

The (Apparent) Absence of Women in the *Praise of the Ancestors* (Sir 44–49)¹

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SUMMARY: The *Praise of the Ancestors* (Sir 44–49) offers an interpretation of the story of Biblical Israel as seen through the eyes of Ben Sira. His telling of this story, permeated with God's working, contains the names of male protagonists only. Still, analysis of textual versions of the *Praise of the Ancestors* (Hebrew, Greek and Syriac) enables us to detect some anonymous allusions to women (Sir 46:13; 47: 6.19; 48:19, 49:7). The present article attempts to investigate the reasons why there are no named references to Biblical heroines from Israel's history, individuals who are mentioned in other books of the Bible. One answer might be found in the particular focus and educational purpose of the *Praise*, which was to provide a life model for young boys. Another reason might lie in the genre of the *Praise*, which was used in reference to women in Greek texts, but not in the Bible, where the name lists of praised heroes contained male names only. However, the most convincing reason for the absence of female names in the *Praise of the Ancestors* is found in its association with the priesthood of Biblical Israel. For the writer of the book, true high priests of the Jerusalem Temple constituted the ultimate keystone of the covenant between God and his people. Women, being absent from the official priesthood of Israel, are consequently absent from Sir 44–49.

KEYWORDS: Biblical Theology, Book of Ben Sira, Women, The *Praise of Ancestors*

SŁOWA-KLUCZE: teologia biblijna, Księga Syracydesa, kobiety, *Pochwała Ojców*

I. The Woman in the Teaching of Ben Sira

In his teaching, Ben Sira raises a range of issues concerning everyday life and interpersonal relations. His admonitions, aimed at young men preparing for adult life, touch also on their relationships with women. Hence the many instructions about them: out of the book's 1390 verses, 105 (7% of the book)

¹ A slightly revised Polish version of this article will appear in a forthcoming volume of the *Analecta Biblica Lublinensia* series, titled *The Role of Women in Salvation History* (Lublin 2016).

refer to women.² W.C. Trenchard, in his monograph on female issues in the Book of Siracides, specified five different categories of women:³ a good wife (7:19.26a; 9:1; 25:1.8a; 26:1-4.13-18; 28:15; 36:21-26; 40:19.23); a mother and widow (3:1-16; 4:10; 7:27-28; 15:2a; 23:14; 35:14-15; 41:17a); a bad wife (7:26b; 9:2; 25:13-26; 26:5-9; 33:19-23; 37:11a; 42:6; 47:19); an adulteress and prostitute (9:3-4.6-7.8-9; 19:2-3; 23:22-26; 41:20b.21c.22a.22b; 42:8ab); a daughter (7:24-25; 9:5; 22:3-5; 26:10-12; 42:9-14). The view of the woman, as presented in the teaching of Ben Sira, reflects a mode of thinking common to other contemporary writers, which ultimately stems from their social and cultural circumstances. The resulting approach is both extremely ambivalent – a good woman is praised by the sage, a bad one warned against – and strictly functional: a woman is presented solely in her relation to man.

- 2 Cf. C.V. Camp, "Understanding a Patriarchy", *Women Like This*. New Perspectives on Jewish Women in the Greco-Roman World (ed. A.J. Levine) (Atlanta, GA 1991) 1; P.W. Skehan – A.A. Di Lella, *The Wisdom of Ben Sira*. A New Translation with Notes (AB 39; New York, NY 1987) 4-6; J.J. Pudętko, "Powołanie Kobiety według Syracydesa", *VV* 19 (2011) 89-109.
- 3 According to W.C. Trenchard (*Ben Sira's View of Women* [Chico, CA 1982]) Siracides' teaching on women is interpreted here in an explicitly negative way; he's accused of misogyny. Even the praises of women are treated as an expression of male egoism and superiority. The woman is shown as totally dependent on man, deprived of her own dignity and identity; the widely discussed theme of the "bad wife" emphasizes the negative attitude of the sage. The woman is believed to be presented not as an independent individual but only in her relation to the man. She is appreciated only to the extent that she satisfies male needs and wants. Her beauty serves to rouse his sexual desires and her dignity lies in her passive submission to man. The extensive descriptions of women's vices would justify their subordinate position. K.E. Bailey ("Women in Ben Sirach and in the New Testament", *For Me to Live*. Essays in Honor of James Leon Kelso [ed. R.A. Coughenour] [Cleveland 1972] 56-73), while systematizing groups of women, emphasizes the male point of view and the criterion of the usefulness of the woman to man. He notes, however, the great respect shown by the sage to his mother. Although mother's position is lower than that of the father, she is held in esteem for her pains in bringing forth offspring (7:27 – *With your whole heart honor your father, and a mother's birth pangs do not forget*). A harmonious married life is a great gift, beautiful in the eyes both of God and of human beings (25:1). There is some advice protecting a woman against the suspicion of her husband and being abandoned (7:26b; 33:20; 42:6-7). In the case of a bad wife, however, caution and even abandonment are advised (7:26b; 33:20; 42:6-7). Daughters are usually a cause for distress of their fathers (7:24-29; 22:3-5; 26:9-12; 41:9-11). Extreme caution and distance are recommended in relations with married women (9:9). Very strong admonitions apply to contacts with prostitutes, who cause men's ruin in all respects (9:3; 19:2). The author concludes his analysis with a statement about the total dependence of the woman upon man, emphasized in both the positive and negative opinions about her: the lower position of the woman throughout all her life is explicitly asserted. M. Gilbert ["Ben Sira et la femme", *RTL* 7 (1976) 426-442] notes the nuances that are essential for the proper interpretation of female related texts by Siracides. His conclusion, however, is different from those of other writers. In the light of all his texts about women, talking about Siracides' misogyny is not yet justified. It seems that, for Siracides, the woman holds awesome power. She exhibits incredible strength, which can have both positive and negative effects (cf. 26:13-18).

2. The Delimitation and Structure of Sir 44–49

The entire *Book of Ben Sira* is a synthesis of the faith and tradition of the Biblical Israel, as pointed out in the *Prologue* by the translator of the Greek version (cf. *Prologue* 7–14). At the same time, *Praise of the Ancestors* (Sir 44–50) provides a unique interpretation of the people of God's story, which becomes a history of salvation. Chapters 44–50 of the *Book of Ben Sira* constitute a literary and thematic whole, as indicated by most of the attempts at structuring the Book. Many of the various suggestions for outlining the book, as collected by H.W. Jüngling, consistently emphasize the autonomy of Sir 44–50, a section which points to the prescriptions of wisdom being fulfilled in lives of outstanding individuals.⁴ While the beginning of the section is generally accepted to be Sir 44:1,⁵ its end point is still a matter for discussion. A question arises regarding of the relationship, and possible thematic unity, of chapters 44–49 with the following text extolling Simon the high priest, a near contemporary of the author.⁶ Thus, commentators are not exactly united

- 4 Cf. H.W. Jüngling, "Der Bauplan des Buches Jesus Sirach", *Den Armen eine frohe Botschaft*. FS für Bischof Franz Kamphaus zum 65. Geburtstag (eds. J. Hainz – H.W. Jüngling – R. Seibott) (Frankfurt a/M 1997) 97. Cf. J. Marböck, "Structure and Redaction History in the Book of Ben Sira. Review and Prospects", *The Book of Ben Sira in Modern Research*. Proceedings of the First International Ben Sira Conference 28-31 July 1996, Soesterberg, Netherlands (ed. P.C. Beentjes) (Berlin – New York, NY 1997) 61-79.
- 5 See e.g.: R. Smend, *Die Weisheit des Jesus Sirach erklärt* (Berlin 1906) xxxiv; Skehan – Di Lella, *The Wisdom of Ben Sira*, 4-6; J.D. Harvey, "Toward a Degree of Order in Ben Sira's Book", *ZAW* 105 (1993) 61; Jüngling, „Der Bauplan”, 105. There are, however, authors who see the introduction to the *Praise of the Ancestors* in the previous text on creation (42:15–43:33). See e.g.: N. Peters, *Das Buch Jesus Sirach oder Ecclesiasticus*. Übersetzt und erklärt (EHAT 25; Münster 1913) xli; C. Spicq, *L'Écclesiastique* (SB[PC]; Paris 1951) 553-554; A. Minissale, *Siracide (Ecclesiastico)*. Versione – Introduzione – Note (Roma 1980) 10; G. Sauer, *Jesus Sirach / Ben Sira* (ATD Apokryphen 1; Göttingen 2000) 34-35. W. Roth ("On the Gnostic-Discursive Wisdom of Jesus Ben Sirach", *Semeia* 17 [1980] 60) distinguishes seven sections within the book, each beginning with a pericope on wisdom. The *Praise of the Ancestors* is included in the larger whole of Sir 38:24–50:29. Whereas according to T.R. Lee (*Studies in the Form of Sirach 44–50* [SBL Dissertation Series 75; Atlanta 1986] 6) the text of Sir 42:15–43:33 and 44:1–50:24 constitute two separate pericopes with parallel references.
- 6 Some scholars identify him with Simon I, living in 4th – 3rd century BC, called „Simon the Just” by Josephus Flavius. The assumption is that Ben Sira did not know the described high priest in person, even if his vivid descriptions suggest an eyewitness. Cf. e.g.: J.C. VanderKam, *From Joshua to Caiaphas*. High Priest after the Exile (Minneapolis – Assen 2014) 149-151; H. Drawnel, "Władza arcykapłana w Izraelu we wczesnym okresie hellenistycznym: pomiędzy historią a kapłańską ideologią dydaktyczną", *Polityka a religia* (eds. P. Jaroszyński et al.) (Lublin 2007) 306-307, note 7. Others identify the character described by Ben Sira with the high priest Simon II, a grandson of Simon I, who held his office at the end of III and the beginning of the 2nd century BC (ca 210-196), in which case it would be possible for the author to be an eyewitness of his accomplishments. Cf. e.g.: J. Ciecieląg, *Żydzi w okresie drugiej świątyni 538 przed Chr. – 70 po Chr.* (Kraków 2011) 165-167. Cf. Skehan – Di Lella, *The Wisdom of Ben Sira*, 550.

on that subject. The ending could be found in chapter 50 or in verse 29, 26 or 21.⁷ By contrast, R. Smend sets the textual boundary after Sir 49:16, thus separating the pericope on Simon the high priest from the *Praise of the Ancestors*.⁸ Sir 49:14-16 seems to be the conclusion of the preceding texts talking about Biblical heroes of the past. The chronological sequence is broken after introducing Nehemiah (49:13), which is then followed by a surprising return to the beginnings. Enoch, mentioned already in 44:16, appears here together with Joseph, Shem, Seth and Enosh (he appears only in the Hebrew text), and Adam, none of whom is previously mentioned by name in the *Praise of the Ancestors* narrative.⁹ The story of “Fathers of the past” ends here, signaled by this brief return to the beginnings, then the author moves on to a new stage, the more recent story concerning the high priest Simon. While acknowledging the unity of chapters 44–50, the present article will focus on chapters 44–49, which refer to the previously recorded history of Biblical Israel. Women were part of this history, of course, and played important roles in it – but did Ben Sira grant them an adequate place, or indeed even note their presence?

3. The Protagonists of Sir 44–49 and Their Presentation

In Sir 44–49, the author selected both the protagonists themselves and the manner of their presentation. In fact, what we have here is the history of Israel presented as the story of its male heroes. The first characters: Noah, Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Moses, Aaron, Phinehas (not counting Enoch)¹⁰ form a coherent entity, bound together by the theme of covenant, implying promises and blessing. In order to emphasize this, the author breaks the chronological order (45:25) to invoke the additional example of David.¹¹ The prominence given to Aaron and Phinehas is worth noting, as it draws our attention to

7 Cf. Peters, *Das Buch Jesus Sirach*, 553-554; Roth, “On the Gnostic-Discursive Wisdom”, 60; Harvey, “Toward a Degree of Order”, 61; Jüngling, “Der Bauplan”, 105; Spicq, *L’Écclesiastique*, 553-554; Minissale, *Siracide*, 9-10; Skehan – Di Lella, *The Wisdom of Ben Sira*, 5; Sauer, *Jesus Sirach*, 34-35.

8 Smend (*Die Weisheit*, 474) declares: “Um das Lob der Väter abzuschließen und es zugleich gegen das Lob des Simon abzugrenzen, biegt Sirach jetzt auf die Urzeit zurück.”

9 Cf. Lee, *Studies*, 10-11.

10 The lack of Sir 44:16 in either the manuscript of Masada or the Syrian text undermines, according to some scholars, the authenticity of the text. Cf. Y. Yadin, *The Ben Sira Scroll from Masada* (Masada VI. Yigael Yadin Excavations 1963-1965. Final Reports; Jerusalem 1999) 224-225; P.C. Beentjes, „The ‘Praise of the Famous’ and its Prologue. Some Observations on Ben Sira 44:1-15 and the Question on Enoch in 44:16”, *Bijdragen, tijdschrift voor filosofie en theologie* 45 (1984) 380-382.

11 B.L. Mack, *Wisdom and the Hebrew Epic*. Ben Sira’s Hymn in Praise of the Fathers (Chicago Studies in the Story of Judaism; Chicago – London 1985) 39.

the position of priests in the larger story. Next appear Joshua and Caleb, followed by the Judges (collectively), representing two concepts or stages in the conquest of the Promised Land (a rapid military conquest by Joshua followed by the peaceful infiltration of the period of the Judges). The history of the monarchy develops in a parallel fashion, with kings appearing side by side with the prophets. Saul appears anonymously, and Rehoboam and Jeroboam are both condemned. David, Hezekiah and Josiah are considered praiseworthy, whereas the opinion on Solomon is ambivalent. The remaining kings of Judah, regarded as wicked, appear namelessly. The prophets mentioned include Samuel, Elijah, Elisha, Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel and the Twelve. Times of rebuilding after the exile are represented by Zerubbabel, Joshua and Nehemiah. Then, as noted, the author returns to the beginnings, mentioning Enoch, Joseph, Shem, Seth, Enosh (in the Hebrew version) and finally Adam. This conclusion of the story, alluding to the beginnings, then leads us on to more recent history, to the description of Simon, the high priest (50:1-21).

4. Nameless Women in Sir 44–49

Although named references to well-known female protagonists of the history of Biblical Israel are missing from this history of the “fathers”, at close reading of the *Praise*, especially in its Hebrew version, reveals some anonymous allusions to women.¹²

4.1. Women in the Praise of David (Sir 47:6 H/S)

In the praise of David included in Hebrew and Syriac versions of Sir 47:6, there appear anonymous women who exalt him after his victory over Goliath.¹³ The Hebrew text¹⁴ goes as follows:

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- 12 On this subject: N. Calduch-Benages, “The Absence of Named Women from Ben Sira’s Praise of Ancestors”, *Rewriting Biblical History. Essays on Chronicles and Ben Sira in Honor of Pancratius C. Beentjes* (eds. J. Corley – H. van Grol) (Berlin – New York, NY 2011) 310-307.
- 13 M. Marko, “David in the Wisdom of Ben Sira”, *SJOT* 25/1 (2011) 39. Cf. G.H. Box – W.O.E. Oesterley, “The Book of Sirach”, *The Apocrypha and Pseudepigrapha of the Old Testament with Introductions and Critical and Explanatory Notes to the Several Books* (ed. R.H. Charles) (Oxford 1913) I, 495; V. Hamp, *Sirach* (Die Heilige Schrift in deutscher Übersetzung, Echter – Bibel 13; Würzburg 1952) 129; Minissale, *Siracide*, 224; Sauer, *Jesus Sirach*, 319-321; B.M. Zapff, *Jesus Sirach 25–51* (Kommentar zum AT mit der Einheitsübersetzung. Die Neue Echter Bibel 39; Würzburg 2010) 347.
- 14 The Hebrew text after ms B.P.C. Beentjes (ed.), *The Book of Ben Sira in Hebrew. Text Edition of All Extant Hebrew Manuscripts and a Synopsis of All Parallel Hebrew Ben Sira Texts*

על כן עני לו בנות
 ויכניהו ברבבה
*Therefore girls¹⁵ sang for him
 and praised him for the tens of thousands.*

In a Syriac version¹⁶ the word: “girls, daughters” (בנות), is replaced by “women”(נצא):

ܘܥܠ ܟܢ ܥܢܝ ܠܘ ܒܢܘܬܝ
 ܘܝܚܢܝܗܘ ܒܪܒܒܗ
*Because of this the women praised him in ten of thousands;
 he hardly made efforts.¹⁷*

The Greek text¹⁸ records praises for David but does not mention women. David is praised by anonymous people.

οὕτως ἐν μυριάσιν ἐδόξασαν αὐτὸν
 καὶ ἤνεσαν αὐτὸν ἐν εὐλογίαις κυρίου
*So among the tens of thousands they glorified him
 and they praised him with blessings of the Lord.*

Here Ben Sira alludes to the episode described in 1 Sam, where women indeed appear: *On their way back, as David was returning after killing the Philistine, the women came out to meet King Saul from all the towns of Israel, singing and dancing to the sound of tambourine and lyre and cries of joy; and as they danced the women sang: “Saul has killed his thousands, and David his tens of thousands”* (1 Sam 18:6-7). The theme of girls singing (or dancing – see Ex 15:20; Judges 11:34; Judges 5:1) to greet their victorious countrymen is well known in Israel and in the ancient Near East.¹⁹ It is not

(VT.S 68; Leiden – New York – Köln 1997) *ad loc.* The grammatical forms of the verbs “sing, praise” are, however, of masculine gender, probably taken from 1 Sam 21:12 and 1 Sam 29:5. Calduch-Benages, “The Absence of Named Women”, 305.

¹⁵ Literally: “daughters”.

¹⁶ The Syriac texts and its English translations, if not indicated otherwise, are always given after N. Calduch-Benages – J. Ferrer – J. Liesen (eds.), *La Sabiduría del Escriba*. Edición diplomática de la versión siríaca del libro de Ben Sira según el Códice Ambrosiano, con traducción española e inglesa / *Wisdom of the Scribe. Diplomatic Edition of the Syriac Version of the Book of Ben Sira according to Codex Ambrosianus, with Translations in Spanish and English* (Biblioteca Mitrásica 26; Estella 2003).

¹⁷ Calduch-Benages – Ferrer – Liesen, *La Sabiduría del Escriba*, 252.

¹⁸ J. Ziegler (ed.), *Sapientia Iesu Filii Sirach* (Septuagint: Vetus Testamentum graece auctoritate Societatis Göttingensis editum 12/2; Göttingen 1965, ²1980) *ad loc.* Cf. A. Minissale, *La versione greca del Siracide*. Confronto con il testo ebraico alla luce dell’attività midrascica e del metodo targumico (AnBib 133; Roma 1995) 181.

¹⁹ Ritual dances connected with fertility, funerals or the victory of warriors were the domain of women. See M.A. Murray, “Ancient and Modern Ritual Dances in the near East”, *Folklore*

only the question of “military glory”, which provokes the jealousy and rivalry of Saul (see 1 Sam 1:8). This kind of singing also has religious connotations.²⁰ Drums and tambourines are the musical instruments used by prophets (see 1 Sam 10:5), and during the installation of the Ark of the Covenant in Jerusalem (see 2 Sam 6:5). Thus, women here serve the important function of proclaiming God’s deeds in the life of David and in the history of Israel.

4.2. Women as a Reason for Solomon’s Downfall

The praise of Solomon and his deeds (Sir 47:12-18) change abruptly to severe criticism in Sir 47:19. All his previous accomplishments and merits are nullified by the fact of his sin. Following the description of 1 Kings 11:1-3, the sage points to the existence of foreign wives as the reason for his downfall.²¹ Here the various textual versions of Sir 47:19 are slightly different.²²

The Hebrew version is as follows:

והתן לנשים כסליך והתמשילם בנייתך
*And you abandoned your loins to women
 and gave them the dominion over your body.*

The Greek version emphasizes the subjection of Solomon to women as a sign of surrender to his bodily appetites:

παρανέκλινας τὰς λαγόνας σου γυναιξίν
 καὶ ἐνεξουσιάζσθης ἐν τῷ σώματί σου
*You subjected your loins to women
 and surrendered yourself to your body.*

In the Syriac version the expression “your strength” (ܣܘܒܪܬܐ) appears as a euphemism denoting sexuality:

66/4 (1955) 401-409. In the Bible there are two Hebrew stems describing dancing – רקד (men’s dance, consisting of up and down movements, e.g.: David in 1 Ch 15:29) and הול (women’s dance, consisting of movements in circles, e.g. the women in front of David in 1 Sam 18:6). Cf. T. Ilan, “Dance and Gender in Ancient Jewish Sources”, *Near Eastern Archaeology* 66/3 (2003) 135-136.

²⁰ There is a certain ambiguity in the Hebrew text of Sir 47:6. The suffixes of the 3rd person singular masculine (*sang for him, praised him*) may refer either to David and to JHWH, who is the author of his victories. Cf. A. Demitrow, *Quattro oranti nell’Elogio dei Padri (Sir 44–49)*. Studio dei testi e delle tradizioni (Opolska Biblioteka Teologiczna 124; Opole 2011) 297.

²¹ Cf. Box – Oesterley, “The Book of Sirach”, 498; Hamp, *Sirach*, 130; Minissale, *Siracide*, 227; Sauer, *Jesus Sirach*, 322-323; Zapff, *Jesus Sirach 25–51*, 352.

²² Cf. Minissale, *La versione greca del Siracide*, 187.

וְאַתָּה יְיָ אֱלֹהֵינוּ
 וְאַתָּה יְיָ אֱלֹהֵינוּ
 And you gave your strength to women
 and you made them rule over your body.²³

Here the emphasis is clearly on the lack of bodily control, a concept which belonged to sapiential tradition and constituted an element of its teaching: *Do not spend all your energy on women, nor your loins on these destroyers of kings* (Prov 31:3).²⁴ It might seem that Ben Sira directs his criticism solely to the ruler's lack of restraint and control over his body.²⁵ Still, it should not be forgotten that the women in question are foreign and thus identified with pagan cults posing a threat to the purity of Israel's faith. Moreover, the *Praise of the Ancestors* highlights the person of Phinehas (Sir 45:23-24), who objected to sexual practices with foreign females and the resulting idolatry in Baal Peor (see Num 25:1-9).

4.3. Mothers of Priests and Prophets: Samuel (Sir 46:13 H/S) and Jeremiah (Sir 49:7)

Other allusions to women concern mothers or, more precisely, the life beginnings of the protagonists, referred to by means of a symbolic phrase, "mother's womb". The first reference applies to Samuel, who according to 1 Sam is born of a formerly barren mother.²⁶

The Hebrew text of Sir 46:13ab reads as follows:

אֹהֶב עַמּוֹ וְרִצּוֹי עוֹשֶׂהוּ
 הַמְשׂוּאֵל מִבֶּטֶן אִמּוֹ
 A friend of his people, cherished by his Creator,
 consecrated²⁷ since his mother's womb.

²³ Calduch-Benages – Ferrer – Liesen, *La Sabiduría del Escriba*, 254.

²⁴ Cf. Skehan – Di Lella, *The Wisdom of Ben Sira*, 528.

²⁵ Cf. Calduch-Benages, „The Absence of Named Women”, 307.

²⁶ Demitrów, *Quattro oranti*, 149. Cf. Box – Oesterley, “The Book of Sirach”, 492; Hamp, *Sirach*, 127; Minissale, *Siracide*, 222; Sauer, *Jesus Sirach*, 317-318; Zapff, *Jesus Sirach 25–51*, 341.

²⁷ Stem שֹׂאֵל of pual conjugation does not appear in BH. It might denote either “consecrate” or „pray for”. There is an interesting link with 1 Sam 1:28 where we find the שֹׂאֵל stem in hifil conjugation: *make over (consecrate) him to the Lord*. The text reads as follows: *Now I make him over to Yahweh for the whole of his life. He is made over to Yahweh*. What was prayed for is now made over. It is also an allusion to Samuel's name. Cf. Demitrów, *Quattro oranti*, 150; Skehan – Di Lella, *The Wisdom of Ben Sira*, 517.

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The Greek version, however, omits the reference to mother's womb, emphasizing instead the social accomplishment of Samuel.²⁸

ἡγαπημένος ὑπὸ κυρίου αὐτοῦ Σαμουὴλ προφήτης κυρίου
κατέστησεν βασιλείαν καὶ ἔχρισεν ἄρχοντας ἐπὶ τὸν λαὸν αὐτοῦ
*Samuel, the beloved of the Lord, prophet of the Lord,
instituted the kingdom and anointed rulers over his people.*

The Syriac version seems to combine the Hebrew and Greek ones, containing references both to “mother's womb” and to the appointing of rulers by Samuel:

הוֹשֵׁב לִבּוֹ
מִן הַבֶּטֶן הַיְמָנִית הַיְמָנִית הַיְמָנִית
וְהוֹשֵׁב לִבּוֹ הַיְמָנִית הַיְמָנִית הַיְמָנִית
הַיְמָנִית הַיְמָנִית הַיְמָנִית הַיְמָנִית
*And beloved by his Creator,
who was asked for from the womb of his mother,
a Nazirean by prophecy, Samuel, judge and priest,
by whose word the kingdom was established
and he anointed rulers and kings for the people.*²⁹

On one hand, the reference to mother's womb in the story of Samuel points to the presence of God and his calling at the very beginning of his life. On the other hand, it evokes the dramatic situation of barren Hannah and her vow, a promise made to the Lord. A gift of male offspring was to be “made over”, i.e. consecrated to the service of the Lord, just like every firstborn in Israel destined for priestly service, thus Hannah's decision merges with God's larger plan for Samuel (see 1 Sam 1:11). That is, the power of God working in Samuel's life coincides with the prayer of his mother and reveals itself in an answer to her supplication.³⁰

A similar reference to “mother's womb” is present in the description of Jeremiah.³¹ All three language versions imply that Jeremiah was already formed and consecrated a prophet in his mother's womb. The Hebrew text of Sir 49:7 goes as follows:

בֵּיד יִרְמִיָּהוּ כִּי עָנִוּהוּ
וְהוּא מִרְחֵם נוֹצֵר נְבִיא

²⁸ Cf. Minissale, *La versione greca del Siracide*, 249.

²⁹ Calduch-Benages – Ferrer – Liesen, *La Sabiduria del Escriba*, 250.

³⁰ Cf. Calduch-Benages, “The Absence of Named Women”, 308.

³¹ Cf. Box – Oesterley, “The Book of Sirach”, 504; Hamp, *Sirach*, 135; Minissale, *Siracide*, 233; Sauer, *Jesus Sirach*, 333-334; Zapff, *Jesus Sirach 25–51*, 370.

לנתוש ולנתוץ ולהאביר להרס
 וכן לבנת לנשע³² ולהשי[ב]

*As Jeremiah³³ had predicted; for they had ill-treated him,
 although he had been formed a prophet since the [mother's] womb
 to uproot and to ruin and to destroy, to demolish,
 but also to build, plant and restore.*

The Greek text:

ἐν χειρὶ Ἰερεμίου ἐκάκωσαν γὰρ αὐτόν
 καὶ αὐτὸς ἐν μήτρᾳ ἡγιασθη προφήτης
 ἐκριζοῦν καὶ κακοῦν καὶ ἀπολλύειν
 ὡσαύτως οἰκοδομεῖν καὶ καταφυτεύειν

*As Jeremiah had predicted;
 for they had ill-treated him,
 him who in the mother[’s womb] was consecrated a prophet
 to uproot, afflict and destroy,
 but also to build and plant³⁴.*

The Syriac text of Sir 49:6c-7 is somewhat shorter:

ܬܢܬܢ ܐܘܪܚܐ ܕܩܘܡܐ ܕܢܒܝܐ ܕܝܪܘܡ ܕܢܒܝܐ
*In the days of Jeremiah, who was prophet
 from the womb of his mother.³⁵*

Here Ben Sira recalls the Book of Jeremiah: *Before I formed you in the womb I knew you; before you came to birth I consecrated you; I have appointed you as prophet to the nations* (1:5). As in the case of Jer, in the Hebrew description of Sir we find certain characteristic expressions: womb (רֶחֶם), prophet (נְבִיא), form (יֵצֵר). What comes to the foreground is the work of God and the irrevocable gift of his calling, present since the very beginning of the prophet’s life (See Jg 16:17, Is 49:1.5; Jr 1:5; Ps 22:10-11)³⁶. Hence the

³² We follow the reconstruction by Beentjes (*The Book of Ben Sira*, 88) and Smend (*Die Weisheit*, 470). Cf. Calduch-Benages, “The Absence of Named Women”, 310.

³³ Literally “in the hand/ by the hand of Jeremiah” appears in the Hebrew text (בִּידוֹ), the Greek (ἐν χειρὶ), as well as the Latin (*in manu*). In this context, this expression may denote the strength of the prophetic word, which found its fulfillment in the destruction of Jerusalem, or possibly the mediation of Jeremiah in the transmission of God’s word. Similarly in Sir 46:4 (*Was not the sun held back by his hand* [בִּידוֹ / ἐν χειρὶ αὐτοῦ], and *one day drawn out into two?*) and 48:20 (*They called on the merciful Lord, stretching out their hands towards him. Swiftly the Holy One heard them from heaven, and delivered them by the hand* [בִּידוֹ / ἐν χειρὶ] of Isaiah).

³⁴ NETS renders the idiom *by the hand* in Sir 49:6 as *because*. B.G. Wright, “Wisdom of Iesous Son of Sirach”, *A New English Translation of the Septuagint (NETS) and the Other Greek Translations Traditionally Included under that Title* (eds. A. Pietersma – B. G. Wright) (New York – Oxford 2007) 759.

³⁵ Calduch-Benages – Ferrer – Liesen, *La Sabiduría del Escriba*, 260.

³⁶ Cf. Demitrów, *Quattro oranti*, 150-151.

expression: “since his mother’s womb” is a metaphor for the beginnings of life, although it also refers to two specific women, mothers who gave birth to Biblical heroes.

4.4. Pains of Women in Labour

The text of Sir 48:19 refers to Sennacherib’s expedition against Jerusalem and Hezekiah (Cf. 2 Kings 19; Is 37). The Assyrian invasion aroused panic among inhabitants of Jerusalem, whose suffering was compared by Ben Sira to labour pains.³⁷ The Hebrew text goes as follows:

אז נמוגו בנאון לבם
ויהילו כיולדה

[Then] they trembled in hubris of their hearts,³⁸
they suffered as the one giving birth.

The Greek text shows a certain difference:⁴⁰

τότε έσαλεύθησαν καρδίαι καὶ χεῖρες αὐτῶν
καὶ ὠδίνησαν ὡς αἱ τίκτουςαι

[Then] their hearts and hands trembled,
they suffered as those who are giving birth.

The Syriac text is missing. The reference to labour pains may evoke the image of a hard, grievous situation which prevents a baby from being born. This is how the Assyrian threat was described by king Hezekiah: *Today is a day of suffering, of punishment, of disgrace. Children come to birth, and there is no strength to bring them forth* (2 Kings 19:3; cf. Isa 37:3). On the other hand, the pain of women in labour is a metaphor for severe, sudden and inevitable pain and illustrates the crisis of an individual or a community.⁴¹ The day of judgment is described likewise in Isa 13:8: *seized with pains and convulsions; they writhe like a woman in labour, they look at one another*

³⁷ Cf. Box – Oesterley, “The Book of Sirach”, 503; Hamp, *Sirach*, 133; Minissale, *Siracide*, 231; Sauer, *Jesus Sirach*, 328-329; Zapff, *Jesus Sirach 25–51*, 364.

³⁸ Calduch-Benages (“The Absence of Named Women”, 309) suggests putting אִז at the beginning of the corrupted text (“then, at that time”; cf. LXX: τότε).

³⁹ The Hebrew version gives the reason for the panic of Jerusalem inhabitants. At first they felt safe and secure thanks to their city being fortified and having access to water. It turned out, however, that their confidence gave way to fear when confronted with the attitude of Assyrian army representatives.

⁴⁰ Por. Minissale, *La versione greca del Siracide*, 219.

⁴¹ Cf. Calduch-Benages, “The Absence of Named Women”, 309-310.

appalled, with feverish faces (Cf. Is 21:3; 26:17-18; Jer 6:24; 13:21; 22:23; 48:41; 49:22; Mi 4:9; Ps 48:7). Ben Sira, therefore, seems to have used the already existing images pointedly describing a dramatic situation of his people in order to enhance the realism of his own telling of it. Consequently, there is no reference here to a specific female personage but only an attempt at depicting extreme suffering by comparing it to pains of a woman in labour.

5. Pedagogical Purpose of the *Praise of the Ancestors* as a Reason for the Absence of Women

One may well ask: why did the sage choose to present women in this way? History in Sir 44–49 is definitely androcentric. “Female” references are general, anonymous or metaphorical and thus seem to be totally insignificant in this story. In the Greek text we may also observe the tendency to play down or omit references to women altogether. LXX, for example, omits the allusion to girls praising David and the reference to “mother’s womb” in the description of Samuel.⁴² Such changes might result from the context in which the translation was compiled by the sage’s grandson in pagan Alexandria, where women acted as priestesses in the pagan cult. The alterations might also be associated with the experience of compulsory Hellenization and the pressure of pagan cults in pre-Maccabean times. From the perspective, the case of Solomon, overwhelmed by his pagan wives, would have served as an especially strong warning. Passing over female role models might also be due to the fact that one of the aims of the *Praise* was to educate young men, to show them models of life, tradition and Law in order to build up their identity.⁴³ Is there, however, any other possibility to explain the choice of exclusively male protagonists in the *Praise of the Ancestors*?

6. The Literary Genre of Sir 44–49

Another explanation for the choice of protagonists in the *Praise of the Ancestors* is offered by the literary genre of the text. The text of Sir 44–49, as the title itself suggests, is a laudatory oration, a eulogy.⁴⁴ Greek rhetoric

⁴² For the differences between the various language versions of texts about women in the Book of Ben Sira see Minissale, *La versione greca del Siracide*, 260.

⁴³ This is the view favoured by N. Calduch-Benages (“The Absence of Named Women”, 311), the only author who wrote an article long study on the issue of the female figures in Sir 44–49.

⁴⁴ Mack, *Wisdom*, 128-129.

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distinguishes between three types of oration: deliberative (political), judicial and epideictic.⁴⁵ The last category included encomia and invectives.⁴⁶ This leads to the question of the presence of women in various laudatory orations. Were they present in Greek encomia at all? Gorgias (V-IVth century BC), the Greek philosopher, orator and rhetorician, wrote a number of speeches in defense of mythological characters. His *Encomium of Helen* (*Elenes enkomion*)⁴⁷ justifies Helen, claiming her blameless in all things.⁴⁸ An *Encomium of Helen* was likewise written by Isocrates (V-VIth century BC) who followed the example of his master, Gorgias.⁴⁹ Theocritus of Syracuse (IV-IIIrd century BC), connected with the Alexandrian court, compiled an encomium in honour of Ptolemy II Philadelphus, in which he also praised his mother, Berenice I, the wife of Ptolemy I Soter. Callimachus of Cyrene (IV-IIIrd BC), the greatest poet of the Alexandrian epoch, a librarian, and, author of the first history of literature, in his encomium of Ptolemy III Euergetes praises his wife, Berenice II, endowing her with the title: *basilissa Berenike II Thea Euergetis – Queen Berenice, the Benevolent Goddess*⁵⁰.

Biblical texts also contain eulogies, focused on the achievements of famous heroes. 1 Macc 3:3-9 is a eulogy of Judah Maccabeus (the leader of the Maccabean Revolt in 166-160 BC), presented as a courageous and strong warrior bringing glory to his people and installing fear in his enemies. His memory will survive thanks to his brave deeds, and his struggle for the purity of faith “diverted the Retribution from Israel”. 1 Macc 14:4-15 praises his brother and successor Simon (the ethnarch and high priest, 143-134 BC). The eulogy of Simon highlights his role in safeguarding peace

⁴⁵ Por. J. Nowaszczuk, “Kompozycja wypowiedzi w ujęciu greckiej szkoły retorycznej”, *Roczniki Humanistyczne* 54-55/3 (2006-2007) 247.

⁴⁶ For Sir 44–49 as an encomium see Mack, *Wisdom*, 128-137; Lee, *Studies*, 82-103.

⁴⁷ Gorgias de Léontini, “Γοργίου Ἐλενης Ἐγκωμίου. Gorgiæ Helenæ Laudatio”, *Oratores attici* (Vol. II. Fragmenta oratorum atticorum en grec/latin) (Paris 1888) 206-209; Gorgias, “Encomium of Helen”, *The Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism* (eds. Vincent B. Leitch et al.) (New York 2001) 30-33.

⁴⁸ *Encomium of Helen* by Gorgias is the oldest preserved artistic oration of antiquity, dated approximately to the end of V century BC. It is, according to scholars, a “demonstration” speech, since the defense of an unfaithful wife may be applied to any other woman. The model nature of this encomium gave rise to assumptions that it was written by Gorgias with his disciples in mind. It is considered a prime example of the art of rhetoric. Cf. Z. Nerczuk, “Pochwała Heleny Gorgiasza z Leontinoi” [“The Encomium of Helen by Gorgias of Leontinoa”], *Studia Antyczne i Mediewistyczne* 45 (2012) 18-19; Lee, *Studies*, 125-127.

⁴⁹ Isocrates, “EAENH. Helen”, *Isocrates*. In Three Volumes with an English Translation (ed. L. Van Hook) (Loeb Classical Library 373; Cambridge, MA 1945) III, 54-97; Lee, *Studies*, 135-137. See K. Tuszyńska-Maciejewska, „Pochwała Heleny w wykonaniu ateńskiego mówcy Izokratesa” [*Encomium of Helen performed by an Athenian orator, Isocrates*], *Symbole Philologorum Posnaniensium Graecae et Latinae* 8 (1991) 57-70.

⁵⁰ Cf. Lee, *Studies*, 159-160; Calduch-Benages, “The Absence of Named Women”, 302.

and well-being for Judeans, as well as his contributions towards the development of the country and embellishing the Temple. Among the eulogies of individuals, there is one devoted to a woman – to Judith. She is praised three times: by Uzziah (Judith 13:18-20), by Achior (Judith 14:7), and by Joakim the high priest (Judith 15:8-10). However, being a fictional character, she provides no argument for the presence of women from the history of Israel in Biblical eulogies.⁵¹ In any event, eulogies containing lists of praised personages are far more important for our purpose. In the Book of Wisdom, the praise of wisdom is expressed by, among other things, appreciating its work in the lives of outstanding individuals. Wisdom 10:1–11:14 mentions them anonymously (calling them “upright men”); in other places they are mentioned together with their “enemies”. It may be deduced from the context that the heroes (and enemies) alluded to are: Adam and Cain; Noah; the builders of the Tower of Babel and Abraham; the inhabitants of Sodom and Lot; Jacob and Esau; Laban; Joseph of Egypt; and Moses. The text aims at presenting the ultimate victory of those accepting the gift of God’s wisdom and the defeat of those who do not.⁵² In 1 Maccabees another list of heroes was supposedly left by Mattathias to his sons shortly before his death. The memory of „ancestors” and their deeds is an example to be followed. The heroes mentioned are: Abraham, Joseph, Phinehas, Joshua, Caleb, David, Elijah, Hananiah, Azariah, Mishael and Daniel (see 1 Macc 2:51-60). Similarly, the mother of seven brothers condemned to martyrdom, encourages her sons by listing examples of heroes: Abraham, Isaac, Daniel, Hananiah, Azariah and Mishael (see 4 Macc 16:20-23). One cannot fail to observe that women are missing from all three lists of praised heroes. It was essentially male heroes who were role models for Jewish men in the midst of trials and tribulations.⁵³ Is this then a satisfactory answer for our question of the lack of reference to specific Biblical heroines in Sir 44–49? Perhaps it would be advisable to consider the basic aim of the *Praise of the Ancestors* and draw our attention to the elements emphasized by the author.

51 On the historical character and purpose of the Book of Judith, see: C.A. Moore, *Judith. A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* (AB 40B; New Haven – London 2008) 76-77.

52 D. Winston (*The Wisdom of Solomon. A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* [New Haven – London 2008] 211) states: “Wisdom’s saving and punishing power is here illustrated by the enumeration of seven righteous heroes and their wicked counterparts, although the contrast is not consistently carried out. We have Adam-Cain; Noah-generation of the Flood; Abraham-the nations confounded in their wickedness; Lot-Sodomites; Jacob-Esau; Joseph-his critics; Israel under Moses-the Egyptian oppressors under Pharaoh.”

53 Cf. Calduch-Benages, “The Absence of Named Women”, 303-304.

7. The Cultic Interpretation

There is indeed, a third way of explaining such an insignificant presence of women in the *Praise of the Ancestors*. In my opinion, it is the most convincing one. While analyzing the text of Sir 44–49 one may notice the author's very strong interest in the role played by priests in the history of Israel, which finds its culmination in the final description of Simon. There has even been an attempt to interpret the *Praise of the Ancestors* as the genealogy of Simon the high priest.⁵⁴ Although this focus on priests and cult seems rather one-sided⁵⁵ (since the *Praise* recounts the whole sweep of salvation history), it allows us to view the presence of women in the *Praise*, as well as at the entirety of *Praise* itself, through the sacerdotal lens.

The person of Moses, described in a mere five verses (45:1-5), is greatly overshadowed by Aaron, to whom as many as seventeen verses are devoted (45:6-22).⁵⁶ The next person praised in the text is the grandson of Aaron and son of Eleazar, Phinehas (45:23-26), who, for all his contributions to the purity of faith and the cult of Israel (see Num 25:7-11), was not a leading hero in his people's history. What Ben Sira wanted to emphasize, however, was the fact that God's choice of Aaron's sons was irrevocable. The praise of Simon (50:1-21) marks a new stage, closely connected with the previous text (44–49). A certain continuity, both literary and thematic, has indeed been noticed here.⁵⁷ There are some lexical links between the descriptions of Aaron, Phinehas and Simon. The person, apparel and functions of Simon refer back to Aaron (45:6-22), Phinehas (45:23-25) and Nehemiah (49:13). In Sir 44–49 and in the praise of Simon there are parallel doxologies, which serve to illustrate the unity between the two texts.⁵⁸ The sage describes Aaron and Phinehas using characteristics of the Second Temple high priest. He

⁵⁴ Lee, *Studies*, 206.

⁵⁵ For the analysis of this topic, see Mack, *Wisdom*, 130-133. The writer presents the elements of the Greek encomium and its adaptation in the *Praise of the Ancestors*. In his opinion (*ibid.*, 136), however, Ben Sira goes beyond the standard encomium format, enriching it with elements of ancient historiography and biography.

⁵⁶ Cf. A. Piwowar, "Syrach – obrońca prawowitego arcykapłana", *Od Melchizedeka do Jezusa Arcykapłana*. Biblia o kapłaństwie (ed. D. Dziadosz) (Analecta Biblica Lublinensia 5; Lublin 2010) 94.

⁵⁷ Box – Oesterley, "The Book of Sirach", 479.

⁵⁸ At the end of the section on the priest Phinehas, son of Eleazar, there is a doxology present only in H version, Sir 45:25ef in ms B: [הטוב] את יי ועהברכונא את (and now bless the [good] Lord). In Sir 50:22a, in H version there is the almost identical expression: אתהברכונא את יי (now bless the Lord). The other doxology appears in Sir 45:26a: ויתן לכם הכמתלב (And may he grant us wisdom of heart). It corresponds with Sir 50:23a: יתן לכם חכמת לבב (May he grant us wisdom of heart).

presents them as exercising both religious and secular (legislative, executive and judicial) authority, granted to them by God himself.⁵⁹

In the description of Aaron (45:12), the sage uses the expression עֲטָרֶתָּו, which appears only one other place in BH, in Ps 21:4, to denote the royal crown. Moreover, the covenant made with Aaron will be eternal “like the days of heaven” (Sir 45:15: כִּי־יָמֵי־שָׁמַיִם), similar to the one made with David (see Ps 89:30: כִּי־יָמֵי־שָׁמַיִם). The attributes of the king were thus transferred to the high priest.⁶⁰ The rightful priesthood is, in the thought of Ben Sira, the sign of being faithful to the covenant, the fulfillment of God’s promises and the unique position of the people of God.

While interpreting the anonymous allusions to women in Sir 44–49 using the sacerdotal key, one cannot fail to notice certain connections. Leaving aside the figurative image of birth pains (Sir 48:19), the other examples refer to particular, historical personages, some of whom are mentioned by name in other books of the Bible (e.g. the women praising David: 1 Sam 18:7; the foreign wives of Solomon: 1 Kings 11:1-3; Hannah, mother of Samuel: 1 Sam:1-2; Jeremiah being called since his mother’s womb: Jer 1:5). Considering those examples, although employed anonymously in *Praise*, leads to some interesting conclusions. The women praising David (or God) during David’s life (Sir 47:6 H/S), while not belonging to the official cultic establishment, still perform public religious functions by giving praise to the God of Israel and proclaiming his great deeds. The opposite attitude is demonstrated by the foreign wives of Solomon (Sir 47:19). Although the text itself does not mention idolatry of the king explicitly, staining the honour of the monarch (Sir 47:20) and the splitting of his empire (Sir 47:21) were the result of his idolatry, which the Bible connects with the presence of his foreign wives. So those women are the symbol of the sinful cult, in opposition to the cult of the God of Israel; the sinful cult that always led to both religious and political ruin. The metaphorical image of “mother’s womb”, used in relation to both Samuel (Sir 46:13 H/S) and Jeremiah (Sir 49:7) shows, on the one hand, the power of God who reveals himself and calls his chosen ones from the very beginning of their lives. On the other hand, the image emphasizes the cooperation of mothers with this work of God through his prophets and priests. Consequently, all the women alluded to in *Praise of the Ancestors*

⁵⁹ Cf. Piwowar, “Syrach”, 107.

⁶⁰ Jesus Sirach wrote his story with a clear purpose, namely to preserve the priestly succession of Simon and his successors. Their role was to guarantee the continuation of God’s work in the history of Israel. Cf. P. C. Beentjes, “The Countries Marvelled at You. King Salomon in Ben Sira 47:12-22”, *Bijdragen* 45 (1984) 12-13.

somehow – in either positive or negative ways – “fit into” the cultic conception of the history of Israel that was adopted by the sage of Sira.

8. Conclusions

The absence of named references to women is then neither a symptom of the writer’s misogyny nor the result of the educational character of his admonitions (since those in the sapiential tradition could also be given by a woman, a mother). Moreover, the absence of named references to women cannot be explained by the choice of the literary genre of encomium (eulogy), because we know of Greek *encomia* praising women. It therefore seems that it is the defense and promotion of the priesthood that determined both the choice of the presented protagonists and the manner of their presentation. Women had no part in the official priesthood of Israel,⁶¹ which was passed on from father to son, beginning with Aaron the high priest. The absence of any of the great heroines of Biblical history from *Praise* may be due to the conscious choice of the author, who wished to concentrate on the sacerdotal dimension of the history of Israel. Further, the historical context of this work suggest a possible motive. Onias III, the successor of Simon the high priest who was praised by Ben Sira, did not have such a strong personality as his father. The presentation of the history of Israel with a focus on God’s choice of Aaron’s offspring might have been an attempt at overcoming the growing crisis around this weak high priest Onias, who, by the virtue of his function, represented the keystone of the covenant between God and Israel.

⁶¹ Ex 38:8 mentions women who served at the entrance to the tabernacle and gave their mirrors to make the bronze basin. The motif of women appears also in 1 Sam 2:22, considered a gloss. It might be a later text, echoing the reform of Josiah and removing women who wove veils for Asherah from the Temple (see 2 Kings 23:7). The fact that women sang and danced at religious celebrations (see Ex 15:20; Judges 21:21; Ps 68:26) does not mean they belonged to the official cultic establishment. There is evidence of priestesses taking part in Assyrian and Phoenician cult, where the feminine counterpart of the word “priest” was coined. In Hebrew, however, the nouns “kohen” and “lewi” have no feminine counterparts. In the context of pagan priestesses, reference to women in cult could lead to associations with idolatry. Cf. R. De Vaux, *Instytucje Starego Testamentu* (T. II: Instytucje Wojskowe. Instytucje Kultyczne) (transl. T. Brzegowy) (Poznań 2004) 398. Cf. H.J. Marsman, *Women in Ugarit and Israel. Their Social and Religious Position in the Context of the Ancient Near East* (OTS 49; Leiden – Boston 2003) 536-572.

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