, Israel, in whom I will show myself splendid (אתפאר)” (Isa 49:3). If in Sir 48:4 (as in 48:11) we accept an emendation of the relative pronoun אשר (“that”) to אשרי (“happy”), Ben Sira may in this context be implying that only Elisha has cause to boast of miracles like Elijah (48:12-14). The wording echoes Moses’ eulogy of Israel in Deut 33:29: “Happy are you (אשריך), Israel! Who is like you (כמוך)?”

As in three other passages in the Praise of the Ancestors (Sir 46:2; 47:14; 50:5), the sage here employs the term “how!” (מה) to express the greatness of a biblical figure. Third-person constructions appear in the exclamation on Joshua in 46:2 (“How splendid he was when he stretched out a hand!”) and on the high priest Simeon in 50:5 (“How splendid he was when he looked out from the tent!”). By way of contrast, the second-person exclamation about Elijah in 48:4 uses a similar construction to the second-person exclamation about Solomon in 47:14 (“How wise you were in your youth!”). Unlike most of the characters described in the third person within the Praise of the Ancestors, Ben Sira addresses Elijah with 9 bicola in the second person (48:4-11), just as the Hebrew text also has a second-person address to King Solomon lasting 9 bicola (47:14-20 H^B, which lacks 47:16)²⁷.

Ben Sira’s Hebrew text begins the verse by praising Elijah as “awesome” (נורא, 48:4), perhaps recalling the Israelites’ response when fire descended on the sacrifice at the end of the contest on Mount Carmel: “and the whole people was in awe (revocalizing וירא), and they fell on their faces” (1 Kgs 18:39)²⁸. Because the same adjective describes the great and “awesome” (נורא) day of the Lord in Mal 3:23, Ben Sira may be hinting at Elijah’s role in actualizing divine

²⁶ The cognate noun “splendour” (תפארת) describes the glory of the priestly figures of Aaron and Simeon (Sir 45:8; 50:1), as well as the splendour of Adam (49:16).

²⁷ HILDESHEIM, *Prophet*, 79.

²⁸ Here I revocalize the verb in the MT, which states: “and the whole people saw (וירא), and they fell on their faces” (1 Kgs 18:39).

judgment, both in his lifetime and at his future return. Possibly also Ben Sira's wording in his address to Elijah (Sir 48:4) is an ironic reversal of his reaction to Jezebel's threat to make his life like that of one of the slaughtered Baal prophets: "Then he was afraid" (revocalizing **וירא** in 1 Kgs 19:3 to match LXX ἐφοβήθη)²⁹. Sirach 43:2 also employs the adjective "awesome" to describe the sun, subsequently depicted as a fiery smelting pot (v. 4)³⁰. While the Masada text of Sir 43:2 calls the sun: "an awesome (**נורא**) instrument, the work of the Most High," the Cairo Genizah MS B changes the wording: "how (**מה**) awesome (**נורא**) is the work of the Most High!" Elijah's connection to the sun may be suggested by the way he was carried up to heaven with fiery troops (Sir 48:9).

Possibly Elijah is addressed directly because of the belief that he did not die but was taken up to heaven to await his return (Sir 48:9-10)³¹. The literary device of apostrophe is often an emotional exclamation, as in David's lamenting over Saul and Jonathan (2 Sam 1:19-27) and over Absalom (19:1 [18:33])³². For rhetorical effect, the biblical poets use the device to favourably address the God-fearing man (Ps 128:2-3) and to offer admiration directly to the woman of worth (Prov 31:29). Tod Linafelt comments on the poetic significance of using direct address:

The apostrophic mode constitutes the speaker as speaker, a speaker who wants to be heard and responded to; however, it is not the posited "hearers" of the poem that are truly expected to respond, but rather, those who overhear it.³³

Thus, when Ben Sira declares, "How awesome you were, Elijah," he is not expecting Elijah himself to respond, but the exclamation is for the benefit of his own audience³⁴.

Perhaps the most spectacular of the prophet's awesome deeds (Sir 48:5) was to raise to life the widow's son at Zarephath (1 Kgs 17:22). Here Ben Sira

²⁹ DEVRIES, *1 Kings*, 233.

³⁰ Thanks to Jordan Schmidt for this observation. The awesome prophet ascends to heaven, where the moon is, and Ben Sira also employs the adjective "awesome" to describe the moon, since Sir 43:8 (H^B) says of it: "how (**מה**) awesome (**נורא**) [it is] in its changing!"

³¹ Is Solomon addressed directly because he is felt to be somehow present in the location of his temple?

³² LINA FELT, *Private Poetry*, 500-516.

³³ LINA FELT, *Private Poetry*, 502.

³⁴ By way of contrast, the presumed actual priestly audience are directly addressed in his second-person doxological prayer for wisdom in Sir 45:25-26 and 50:23.

deploys the hiphil of the verb “raise” (קום), which depicts the restoration of the people in Hos 6:2: “He will raise us (יקמו) and we will live.” Just as the Greek of Sir 48:5 interprets the Hebrew participle גוע (lit., “one expiring”) as “someone dead” (νεκρόν – so also the Syriac here), most interpreters understand the revived person as one who has already died, in accordance with a common reading of the Deuteronomistic narrative (1 Kgs 17:17-24)³⁵. However, like the Syriac “dying” in Sir 8:7, Moshe Segal interprets the participle in 48:5 (גוע) as someone going to die but not yet dead – as in Ps 88:16, where NRSV renders: “close to death”³⁶. Similarly, some modern interpreters of 1 Kgs 17:17-24 follow Josephus (*Ant.* 8.325) by regarding the Zarephath story as describing an apparent death where the prophet actually revives a very sick lad³⁷. Elijah’s divinely authorized intervention to bring someone back from the realm of the dead contrasts with Saul’s unauthorized consultation of the dead Samuel at Endor (Sir 46:20; 1 Sam 28:3-25), against the Torah stipulation (Deut 18:9-14).

Verse Sir 48:6 praises Elijah as “the one bringing down kings to the pit [שחת = the grave or destruction], and nobles down from their beds!” Although Ben Sira does not name these kings, they include Ahab, Ahaziah, and Jehoram. Most famously, after the sulky King Ahab had lain down on “his bed” (מטתו, 1 Kgs 21:4) and Queen Jezebel had arranged the judicial murder of Naboth, Elijah predicted Ahab’s death as a punishment (21:19; 22:34-38). Mention of the word “bed” (מיטה) also recalls its presence in the story of Israel’s King Ahaziah (2 Kgs 1:4.6.16), whose death Elijah foretold as the penalty for his apostasy (vv. 16-17). Moreover, although the exact term does not appear, the bed motif recalls Hazael’s use of a “netted bed-cover” (מכבר) to suffocate the sick King Ben-hadad (8:15). If we consider the Chronistic narrative (possibly anachronistic), we could also include Elijah’s sending of a letter predicting punishment for Judah’s bed-bound King Jehoram, who died of an incurable disease (2 Chr 21:12-19)³⁸. In addition, there is an ironic contrast with Sir 48:5, since Elijah raised to life the widow’s son, whom he took and placed down on “his bed” (מטהו, 1 Kgs 17:19).

³⁵ SKEHAN – DI LELLA, *Wisdom*, 529; HILDESHEIM, *Prophet*, 95; SMEND, *Weisheit erklärt*, 76; MOPSIK, *Sagesse*, 302. Commentators accepting the child’s actual death include COGAN, *1 Kings*, 428-30; WALSH, *1 Kings*, 233.

³⁶ SEGAL, *Sefer*, 331.

³⁷ DEVRIES, *1 Kings*, 222, 220; GRAY, *I & II Kings*, 382-83; GARSIEL, *From Earth to Heaven*, 46.

³⁸ HILDESHEIM, *Prophet*, 97.

Indeed, the contrast is expressed with the opposite participial verbs, since Elijah is both “the one raising” (המקים) to life and “the one bringing down” (המוריד) to death. This pattern matches the vertical axis found in the Elijah cycle, especially in the story of the descent of fire at Mount Carmel (1 Kgs 18:38) and the prophet’s subsequent heavenly ascent (2 Kgs 2:1-18).

Elijah’s Commission at Sinai (Sir 48:7-8)

H^B: ⁸ The one anointing someone full of recompenses,
and a prophet as a successor in your place —

⁷ And he let him hear punishments at Sinai,
and at Horeb, judgments of vengeance!

G: ⁷ Hearing a rebuke at Sinai,
and at Horeb judgments of vengeance!

⁸ The one anointing kings as a recompense,
and prophets as successors after him!

While verses Sir 48:7-8 deal with Elijah’s visit to Mount Horeb (1 Kgs 19:8-18), the Hebrew text differs from the Greek and Syriac by placing v. 8 before v. 7³⁹. Verse 8 echoes God’s instruction about anointing successors in 1 Kgs 19:15-17, but unlike Moses, who anoints the priest Aaron (Sir 45:15), Elijah anoints kings and prophets (48:7). Verse 8b has a clear allusion to Elisha in the alliterative phrase: “a prophet as a successor (תחליף) in your place (תחתיד),” based on the command in 1 Kgs 19:16: “You shall anoint Elisha son of Shaphat of Abel-meholah as prophet in your place (תחתיד).” Presumably the Genizah Hebrew verse contains synonymous parallelism, so that the person “full (מלא) of recompenses” (Sir 48:8a) is also the successor prophet Elisha⁴⁰. To fulfil the role of bringing recompenses, Elisha sent a delegate to anoint Jehu (2 Kgs 9:1-10), who then performed vengeance on the royal line of Ahab. The noun “recompenses” (תשלומות) recalls Jehu’s reference to the divine prophecy of vengeance against Ahab’s son Joram: “Surely for the blood of Naboth and for

³⁹ If the Hebrew sequence is original, the Greek and Syriac may have placed v. 7 before v. 8 to avoid the impression that the successor prophet Elisha (v. 8) was the one hearing God at Sinai (v. 7). For the same reason, the Hebrew avoided the expected series of participles: “the one hearing” (v. 7).

⁴⁰ SKEHAN – DI LELLA, *Wisdom*, 533; BEENTJES, *Elijah*, 94.

the blood of his son that I saw yesterday, says the Lord, I will recompense (ושלמתי) you on this plot of ground” (2 Kgs 9:26)⁴¹. Many commentators on Sir 48:8 follow the Greek and Syriac, however, by reading “kings (מלכי) of recompenses” (= kings performing recompenses), referring not only to Jehu who terminated Ahab’s dynasty (2 Kgs 9:1–10:36), but also to Hazael who brought vengeance on Ben-hadad (8:7-15)⁴². Technically, it was not Elijah himself but Elisha who in fact encountered Hazael in Damascus (8:7-15) and also sent a representative to anoint Jehu (9:1-10)⁴³.

Verse Sir 48:7 explains God’s message for Elijah at the holy mountain: “And he let him hear punishments at Sinai, and at Horeb (בחורב) judgments (משפטי) of vengeance (נקם).” Here the sage recalls the admonition in Mal 3:22: “Remember the Torah of Moses my servant, which I commanded him at Horeb (בחרב) for all Israel – statutes and judgments (משפטים).” Whereas the Deuteronomist’s story uses only the place name Horeb (1 Kgs 19:8), Ben Sira differs from earlier biblical books by explicitly identifying Horeb with Sinai, thereby enhancing Elijah’s similarity to Moses, whom tradition connects both to Sinai (Exod 19:11) and to Horeb (Deut 4:15). The language of Sir 48:7 has similarities to God’s communication to Moses: “He let him hear his voice” to teach “his judgments (משפטי) to Israel” (Sir 45:5).

The Greek understands that at Sinai Elijah was given to hear “rebuke” (ἐλεγμὸν = תוכחה *tōkahat*), whereas the parallelism suggests that the unvocalized Hebrew spoke of “punishments” (תוכחות *tōkēhōt*)⁴⁴. The noun echoes Hos 5:9: “Ephraim, you will be for desolation on the day of punishment (תוכחה *tōkēhā*) among the tribes of Israel.” Elijah heard judgments on Mount Horeb affecting the apostate people of Israel, because all except seven thousand had bowed the knee to Baal (1 Kgs 19:18). The motif of vengeance also recalls the message of Elisha’s delegate when anointing Jehu: “You shall strike down the house of Ahab your master, so that on Jezebel I may avenge (ונקמתי) the blood of my servants the prophets, and the blood of all the Lord’s servants” (2 Kgs 9:7).

⁴¹ Although the piel verb שלם (“repay” or “recompense”) is common in the MT, the noun תשלומת (*tišlōmet* or *tašlōmet* = “recompense”) appears three other times in Ben Sira (12:2 H^A; 14:6 H^A; 35:13 H^B) but never in the MT.

⁴² HILDESHEIM, *Prophet*, 68; SEGAL, *Sefer*, 331; PETERS, *Buch*, 411.

⁴³ STADELMANN, *Ben Sira*, 199.

⁴⁴ GILBERT, *Les relectures*, 19.

Elijah Ascended and Ready for the Future (Sir 48:9-10)

H^B: ⁹ The one taken upwards in a tornado,
and on high with fiery troops!

¹⁰ The one recorded as ready for the time,
to put an end to anger before the wrath,
To bring back the heart of fathers towards sons,
and to reestablish the tribes of Israel!

G: ⁹ The one taken up in a whirlwind of fire,
and in a chariot of fiery horses!

¹⁰ The one recorded in rebukes for the times,
to abate anger before wrath,
To turn a father's heart to his son,
and to restore the tribes of Jacob!

In Sir 48:9, the passive form “taken up” (נלקח) denotes a heavenly assumption, while the Greek participle (ἀναλημφθείς) resembles the Greek of 1 Macc 2:58 that Elijah “was taken up” (ἀνελήμφθη) into heaven. Sirach 48:9 speaks of Elijah being “taken up” (נלקח = *niphal* participle), using the same verb form (*niphal* perfect) applied to Enoch in 49:14⁴⁵. In addition, the same *niphal* verb appears in the book's first mention of Enoch (44:16), though many scholars view this verse as a later gloss because of its absence from the Ben Sira Masada scroll⁴⁶. Ralph Hildesheim has pointed out that in the Praise of the Ancestors, the sage is not absolutely closed to some specific cases of survival after death⁴⁷. Just as Ben Sira mentions two persons who while still alive were “taken up,” namely Enoch and Elijah ([44:16]; 48:9; 49:14), Elijah is also paired with Enoch in Philo's *Questions and Answers on Genesis* (QG 1.86) and Josephus' *Antiquities* (Ant. 9.28).

While Ben Sira borrows the term “tornado” or “whirlwind” (סערה) from 2 Kgs 2:11, the term “troops” echoes Bildad's rhetorical question to Job about God's power: “Is there a number to his troops (לגדודיו)?” (Job 25:3). The mention

⁴⁵ Whereas 2 Kgs 2:9 uses the passive (*niphal*) for Elijah, Gen 5:24 employs the active (*qal*) for Enoch.

⁴⁶ SKEHAN – DI LELLA, *Wisdom*, 499; HILDESHEIM, *Prophet*, 100, n. 100; BEENTJES, *Elijah*, 96, n. 25.

⁴⁷ HILDESHEIM, *Prophet*, 261-62; SCHNOCKS, *Totenerweckung*, 296-298.

of “fiery troops” (גְּדוּדֵי - אֵשׁ) almost matches the “fiery chariots” (רֶכֶב - אֵשׁ) and “fiery horses” (סוּסֵי - אֵשׁ) that took away Elijah to heaven (2 Kgs 2:11)⁴⁸. A comparable motif recurs in the story of Elisha, when God revealed to the prophet’s servant that “the mountain was full of horses (סוּסִים) and fiery chariots (רֶכֶב - אֵשׁ) surrounding Elisha” (6:17)⁴⁹.

Ben Sira describes the exalted Elijah as the one recorded or written down (כְּתוּב) as ready for the occasion or time. This participle has a double meaning. On the one hand, in Elijah’s readiness for the time of his future activity, it depicts him as “recorded” or “enrolled” or “appointed,” as in Isa 4:3: “everyone recorded (כָּל-הַכְּתוּב) for life in Jerusalem.” On the other hand, even if the participle is not exactly a proper citation formula, because it is Elijah himself who is written down, it still leads into a clear scriptural reference to the end of the prophet Malachi’s book (Mal 3:23-24)⁵⁰. However, this passive participle may also hint at the shift from viewing Elijah as an oral preacher towards seeing him as a literary figure. Whereas the Deuteronomistic History presents him as a “speaking prophet” (1 Kgs 17–2 Kgs 2), the Chronicler’s unique reference to Elijah refers only to a “letter” or “written message” (מִכְתָּב) made by Elijah (2 Chr 21:12).

The final verses of the prophet Malachi contain this promise: “Behold, I am sending you Elijah the prophet before the coming of the great and awesome day of the Lord. And he will bring back the heart of fathers towards sons and the heart of sons to their fathers, lest I come and strike the land with the ban” (Mal 3:23-24 [4:5-6]). In light of this promise, Ben Sira declares that Elijah is “ready” (נָכוֹן) for this role. The Qumran *Messianic Apocalypse* (4Q521 2.3.2) has a comparable echo of Mal 3:24 in the motif of reconciliation between fathers and sons, using Malachi’s three-word phrase “fathers towards sons” (עַל - בְּנִים - אֲבוֹת)⁵¹. In addition, this Qumran mini-apocalypse employs the term “ready” (נָכוֹן), but unfortunately its fragmentary context in the Qumran text precludes

⁴⁸ DHARAMRAJ, *Prophet*, 183-84.

⁴⁹ Moreover, the term “troops” (גְּדוּדִים) also recalls Elisha’s death, since 2 Kgs 13:20 states: “And Elisha died, and they buried him, and Moabite troops used to come into the land.”

⁵⁰ SMEND, *Weisheit erklärt*, 46; BEENTJES, *Elijah*, 93; HILDESHEIM, *Prophet*, 100-101; SKEHAN – DI LELLA, *Wisdom*, 530. The term “written” or “recorded” became popular in later apocalyptic texts (Dan 12:1; Rev 5:1).

⁵¹ COLLINS, *Scepter*, 120; BEENTJES, *Elijah*, 93, n. 17.

a full comparison⁵². Interestingly, Mal 3:23 is also echoed in a fragmentary Aramaic Vision text from Qumran: “To you I will send Elijah before... power, lightning, and meteors” (4Q558 54.2.3-5)⁵³.

The word “for the time/opportunity” (לעת) means “for the right/particular time” in Sir 10:4, where the sage asserts that God provides a suitable leader for each time: “The government of the earth is in God’s hand, and over it will stand a person for the right time (לעת).” Moreover, the Hebrew text of 39:30 speaks of God’s providential ruling of all things in the universe: “All these things were created for their function, and they are in a storehouse and will be appointed for the right time (לעת).” The word in 48:10 refers to the right or particular time in the future, unknown to humanity, when Elijah will return to fulfil the appointed mission⁵⁴. Whereas two of the Greek uncials speak of one recorded for the times “in rebukes” (ἐν ἐλεγμοῖς – perhaps referring to Mal 3:23-24), instead of this phrase Ziegler follows Smend in proposing the adjective “ready” (ἔτοιμος) to match the Hebrew⁵⁵.

After the mention of Elijah’s role in enabling vengeance to be enacted on sinners (Sir 48:6-8), it comes as a surprising contrast that, as in Mal 3:23-24, the expected return of Elijah will not be to bring punishment but rather “to put an end to anger” before the dreadful day of the Lord’s judgment. Although Ben Sira describes the prophet’s appointed task of bringing divine anger to an end, the Greek and Syriac differ on what follows. The slightly tautological Greek text says: “before wrath” (θυμῶ = חרון)⁵⁶. Segal tentatively suggests that the lost Hebrew may have had the word “ban” or “curse” (חרם), echoing Mal 3:24⁵⁷. However, the Syriac echoes Malachi’s mention of “the day of the Lord” (Mal 3:23) in its wording: “before the day of the Lord”⁵⁸.

⁵² JASSEN, *Mediating the Divine*, 147-148; COLLINS, *Scepter*, 120. Possibly the fragmentary text of 4Q521 could here be referring to Elijah: “he is ready (נכו): coming are fathers towards sons.”

⁵³ GARCÍA MARTÍNEZ – TIGCHELAAR (eds.), *The Dead Sea Scrolls*, II, 1115; cf. PUECH, L’attente du retour d’Élie, 3-26; JASSEN, *Mediating the Divine*, 143-44.

⁵⁴ The Greek plural phrase “for the times” (εἰς καιρούς) suggests the apocalyptic notion of the final times (Dan 12:7; 1 Thess 5:1; 1 Tim 4:1).

⁵⁵ SMEND, *Weisheit erklärt*, 460-61.

⁵⁶ Accepted by SEGAL, *Sefer*, 330; PETERS, *Buch*, 409; SAUER, *Sirach*, 326.

⁵⁷ SEGAL, *Sefer*, 332.

⁵⁸ Accepted by SKEHAN – DI LELLA, *Wisdom*, 531; HILDESHEIM, *Prophet*, 70; MOPSIK, *Sagesse*, 303.

The depiction of Elijah's future role in Sir 48:10 could be understood as reflecting his prophetic ministry described in 1 Kgs 17–2 Kgs 2. His first task (according to the Greek) is to put an end to anger before the wrath, just as Elijah sought the people's repentance in order to avert God's final wrath that would ultimately destroy the Northern Kingdom (Sir 47:24; 48:15). The third task of re-establishing the tribes of Israel is symbolized by his setting up twelve stones on Mount Carmel to match number of the "tribes of the sons of Jacob" (1 Kgs 18:31), as well as the subsequent answer to Elijah's prayer, indicating that God has turned back the people's hearts (18:37).

The second task of bringing back the heart of fathers towards sons recalls the immediate prelude to the Elijah story, when the father-son bond has been betrayed by human sacrifice: "In his [= Ahab's] days Hiel of Bethel built Jericho; at the cost of Abiram his firstborn he laid its foundation, and at the cost of his youngest son Segub set up its gates" (1 Kgs 16:34). Charles Conroy observes that Hiel loses his two sons while building Jericho, suggesting that this foreshadows the later loss of Ahab's two sons, Ahaziah ("according to the Lord's word," 2 Kgs 1:17) and Jehoram ("according to the Lord's word," 9:24-26)⁵⁹. Bart Koet comments on Hiel's action:

A father who killed his eldest and youngest son as an offering for the success of his city-building is evidently not an example of a father who turns his heart to his son. When Elijah inspires fathers to turn their hearts to their children, this flagrant example of idolatry will stop.⁶⁰

As a contrast, Elijah serves as a substitute father or protector for the widow's son (1 Kgs 17:8-24), in accordance with Sir 4:10: "Be a father to orphans, and in place of a husband to widows." Elijah also serves as a substitute father to Elisha, who cries out when he is losing Elijah who is ascending into heaven: "My father! My father!" (2 Kgs 2:12). Koet astutely observes: "Whereas 1 Kgs 16:34 describes an unfaithful father, the Elijah cycle is concluded by a story of a faithful son."⁶¹

Ben Sira deploys assonance in the depiction of Elijah's role (Sir 48:10bc H^B): "to put an end to (להשבית) anger before the wrath (Segal: חרון), to bring

⁵⁹ CONROY, Hiel, 210-218.

⁶⁰ KOET, Elijah, 179.

⁶¹ KOET, Elijah, 176-177. In addition, 1 Kgs 21:3-4 reports Elijah's rebuke of King Ahab for his judicial murder of Naboth, who had declared his intention to protect the inheritance of "my fathers" or "my ancestors" (אבותי).

back (להשיב) the heart of fathers towards sons.”⁶² The redirecting of hearts within the family has a faint parallel to the mention of a turning of hearts towards God in Elijah’s prayer on Mount Carmel: “Answer me, O Lord, answer me, so that this people may know that you, Lord, are God, and that you yourself have turned their hearts (הסבת) back” (1 Kgs 18:37). A comparable instance of assonance (with the verbs reversed) explains the purpose of the intervention by Joshua and Caleb in the Israelite assembly (Sir 46:7 H^B): “So as to turn back (להשיב) wrath (חרון) from the congregation, and so as to put an end to (להשבית) a malicious ill report.” In the accounts of Israel’s monarchs, wrath could be turned away by the removal of idolatrous practices, but in Elijah’s day, King Ahab’s idolatry continued Jeroboam I’s pattern of provoking divine wrath (1 Kgs 16:33). Ben Sira echoes the Deuteronomist in seeing idolatry as causing the fall of the Northern Kingdom (2 Kgs 17:11.17; Sir 47:24-25; 48:15)⁶³. Elijah’s role parallels the religious activity of Hezekiah in putting an end to Judah’s infidelity, by making a covenant with God to avert his fierce anger (2 Chr 29:10). Hence the activity promised for the returning Elijah is to be successful in removing idolatry – a task which he failed to complete during his earthly life.

Elijah’s future role was to reconcile parents and children: “to bring back the heart of fathers towards sons.” This phrase echoes part of the description of Elijah’s task in Mal 3:24: “And he will bring back (והשיב//ἀποκαταστήσει, “restore”) the heart of fathers towards sons and the heart of sons to their fathers.” Elijah’s forthcoming mission was also “to reestablish the tribes of Israel,” echoing the task of God’s servant (perhaps originally Cyrus) in Isa 49:6: “to raise up (להקים = στῆσαι) the tribes of Jacob and to bring back (להשיב = ἐπιστρέψαι) the survivors of Israel.”⁶⁴ Because Isa 49:6 mentions the “tribes of Jacob,” the Greek and Syriac adopt this formulation, whereas the Hebrew mention of “Israel” is likely original as the *lectio difficilior*. A similar concern for the twelve tribes

⁶² Moreover, the verb “to put an end to (להשבית)” exhibits subtle assonance with the opening Deuteronomistic description of Elijah as “the Tishbite” (התשבי) in 1 Kgs 17:1. A link between Elijah’s designation התשבי (“the Tishbite”) and the idea of תשובה (“repentance”) is proposed by GARSIEL, *From Earth to Heaven*, 147-148.

⁶³ Thus, Moses is commanded to impale the worshippers of Baal, “so that the fierce anger of the LORD may turn away from Israel” (Num 25:4). Later, 1 Macc 3:8 declares of Judas Maccabeus: “He went through the cities of Judah and destroyed the impious out of it [= the land], and he turned away wrath from Israel.”

⁶⁴ STADELMANN, *Ben Sira*, 200; HILDESHEIM, *Prophet*, 104; SKEHAN – DI LELLA, *Wisdom*, 534.

occurs in Ben Sira's nationalistic prayer: "Gather all the tribes of Jacob" (Sir 36:13 H^B). In Ben Sira's thinking, the returning Elijah would revive the nation, just as on an individual level he had resuscitated the widow's son (Sir 48:5; 1 Kgs 17:22)⁶⁵.

In fact, Ben Sira's poem on Elijah is framed by a double allusion to the prophet Malachi, who indeed speaks of the zealous prophet's future return (Mal 3:23-24) on the basis of the tradition that he ascended into heaven (2 Kgs 2:1-18). In fact, the Book of Malachi has multiple echoes of the Jacob story, beginning with its blunt opening statement: "I have loved Jacob, and Esau I have hated" (Mal 1:2-3)⁶⁶. A particular parallel exists between Gen 32:12 and Mal 3:24 [4:6] because of several shared words (sons, strike, lest someone comes). Sirach 48:10 alludes to the prophet's description of Elijah's return: "And he will bring back the heart of fathers towards sons and the heart of sons to their fathers, lest I come and strike the land with the ban." (Mal 3:24 [4:6]) The Malachi text echoes the Genesis report of Jacob's prayer: "Please deliver me from the hand of my brother, from the hand of Esau, for I am afraid of him, lest he come and strike me – mother along with sons" (Gen 32:12). The Elijah story is also set against the background of family tensions, especially between fathers and sons (1 Kgs 16:34).

Luke's Gospel reapplies Greek Sirach's mention of the returning Elijah to the unborn John the Baptist, both in his reconciling role and in his task of restoring Israel: "And he will turn back (ἐπιστρέψει) many of the sons of Israel to the Lord their God, and he will go before him in the spirit and power of Elijah, to turn back (ἐπιστρέψαι) the hearts of fathers towards children, and the disobedient to the prudence of the righteous, to make ready for the Lord a people prepared" (Luke 1:16-17)⁶⁷. An eschatological interpretation of the family reconciliation foretold in Mal 3:24 occurs in Pseudo-Philo at the conclusion of Joshua's farewell speech, where he promises eternal life for the Israelites assembled and their descendants: "I will restore you to your fathers and your fathers to you" (*L.A.B.* 23:13)⁶⁸.

⁶⁵ I owe this insight to Bradley C. Gregory.

⁶⁶ LEAR, *Relationship*, 651-52.

⁶⁷ Just as Sir 48 links these two prophetic figures of Elijah and Malachi, so does Luke 1:17 when describing the role of John the Baptist; cf. KURZ, *Sirach* 48.1-16, 308-324.

⁶⁸ HARRINGTON, *Pseudo-Philo*, 333.

Elijah in Relation to Elisha (Sir 48:11-12b)

Because the Hebrew text in Sir 48:11-12b is damaged, here is a comparison with the Greek and Syriac versions, which attest a belief in the resurrection⁶⁹.

H^B: ¹¹ [Happy is the one] who saw you and died.
[But happy are you, because you will indeed live.]⁷⁰

¹² [Elijah was concealed in a tornado,
And Elisha was filled with his spirit.]⁷¹

G: ¹¹ Happy are those seeing you
And those having been established in love,
For we also will live in life.⁷²

¹² Elijah is the one who was covered in a whirlwind,
And Elisha was filled with his spirit.

S: ¹¹ Happy is the one who saw you and died,
Yet he does not die but will indeed live.⁷³

¹² Elijah was gathered to heaven in the treasuries,
And Elisha received twice as much prophecy.

Since Elijah has been described as “the one taken upwards in a tornado” and as “the one recorded as ready for the time” (Sir 48:9-10), the Greek and Syriac versions allude to the afterlife or resurrection in v. 11b, where the Hebrew text is lost. While Elijah resembles Enoch by being “taken up” to the divine presence in heaven ([44:16]; 48:9; 49:14), 48:10 has added an allusion to Mal

⁶⁹ Greek from ZIEGLER, *Sapientia*, 351; Syriac from CALDUCH-BENAGES – FERRER – LIESEN, *Wisdom of the Scribe*, 258. For six scholarly reconstructions of the original lost Hebrew of Sir 48:11, see BEENTJES, *Elijah*, 97. For a reconstruction implying resurrection, see PUECH, *Ben Sira* 48:11, 87.

⁷⁰ Reconstruction of Sir 48:11b from SMEND, *Weisheit hebräisch*, 55.

⁷¹ Reconstruction of Sir 48:12ab, based on Greek, from SEGAL, *Sefer*, 330. On the remainder of 48:12, which deals with Elisha and is beyond the scope of this article, see HILDESHEIM, *Prophet*, 109-11.

⁷² Although the major Greek uncials read: “those having been established/adorned (κεκοσμημένοι) in love,” ZIEGLER’s edition follows the Origenic MSS in reading: “those having fallen asleep (κεκοιμημένοι) in love.”

⁷³ Followed by SEGAL, *Sefer*, 330. However, if we see here the hand of a Christian redactor, we may understand the second colon thus: “yet he does not die but will indeed give life”; cf. VAN PEURSEN, *Que vive celui qui fait vivre*, 288.

3:23-24 about his future role. The problem lies in the fact that elsewhere Ben Sira repeatedly denies the notion of an afterlife (Sir 10:11; 14:16; 17:27-28; 22:11; 30:4; 38:21; 41:3-4)⁷⁴. For instance, Sir 17:27-28 G asks:

Who will praise the Most High in Hades, in place of those living and offering thanksgiving? From someone dead, as from someone non-existent, thanksgiving has perished. Someone living and healthy will praise the Lord.

Similarly, Sir 38:21 H^B urges the bereaved to relinquish the memory of the person who has died: “Do not remember him, for there is no hope for him. What will you benefit? But you will harm yourself.”

Nevertheless, taking a minority position within scholarship, Émile Puech strongly advocates the view that Ben Sira himself had a resurrection belief, and hence he reconstructs Sir 48:11: “Happy the one who sees you before dying, for you will give life and he will live.”⁷⁵ To be sure, despite the sage’s lack of belief in a meaningful individual afterlife, a few figures in the Praise of the Ancestors come close to overcoming death. Enoch was assumed into heaven ([44:16]; 49:14); Elijah resuscitated the widow’s son (48:5) and was later taken up to heaven in a whirlwind (v. 9); Elisha worked wonders even after his death by raising a corpse (vv. 13-14)⁷⁶. Interpreting the Book of Malachi, Ben Sira has an expectation of Elijah’s return (Sir 48:10-11), so the implication is that this prophet escaped death and will return to earth in the future.

In spite of the sage’s repeated denials of the afterlife, the Greek and Syriac versions include some references to it. Whereas the Hebrew text Sir 48:7:17b refers to the decay of a human corpse buried in the earth after death: “The expectation of mortals is worms” (cf. 10:11), the Greek text most likely alludes to post-mortem punishment by adding fire as well as worms (Isa 66:24; Mark 9:48), so that its translation reads: “The punishment of the ungodly is fire and

⁷⁴ COLLINS, *Jewish Wisdom*, 92; CORLEY, *Afterlife Hope*, 5-9.

⁷⁵ PUECH, *Ben Sira* 48:11, 87.

⁷⁶ Sir 48:14 H^B reports of Elijah’s successor Elisha: “In his life he performed marvels, and in his death portentous deeds.” Presumably v. 14b refers to the resuscitation of a corpse thrown into his grave (cf. 2 Kgs 13:21), which might conceivably suggest some kind of post-mortem existence. Such instances may provide a connection with Sir 49:10 about the bones of the Twelve Prophets sending forth new life, but in light of Ezek 37:1-14, I understand the mention of dead bones flourishing (Sir 46:12; 49:10) as a reference to national restoration.

worms.”⁷⁷ Similarly, when the Syriac finds passages contrary to belief in an afterlife, it frequently omits them (e.g., Sir 41:4cd) or modifies them (e.g., Sir 17:27)⁷⁸. Indeed, the Syriac form of 48:11 (“Yet he does not die but will indeed live”) recalls not only Ps 118:17 but also Jesus’ saying on the resurrection in John 11:25. Hence, although the Greek and Syriac versions of Sir 48:11b suggest a belief in the afterlife, it is prudent to be cautious about whether the future resurrection was mentioned here in the lost original Hebrew. In 48:11b, both Greek and Syriac may have slightly expanded or edited the lost original text⁷⁹.

The fragmentary Hebrew Sir 48:11 raises numerous questions. Whereas the Greek and Syriac presume that the first word of 48:11 is “happy/blessed” (אשרי), Hebrew MS B actually has simply “who” (אשר)⁸⁰. If the difficult Hebrew relative conjunction or pronoun אשר (“who, which”) is emended to read אשרי (“happy”), the Hebrew and Syriac agree on v. 11a: “Happy is the one who saw you and died.” It is possible to see here a statement contrasting Elijah who was taken up to heaven with Elisha who died and was buried (2 Kgs 13:20): “Happy is the one who saw you [ascend to heaven], even though he [himself later] died.” In Sir 48:11-12, Ben Sira plays on Elijah’s riddling response to Elisha’s request for a double share of Elijah’s spirit: “You have asked a hard thing – if you see (תראה) me being taken from you, it will happen thus for you, but if not, it will not happen” (2 Kgs 2:10).

Particular questions arise about the Greek of Sir 48:11, which stands out as a tricolon in a long series of bicola. Whereas the Hebrew and Syriac have the singular (“one who saw you”: ראך), the Greek has a plural (“those seeing you”: οἱ ἰδόντες)⁸¹. The Greek also turns the one who has “died” (מת) into “those having been established/adorned” (major uncial MSS: *κακοσμημένοι*) or “those having

⁷⁷ REY, *L’espérance post-mortem*, 260. Ben Sira’s grandson and later copyists inserted references to the afterlife; cf. COLLINS, *Jewish Wisdom*, 95.

⁷⁸ NELSON, *Syriac Version*, 113-14.

⁷⁹ On Sir 48:11 see VAN PEURSEN, *Que vive celui qui fait vivre*, 286-301; see also BEENTJES, *Elijah*, 96-97; SCHRADER, *Leiden*, 85-87.

⁸⁰ For the possible presence of the singular noun אשר meaning “happiness” (Gen 30:13), see SMEND, *Weisheit erklärt*, 461. Note that Sir 38:15 is a comparable statement beginning with “one who” (אשר), and keeping the pronoun is accepted as a possibility by MOPSIK, *Sagesse*, 304. Possibly the original text had both words: “happy is the one who” (אשרי - אשר); cf. Ps 137:8-9; 146:5.

⁸¹ Possibly the plural Greek expression in Sir 48:11a (“Happy are those seeing you”) has an echo of Luke 10:23 (cf. Matt 13:16): “Happy are the eyes seeing the things that you are seeing,” though the wording is different.

fallen asleep” (Origenic MSS: *κεκοιμημένοι*). The Greek qualifying phrase (*ἐν ἀγαπήσει* = “in love”) invites suspicion, because the noun *ἀγάπησις* occurs only once elsewhere within the Greek uncials of Ben Sira (Sir 40:20), but seven further times in the later Greek expansions (1:10c, 12d; 11:15b; 17:18b; 19:18b; 24:18a; 25:12a).

In the second half of the damaged bicolon, texts and interpreters differ regarding who will live: “he” (Syriac; Segal) or “we” (Greek; Skehan) or “you” (Smend). The Greek text of Sir 48:11b may be influenced by the mention of revivification in Hos 6:2: “On the third day we will arise, and we shall live (*ζησόμεθα*) before him” (cf. Rom 6:8; 2 Cor 13:4; 2 Tim 2:11)⁸². In fact, the whole Greek verse can be read as a Christian affirmation:

Happy are those seeing you at the final resurrection, in other words, those having fallen asleep (G^O) – or having been established/adorned (G^{BSA}) – in love, for we Christian believers also will live in life, like Elijah who overcame death.⁸³

A comparable Christian change to the Greek text occurs in Sir 25:1, where the uncial MSS suggest a reference to Jesus’ resurrection: “In three things I was beautified, and I arose in a timely way before the Lord and human beings” (*Ἐν τρισὶν ὥραϊσθην καὶ ἀνέστην ὥραϊα ἔναντι κυρίου καὶ ἀνθρώπων*)⁸⁴. For a Christian copyist, mention of the number “three” suggested Christ’s three days in the tomb, as in John 2:19: “in three days I will raise it up,” (*ἐν τρισὶν ἡμέραις ἐγερῶ αὐτόν*), and Mark 9:31: “after three days he will rise” (*μετὰ τρεῖς ἡμέρας ἀναστήσεται*).

The Syriac of Sir 48:11 can be read in two ways. On the one hand, we can understand it as concluding with *peal* verbs: “Happy is the one who saw you and died, yet he does not die but will indeed live” – perhaps asserting that Elisha would share in the final resurrection. The phraseology echoes the affirmation in Ps 118:17: “I shall not die, but I shall live,” taken from a psalm often applied to Jesus’ resurrection (Mark 12:10; Acts 4:11). On the other hand, if we see here the hand of a Christian redactor, we may according to Wido T. van Peursen understand the second colon as concluding with *aphel* verbs: “yet he does not

⁸² Although the NT does not explicitly quote Hos 6:2, it may be echoed in Luke 9:22; 24:46.

⁸³ See VAN PEURSEN, *Que vive celui qui fait vivre*, 298. The Greek use of the first-person plural, differing from Hebrew or Syriac, matches a pattern elsewhere in the Praise of the Ancestors (Sir 44:1; 50:22-24).

⁸⁴ For a Greek reconstruction of Sir 25:1, see ZIEGLER, *Sapientia*, 78.

die, but will indeed give life.”⁸⁵ Here the one who saw Elijah may be interpreted as Jesus at the transfiguration (Mark 9:1-8), and he is likewise the living one who gives life (John 5:21; Rev 1:18). Such Christian influence on the Syriac, as on the Greek, makes it hard to use the early versions for reconstructing the lost original Hebrew in such an instance.

Although certainty is impossible, the most suitable reconstruction of the lost Hebrew for Ben Sira’s context (in my view) was supplied by Rudolf Smend and Norbert Peters: “Happy is the one who saw you and died. But happy are you (אשריך), because you will indeed live.”⁸⁶ If this reconstruction is correct, it includes an ironic echo of Elisha’s false promise conveyed through Hazael to the sick king Ben-hadad of Damascus: “Go, say to him: You shall indeed live (תחיה - חיה)” (2 Kgs 8:10). In light of Ben Sira’s lack of hope in the resurrection, it seems best to regard Sir 48:11a as referring to the event of Elijah’s ascent, witnessed by Elisha (2 Kgs 2:11-12). Whereas Elisha died sometime after seeing Elijah depart, the ascended Elijah himself will indeed live. Lutz Schrader interprets Sir 48:11a by viewing Elisha as the subject of the statement (“Happy is the one who saw you”), which leads well into v. 12, and he takes the next verb as concessive: “though he died,” in contrast to Elijah⁸⁷. Accordingly, in my understanding, the preserved first half of the verse praises Elisha, who saw Elijah ascend to heaven, even though he himself later died and was buried (2 Kgs 13:20-21). The reconstructed second half of Sir 48:11 then praises Elijah, who by contrast escaped death and hence lives and awaits his return at the end-time (Mal 3:23-24). Thus, the original Ben Sira looks forward to Elijah’s return, as promised by Malachi, but he has no clear expectation that Elijah’s return will lead into a general resurrection, because belief in a wider resurrection only entered the mainstream of Jewish belief a generation later, following the death of the Maccabean martyrs (Dan 12:1-3; 2 Macc 7:1-38)⁸⁸.

Finally, to complete our study of Ben Sira’s presentation of Elijah, we can refer to the early versions in the absence of the Hebrew for Sir 48:12ab. While the Syriac says: “Elijah was gathered to heaven in the treasuries, and Elisha

⁸⁵ See VAN PEURSEN, *Que vive celui qui fait vivre*, 288. He also notes (VAN PEURSEN, *Que vive celui qui fait vivre*, 292) a case of Christian wording in Sir 48:10 S (“bring good news”).

⁸⁶ SMEND, *Weisheit erklärt*, 461; SMEND, *Weisheit hebräisch*, 55; PETERS, *Buch*, 413.

⁸⁷ SCHRADER, *Leiden*, 87. However, with an echo of Sir 37:26 and 44:14, he reconstructs 48:11b differently: “for surely his name will live.”

⁸⁸ CORLEY, *Afterlife Hope*, 11-18.

received twice as much prophecy,” the Greek of 48:12 says: “Elijah is the one who was covered (ἐσκαπάσθη) in a whirlwind, and Elisha was filled with his spirit.” While Elijah’s heavenly ascent is described in 2 Kgs 2:11, Elisha’s being filled with a double portion of Elijah’s spirit reflects his request in vv. 9-10, a request recognized as fulfilled in v. 15. When the Greek says that Elijah was covered or concealed (ἐσκαπάσθη) in the whirlwind or storm, there may be the nuance of “concealing” (Exod 2:2 LXX; 3 Macc 3:27.29), as a way of speaking of Elijah’s mysterious disappearance (2 Kgs 2:12)⁸⁹. Although 1 Kgs 17:3 LXX employs a different verb when reporting the divine command for Elijah to depart: “Be hidden (αὐρύβηθι = ונסתר) at the brook Cherith,” Segal reconstructs Sir 48:12a with the same Hebrew verb: “Elijah was concealed (ἐσκαπάσθη = נסתר) in a tornado.”

Conclusion

Within Ben Sira’s Praise of the Ancestors, the poem on Elijah occurs in the middle of the Prophets Section (Sir 46:1–49:10). This section of 120 bicola, beginning with Joshua (46:1: “Moses’ servant in prophecy”) and ending with “the Twelve Prophets” (49:10), displays a canonical concern by referring in traditional sequence to Joshua, Judges, Samuel, Kings, Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, and the Twelve Prophets. The poem on Elijah is framed with allusions to the last of the Minor Prophets, since Elijah is first described as one whose words were like “a burning furnace” (echoing Mal 3:19) and later depicted (“as it is written”) having the task “to bring back the heart of fathers towards sons” (echoing Mal 3:23-24). Drawing on the abundant references to fire in the Deuteronomistic narrative (1 Kgs 17–2 Kgs 2), Ben Sira aptly dubs Elijah “a prophet like fire” (Sir 48:1), and in keeping with his prophetic role, Ben Sira emphasizes Elijah’s connection with God’s word (v. 3). Thereafter, Ben Sira focuses on Elijah’s mighty deeds, culminating in his heavenly ascent. Although the Greek and Syriac versions of Sir 48:11 presume the notion of the afterlife, the damaged Hebrew text may have contrasted the living and ascended Elijah with the deceased and buried Elisha.

⁸⁹ SCHMITT, *Entrückung*, 144.

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Zhrnutie

V rámci Sirachovcovej chvály slávnych predkov sa báseň o Eliášovi nachádza uprostred sekcie venovanej prorokom (Sir 46,1–49,10). Táto časť pozostávajúca zo 120 bikolónov začína Jozuem (46,1: „Mojžišovým nástupcom v prorockom úrade“) a končí „dvanástimi prorokmi“ (49,10). Uvedená sekcia je zaujímavá z kánonického pohľadu, keďže v tradičnom poradí odkazuje na Jozueho, Sudcov, Samuela, Kráľov, Izaiáša, Jeremiáša, Ezechiela a dvanástich prorokov. Hebrejská báseň o Eliášovi je zarámcovaná alúziami na posledného z tzv. malých prorokov, keďže Eliáš je najprv zobrazený ako ten, ktorého slovo „blčalo ohňom sťa fakľa“ (odkaz na Mal 3,19) a neskôr ako ten („ako je písané“), ktorého úlohou je „obrátiť srdcia otcov k synom“ (odkaz na Mal 3,23–24). Bohato čerpajúc z odkazov s motívom ohňa v deuteronomistickom rozprávaní (1Kr 17–2Kr 2) Sirachovec výstižne nazýva Eliáša „prorokom ako oheň“ (48,1) a v súlade s jeho prorockou úlohou zdôrazňuje Eliášovo spojenie s Božím slovom (v. 3). Následne sa Sirachovec zameria na Eliášove mocné činy, čo završí vystúpením do neba.

Kľúčové slová: Sirachovec, Eliáš, Skorší proroci, Malachiáš, vzkriesenie.

Summary

Within Ben Sira's Praise of the Ancestors, the poem on Elijah occurs in the middle of the Prophets Section (Sir 46:1–49:10). This section of 120 bicola, beginning with Joshua (46:1: "Moses' servant in prophecy") and ending with "the Twelve Prophets" (49:10), displays a canonical concern by referring in traditional sequence to Joshua, Judges, Samuel, Kings, Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, and the Twelve Prophets. The Hebrew poem on Elijah is framed with allusions to the last of the Minor Prophets, since Elijah is first described as one whose words were like "a burning furnace" (echoing Mal 3:19) and later depicted ("as it is written") having the task "to bring back the heart of fathers towards sons" (echoing Mal 3:23–24).

Drawing on the abundant references to fire in the Deuteronomistic narrative about the prophet (1 Kgs 17–2 Kgs 2), Ben Sira aptly dubs him “a prophet like fire” (48:1), and in keeping with his prophetic role, Ben Sira emphasizes his connection with God’s word (v. 3). Thereafter, Ben Sira focuses on Elijah’s mighty deeds, ending with his ascent into heaven.

Key words: Ben Sira, Elijah, Former Prophets, Malachi, resurrection.

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