

Ben Sira's Silence Concerning Daniel

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Jesus Ben Sira¹ was a Jew from Jerusalem who, in approximately 190 or 180 B.C.,² wrote a book of religious wisdom and pious advice on a variety of topics. In 132 B.C.--the thirty-eighth year of Ptolemy Physcon VII Euergetes II (170-164, 147-117 B.C.)--Ben Sira's grandson went to live in Egypt and sometime after the death of Euergetes II, i.e., sometime after 117 B.C., translated his grandfather's book from Hebrew into Greek. Although translations were subsequently made into Latin, Syriac, and a number of other languages it is primarily in its Greek form--with the Latin title "Ecclesiasticus"--that the book has come down to us as one of the deuterocanonical books of the Septuagint.³

In Ben Sira chaps. 44-49 the author comments on the outstanding lives of some 28 individual Old Testament heroes⁴, along with the judges as a group (46:11) and the twelve minor prophets (49:10). This long section ends with the following summary:⁵

No one like Enoch has been created on earth, for he was taken up from the earth. And no man like Joseph has been born, and his bones are cared for. Shem and Seth were honored among men, and Adam above every living being in the creation.⁶

The significance for Daniel research of Ben Sira's "Praise of the Fathers" lies in what he does not say. Throughout this extended section of six chapters Daniel is passed over in silence; there is no mention of him at all. Such an omission is conspicuous when compared with 1 Maccabees, written somewhat later at around 100 B.C. Daniel appears at the end of a passage that mentions a number of ancient heroes.

(51) "Remember the deeds of the fathers, which they did in their generations; and receive great honor and an everlasting name. (52) Was not Abraham found faithful when tested, and it was reckoned to him as righteousness? (53) Joseph in the time of his distress kept the commandment, and became lord of Egypt. (54) Phinehas our father, because he was deeply zealous, received the covenant of everlasting priesthood. (55) Joshua, because he fulfilled the command, became a judge in Israel. (56) Caleb, because he testified in the assembly, received an inheritance in the land. (57) David, because he was merciful, inherited the throne of the kingdom for ever. (58) Elijah because of great zeal for the law was taken up into heaven. (59) Hananiah, Azariah, and Mishael believed and were saved from the flame. (60) Daniel because of his innocence was delivered from the mouth of the lions" (1 Macc 2:51-60).

The fact that Ben Sira, writing early in the second century B.C., says nothing about Daniel, while the author of 1 Maccabees does refer to him, writing at the end of the second century B.C., is taken by some scholars to indicate that the book of Daniel originated sometime in between Ben Sira and 1 Maccabees--i.e., in the mid-second century B.C.⁷ Eissfeldt evaluates the evidence from Ben Sira as follows, as it bears on the dating of Daniel:

We may leave the matter there, with the broader period 167-163 in mind. This dating [for Daniel] is then supported by a whole series of further observations. The fact that the book was not included in the canon of the prophets (p. 565) shows already that it can only have been composed very late. This is confirmed by the fact that Ben Sira, writing in about 190, does not mention it in his Praise of the Fathers (xliv-l) whereas 1 Maccabees, compiled probably in about 100 B.C., has in ii,59-60 a reference to it, more precisely to i, iii and vi. . . .⁸

But Eissfeldt's conclusion is not required by the evidence. There is no reason--even under preterist presuppositions--why Ben Sira should not have been well informed concerning the main events of Daniel's life. Mertens shows that the claim that Daniel was written entirely within the second century B.C., with no sources or fragments coming from an earlier time, is a minority view even among critical scholars and one which he considers extreme.⁹

According to F. Nötscher the substance, content and even formulation of individual reports go back to the time of the exile; similarly J. Goettsberger; H. Schneider also takes the position that the oldest parts of the book of Daniel derive from the sixth century B.C.¹⁰

Thus, the claim that Ben Sira did not mention Daniel because the book of Daniel was not written until after Ecclesiasticus requires one to assume that Rowley's view of how Daniel originated was substantially the correct one. Rowley held that a single author produced the entire work in the second century B.C.¹¹ There are no preterist scholars at present, however, who would accept this assumption or defend it. I submit that, whether one proceeds under preterist or historicist assumptions, Ben Sira could not have been unaware of Daniel's life story when he wrote his book.

This raises the question of what reason Ben Sira might have had for not wanting to mention Daniel or single him out for special praise. As it happens, a very plausible and straightforward answer to the above question is available, but it has nothing to do with when the book of Daniel was written. Ben Sira held the opinion, and stated it in so many words, that dreamers and dreams were fools and foolishness, respectively.

A man of no understanding has vain and false hopes, and dreams give wings to fools. (2) As one who catches at a shadow and pursues the wind, so is he who gives heed to dreams. (3) The vision of dreams is this against that, the likeness of a face confronting a face. (4) From an unclean thing what will be made clean? And from something false what will be true? (5) Divinations and omens and dreams are folly, and like a woman in travail the mind has fancies. (6) Unless they are sent from the Most High as a visitation, do not give your mind to them. (7) For dreams have deceived many, and those who put their hope in them have failed. (8) Without such deceptions the law will be fulfilled, and wisdom is made perfect in truthful lips. (Ben Sira 34:1-8)

If Ben Sira believed dreamers were fools, and thought of Daniel primarily as a dreamer,¹² one could hardly expect Ben Sira to name Daniel as one of Israel's great and illustrious figures of the past. For Daniel to be passed over in silence would be much more consistent with the passage just quoted than prominent mention of him a few chapters later would be.

It is not necessary therefore to suggest that the book of Daniel came into existence after Ben Sira wrote in order to account for the latter's silence regarding him. Ben Sira was a man of deep convictions, some of which bordered on prejudice.¹³ One of these convictions was that

dreams were not a dependable criterion for behaviour.¹⁴ Seeing Daniel primarily as a dreamer he was not inclined to praise him.

¹Otto Eissfeldt, *The Old Testament: An Introduction*, translated by P. R. Ackroyd (New York: Harper & Row, 1965), states that, "In the colophon to the main section, which extends as far as I,26 (I,27-9), Jesus ben-Eliezer ben-Sira (ישוע בן-אלעזר בן-סירה) is explicitly named as the author, and the appendix (II,1-30) contains two further colophons, evidently deriving from two different recensions of the text, which mention the same name" (p. 597). The name Jesus is a Greek form of the author's first name; in Hebrew it would be Joshua. By contrast, Sira is a Hebrew form of his last name; the corresponding Greek form would be Sirach (Σιραχ). Thus, it would be more consistent to say either Jesus Ben Sirach (Greek in both cases) or Joshua Ben Sira (Hebrew in both cases). Here, however, I follow Eissfeldt's lead and give the name in the mixed form Jesus Ben Sira, or simply Ben Sira.

²The earlier date (190 B.C.) is defended by Eissfeldt, *Introduction*, p. 597; the later date (180 B.C.) by Bruce M. Metzger, *The Apocrypha of the Old Testament, Revised Standard Version: Expanded Edition Containing the Third and Fourth Books of the Maccabees and Psalm 151* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977), p. 128.

³On the disputed value of the Hebrew fragments of Ben Sira found both in the Cairo Geniza from 1896 onwards and later at Qumran Cave 2 see Eissfeldt, p. 599.

⁴There are also two bad individuals (Rehoboam and Jeroboam in 47:23-25) and one group that had negative associations (other kings in 49:4-5). See the Appendix for a complete list, cross listed for reference, name, description, and number of verses devoted to each.

⁵There is a question whether 49:14-16 ends a section or only represents a break within it. Eissfeldt (p. 598) treats Ben Sira 44:1-49:16 as a separate section, which he calls "Praise of the Fathers." This is followed by a section that describes in glowing terms the ministry of Simon the high priest (50:1-21) (Simon II served in this capacity 219-196 B.C.). Then there is a concluding section of praise for God (50:22-24). But nothing in 50:1 indicates that a new section has begun. This fact, coupled with the words "And now" (*Kai vuv*) in 50:22, which seem to indicate the last item in a series, may be taken as evidence that 44:1 to 50:24 are all one bloc of text. If it is argued that God is out of place in a section praising famous men because He is not a man, I would counter that Rehoboam and Jeroboam (47:23-25) are also out of place because it is impossible to praise them. Even the fact that 21 verses are devoted to Simon (50:1-21) does not argue against including him along with the others that precede it, since fully 17 verses are devoted to Aaron (45:6-22). Note that both men were priests, and more particularly high priests.

⁶Ben Sira 49:14-16.

⁷See Hardy, "The Preterist Model for Interpreting Daniel," in this issue of *Historicism*.

⁸Eissfeldt, *Introduction*, p. 521.

⁹A. Mertens, *Das Buch Daniel im Lichte der Texte vom Toten Meer* (Stuttgart, 1971), pp. 13-19. Only A. v. Gall, H. H. Rowley, O. Eissfeldt, R. H. Pfeiffer, H. Lusseu, and O. Plöger have advanced such a position.

¹⁰*Ibid.*, p. 15.

¹¹See H. H. Rowley, "The Bilingual Problem of Daniel," *Zeitschrift für alttestamentliche Wissenschaft* 50 (1932):256-68; "The Unity of the Book of Daniel," *Hebrew Union College Annual* 23 (1950-51):233-73; "The Composition of the Book of Daniel: Some Comments on Professor Ginsberg's Article," *Vetus Testamentum* 5 (1955):272-76. The author's position was that the stories of Dan 2-6 probably did circulate separately at an early time, but not in written form. They were first recorded by the one author of the book (see "Bilingual Problem, p. 267).

¹²The book begins: "And Daniel could understand visions and dreams of all kinds" (Dan 1:14). The visions and dreams that he himself saw are recorded in Dan 2, 4, 7, 8-9, 10-12.

¹³An in depth study of Ben Sira's attitudes toward women would be illuminating in this connection. While some of his statements are lofty and idealistic (26:1-4; 26:13-18; 36:24-25), and some are neutral (7:24-25; 9:1-9), others seem unreasonably harsh and chauvinistic (42:9-10, 14; see also 22:3-5; 23:22-27 [cf. 23:16-21]; 25:16-26; 26:6-12; 42:6).

¹⁴On the other hand Ben Sira's willingness to include Ezekiel, whose vision of wheels within wheels (Ezek 1:1-28; 10:1-22; cf. Ben Sira 49:8-9) matches anything in found Daniel, calls for a word of explanation. And a straightforward explanation is readily available. Although Ezekiel saw some unusual things in vision he, like Ben Sira, was preoccupied with the temple service. In Ezek 40-47 there is an extended description of what the cultic activity would be like in a restored temple when the Babylonian captivity of Judah should finally be at an end. To Ben Sira this must have been a redeeming virtue on Ezekiel's part. "Wisdom for our author is not identical with the fear of God as such, but with the Jewish law in particular. His whole love is for the religion of the law and its cultic forms of expression (xxxii,1-13 [EVV.xxxv,1-11]; xlv,6-26; l,1-24), . . ." (Eissfeldt, pp. 598-99).

Appendix

Listing 1

Ref	Name	Description	#Vss
44:16	Enoch	Patriarch/Holy life	01
44:17-18	Noah	Patriarch/Holy life	02
44:19-21	Abraham	Patriarch/Covenant	03
44:22	Isaac	Patriarch/Covenant	01
44:23	Jacob	Patriarch/Covenant	01
45:01-05	Moses	Leader/Law giver	05
45:06-22	Aaron	Priest	17
45:23-24	Phinehas	Priest/Zeal	02
45:25-26	David	King/Covenant	02
46:01-06	Joshua	Leader/Firmness	06
46:07-10	Caleb	Leader/Firmness	04
46:11-12	Judges, the	Leaders/Firmness	02
46:13-20	Samuel	Prophet/Faithfulness	08
47:01	Nathan	Prophet	01
47:02-11	David	King/Power	10
47:12-22	Solomon	King/Wisdom	11
47:23-25	Jeroboam	King/Wickedness	03
47:23-25	Rehoboam	King/Folly	03
48:01-11	Elijah	Prophet/Power	11
48:12-16	Elisha	Prophet/Fearlessness	05
48:17-25	Hezekiah	King/Faithfulness	09
49:01-03	Josiah	King/Reform	03
49:04-05	Kings, other	Kings/Unfaithfulness	02
49:06-07	Jeremiah	Prophet	02
49:08-09	Ezekiel	Prophet	02
49:10	Prophets, the twelve	Prophets/Comfort	01
49:11	Zerubbabel	Leader	01
49:12	Jeshua	Priest	01
49:13	Nehemiah	Leader/Builder	01
49:14	Enoch	Special praise	01
49:15	Joseph	Special praise	01
49:16	Adam	Special praise	01
49:16	Shem and Seth	Special praise	01
50:01-21	Simon	Priest	21

Listing 2

Name	Ref	Description	#Vss
Aaron	45:06-22	Priest	17
Abraham	44:19-21	Patriarch/Covenant	03
Adam	49:16	Special praise	01
Caleb	46:07-10	Leader/Firmness	04
David	45:25-26	King/Covenant	02
David	47:02-11	King/Power	10
Elijah	48:01-11	Prophet/Power	11
Elisha	48:12-16	Prophet/Fearlessness	05
Enoch	44:16	Patriarch/Holy life	01
Enoch	49:14	Special praise	01
Ezekiel	49:08-09	Prophet	02
Hezekiah	48:17-25	King/Faithfulness	09
Isaac	44:22	Patriarch/Covenant	01
Jacob	44:23	Patriarch/Covenant	01
Jeremiah	49:06-07	Prophet	02
Jeroboam	47:23-25	King/Wickedness	03
Jeshua	49:12	Priest	01
Joseph	49:15	Special praise	01
Joshua	46:01-06	Leader/Firmness	06
Josiah	49:01-03	King/Reform	03
Judges, the	46:11-12	Leaders/Firmness	02
Kings, other	49:04-05	Kings/Unfaithfulness	02
Moses	45:01-05	Leader/Law giver	05
Nathan	47:01	Prophet	01
Nehemiah	49:13	Leader/Builder	01
Noah	44:17-18	Patriarch/Holy life	02
Phinehas	45:23-24	Priest/Zeal	02
Prophets, the twelve	49:10	Prophets/Comfort	01
Rehoboam	47:23-25	King/Folly	03
Samuel	46:13-20	Prophet/Faithfulness	08
Shem and Seth	49:16	Special praise	01
Solomon	47:12-22	King/Wisdom	11
Zerubbabel	49:11	Leader	01
Simon	50:01-21	Priest	21

Listing 3

Description	Name	Ref	#Vss
King/Covenant	David	45:25-26	02
King/Faithfulness	Hezekiah	48:17-25	09
King/Folly	Rehoboam	47:23-25	03
King/Power	David	47:02-11	10
King/Reform	Josiah	49:01-03	03
King/Wickedness	Jeroboam	47:23-25	03
King/Wisdom	Solomon	47:12-22	11
Kings/Unfaithfulness	Kings, other	49:04-05	02
Leader	Zerubbabel	49:11	01
Leader/Builder	Nehemiah	49:13	01
Leader/Firmness	Caleb	46:07-10	04
Leader/Firmness	Joshua	46:01-06	06
Leader/Law giver	Moses	45:01-05	05
Leaders/Firmness	Judges, the	46:11-12	02
Patriarch/Covenant	Abraham	44:19-21	03
Patriarch/Covenant	Isaac	44:22	01
Patriarch/Covenant	Jacob	44:23	01
Patriarch/Holy life	Enoch	44:16	01
Patriarch/Holy life	Noah	44:17-18	02
Priest	Aaron	45:06-22	17
Priest	Jeshua	49:12	01
Priest/Zeal	Phinehas	45:23-24	02
Prophet	Ezekiel	49:08-09	02
Prophet	Jeremiah	49:06-07	02
Prophet	Nathan	47:01	01
Prophet/Faithfulness	Samuel	46:13-20	08
Prophet/Fearlessness	Elisha	48:12-16	05
Prophet/Power	Elijah	48:01-11	11
Prophets/Comfort	Prophets, the twelve	49:10	01
Special praise	Adam	49:16	01
Special praise	Enoch	49:14	01
Special praise	Joseph	49:15	01
Special praise	Shem and Seth	49:16	01
Priest	Simon	50:01-21	21

Listing 4

#Vss	Description	Name	Ref
01	Leader	Zerubbabel	49:11
01	Leader/Builder	Nehemiah	49:13
01	Patriarch/Covenant	Isaac	44:22
01	Patriarch/Covenant	Jacob	44:23
01	Patriarch/Holy life	Enoch	44:16
01	Priest	Jeshua	49:12
01	Prophet	Nathan	47:01
01	Prophets/Comfort	Prophets, the twelve	49:10
01	Special praise	Adam	49:16
01	Special praise	Enoch	49:14
01	Special praise	Joseph	49:15
01	Special praise	Shem and Seth	49:16
02	King/Covenant	David	45:25-26
02	Kings/Unfaithfulness	Kings, other	49:04-05
02	Leaders/Firmness	Judges, the	46:11-12
02	Patriarch/Holy life	Noah	44:17-18
02	Priest/Zeal	Phinehas	45:23-24
02	Prophet	Ezekiel	49:08-09
02	Prophet	Jeremiah	49:06-07
03	King/Folly	Rehoboam	47:23-25
03	King/Reform	Josiah	49:01-03
03	King/Wickedness	Jeroboam	47:23-25
03	Patriarch/Covenant	Abraham	44:19-21
04	Leader/Firmness	Caleb	46:07-10
05	Leader/Law giver	Moses	45:01-05
05	Prophet/Fearlessness	Elisha	48:12-16
06	Leader/Firmness	Joshua	46:01-06
08	Prophet/Faithfulness	Samuel	46:13-20
09	King/Faithfulness	Hezekiah	48:17-25
10	King/Power	David	47:02-11
11	King/Wisdom	Solomon	47:12-22
11	Prophet/Power	Elijah	48:01-11
17	Priest	Aaron	45:06-22
21	Priest	Simon	50:01-21