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Remembering Joshua in the Book of Ben Sira: Man of Valour or Prophet?

Emlékezés Józsuéra Ben Sira könyvében: hős vagy próféta?

Abstract

The deutero-canonical Book of Ben Sira is considered a collection of wisdom sayings as it belongs to biblical wisdom literature. Attached to the collection of sayings we find a hymn, a so-called anthology „The Praise of the Fathers” representing the author’s view on Israel’s history. Ben Sira’s main concern appears to be the Law (the Torah) and the relation of man to God. The author considers the influence an exceptional individual can exercise over society in general. The heroes are discovered by Ben Sira in four offices: patriarch, priest, judge and king. The portrait gallery includes nevertheless one warrior, a man of valour, Joshua. Joshua’s glory and greatness is described by Ben Sira as depending on Joshua’s prophetic office: his military success is due to God’s intervention on his behalf. Thus, the author of the hellenistic period confirms the biblical view on war: war is always holy, it is part of the cult led by God and fought with God’s help.

Keywords: prophet, wisdom, warrior, biblical warfare, hero

Absztrakt

A bibliai bölcsességirodalom műfaját képviselő deuterokanonikus Sirák fiának könyve lazán felfűzött praktikus bölcsességi mondások gyűjteménye. A szerző egyfajta történelemszemléletet is képvisel a könyv végén olvasható „Az atyák dicsérete” című himnikus antológiában. Sirák fia érdeklődésének középpontjába a Törvényt helyezi, és ezen keresztül az embereknek Istenhez való viszonyát. Felteszi azt a kérdést, milyen hatással lehet a kiváló tulajdonságokkal rendelkező individuum, a pátriárcha, a pap, a bíró, a próféta és a király a társadalomra, a történelemre, amelyet Isten irányít. A történelmi képcsarnokban egyetlen hadvezér kap helyet, Józsué, aki Mózes örököse a prófétaságban. Az izraelita törzsek

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honfoglalásának legbravúrosabb csatáit vezető József hadvezéri nagyságát a szerző abban látja, hogy kérésére – mert istenfélő ember volt – maga az Úristen siet segítségére csodáival. A Kr. e. II. században élt szerző az ószövetségi szemléletet visszhangozza: a háború szent, a kultusz része és Isten vezetésével vívják.

Kulcsszavak: próféta, hadvezér, bibliai hadviselés, hős, bölcsesség

In Old Testament literature - and it is especially true concerning the narratives describing the events preceding the times of the ancient israelite kingdom- war (milchama) is given a religious aspect: Israelites considered war a sacred act, an inherent part of the cult itself.² Men prepared themselves for war with observing laws of cultic purity. War against the foes of the Israelites, i. e. the enemies of Yahweh was led by God/Yahweh Himself.³

When the biblical/Old Testamental descriptions of military conflicts are placed in the narrative of biblical history writing a fair number of characteristic features of this unique ancient „national history writing” appear. In this historical approach the emphasis is placed not on individuals or acts of heroism and their influence on the future of the people of God. The driving force of the history of ancient Israel is not the need of heroic Israelites fighting against a wicked enemy. Rather the promise given by God to His people – this is indeed the starting point of this history. War has always been regarded sacred, the enemies of the people of Israel are also the enemies of God. There is a duality in the history of ancient Israel: God is faithful towards his people, but these people too often turn away from their God.⁴ It could be nevertheless stated that in biblical historiography the history of Israel is represented as a continuous manifestation of God’s faithfulness, mercy and loving kindness towards his people.⁵

JESUS BEN SIRA AND HISTORIOGRAPHY

The Old Testament wisdom literature focuses on the individual, his/her lifestyle, practical and moral problems and recounts the various impressions and effects an individual might have to face in everyday life. The *Book of Job*, *the Book of Proverbs*, *Ecclesiastes* and the deuterocanonical⁶ *Book of Wisdom* and *Book of Ben Sira*) emphasize the influence an individual can exert on the community and on wider scale society. It is indisputable that

² *Jeremiah* 6:4; *Micha* 3:5; *Joel* 4:9.

³ *Isaiah* 13:3-4 (it is Yahweh Sabaot marshalling the troops for battle) and *Jeremiah* 51:33.

⁴ Haag, Herbert, *Bibliai Lexikon*, Szent István Társulat, Budapest, 1989, 522-523.

⁵ See the lecture given by István Karasszon depicting the Deuteronomical History from the acquirement of the homeland (Joshua) to the loss of the kingdom (1-2 Kings). http://www.orzse.hu/karasszoneload_kgre2009.htm; Letöltve 2018. június 24.

⁶ The Palestinian canon (completed in 1. century A.D.) and the Alexandrian canon (based on the Septuagint, the Greek translation of the Hebrew Bible and used from 2. century A.D. and received its final form at the Council of Trent, in 1546) differ – among other things – in the number of the canonized books. Thus, the *Book of Jesus ben Sira* and the *Book of Wisdom* – preserved in Greek and missing from *Biblia Hebraica* are designated as deuterocanonical (in the Catholic terminology).

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wisdom and knowledge are the attributes of a military leader, a „man of valour”. It is well illustrated in a saying of the impersonated Wisdom in the *Book of Proverbs*:

*By me monarchs rule and princes decree what is right;
by me rulers govern, so do nobles, the lawful authorities.*⁷

Later the author declares:

*The wise is mighty in power, strength is reinforced by science;
for it is by strategy that you wage war, and victory depends on having many counsellors.*⁸

Another statement from Ecclesiastes meditating on the value and futility of human life:

*Wisdom is worth more than weapons of war, but a single sin undoes a deal of good.*⁹

The Book of Ben Sira belongs to the corpus of biblical wisdom literature and - as is characteristic to this genre - the author whose basic concept is wisdom (*hochma*) judiciously shares practical knowledge as well as religious and moral problems with his readers. The Wisdom of Jesus ben Sira may rightfully be considered an anthology of loosely connected proverbs (*mashal*) and wisdom sayings and poems. In a so-called post-script at the end of the book the name of the author is revealed: „*Jesus, ben Sirach, the grandson of Eleazar from Jerusalem*”.¹⁰ The author’s basic concept is wisdom. Scripture, tradition, the prophets, and above all the Law (the Torah) and faithfulness to the Law – these are his main concerns. He becomes the first in Jewish literature to identify divine wisdom with Law

⁷ *Proverbs* 8:15-16. https://www.catholic.org/bible/book.php?id=24&bible_chapter=8; letöltve 2018. 07. 01.

⁸ *Proverbs* 24:5-6.

⁹ *Ecclesiastes* 9:18.

¹⁰ According to the Greek inscription this book is the wisdom of Jesus, son of Sirach. This identity is supplemented with a „signature” in the appendix: *Jesus, son of Sirach, grandson of Eleazar from Jerusalem*. 50:27, cf. 51:30. The book found in the Catholic Bible today has been translated into Greek by the grandson of the author of the Hebrew Text. He calls his grandfather Jesus (*Prologue*, verse 7). The Hebrew title of the book is Ben Sira (50:27; 51:30). The latin title is Liber Ecclesiasticus. The Hebrew text exists in a shorter and a longer form. In the present study the shorter version is used which is supported by manuscripts discovered in Qumran and Masada (from 1. century B.C.) as well as a much later manuscript which was found in the Geniza of the Cairo Synagogue (this covers about two third of the text and dates from the 12/13 centuries). It is possible to date the Book of Ben Sira rather accurately and the dating is based on a comment of the grandson-translator: he lived during the years of Ptolemy Physcon VII Euergetes (170-116 B.C.) He arrived in Egypt in the 38th year of Ptolemy’s rule, i. e. in 132 B.C. His grandfather must therefore have lived and written circa 190-180 B.C., in Jerusalem. According to the Greek inscription this book is the wisdom of Jesus, son of Sirach. This identity is supplemented with a „signature” in the appendix: *Jesus, son of Sirach, grandson of Eleazar from Jerusalem*. 50:27, cf. 51:30. In: Schürer, E. – Vermes, G. – Millar, F. – Goodman, M.: *The History of the Jewish People in the Age of Jesus Christ*, III/1, Edinburgh, 1986, 198-200, és Rózsa Huba: *Bevezetés az Ószövetség könyveibe*, Szent István Társulat, Budapest, 2016, 839-847.

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(the Law of Moses)¹¹ and also with *tremendum* (the fear of God).¹² Real wisdom is revealed in the written Law.¹³ The vivid interest of Ben Sira in the past events of Israel's history must be noted as a new phenomenon in wisdom literature and it introduces a new aspect in the genre, namely historical perspective and historical approach.¹⁴ We may therefore conclude that in Ben Sira's concept of wisdom Law, history, faithfulness to God and tradition appear as the four most distinctive principles.

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

Everyday life in Palestine under the rule of the *Ptolemies* (301-198 B.C) seems to have been peaceful, spent in relative security and the Persian administrative system exercised religious tolerance. The Ptolemies did not much interfere in internal affairs in Palestine. This peaceful existence seems to have continued for a while after the battle of Panium (198 B.C.) when as part of the peace treaty between Ptolemy V. Epiphanes (204-180 B.C.) and the Antiochus the Great (222-187 B. C.) Palestine became part of the Seleucid empire. The peaceful albeit permanent expansion of Greek culture, i.e. hellenism presented the greatest danger considering faith and tradition: hellenistic culture became fashionable, made a great impact on the upper stratum of society (especially in priestly circles) and implied a challenge for traditional religious belief. Ben Sira makes a serious effort to strengthen the confidence of Jewish people and to convince his readers that true wisdom is found in Jerusalem and in the Law of God and not in Athens with hellenistic humanism.¹⁵ Ben Sira supports tradition against the liberalism of hellenistic influence.¹⁶ Problems in Seleucid Palestine started with the financial difficulties the Seleucid monarchs had to face (due to their military encounters with Rome) which became worse later during the rule of Antioch IV Epiphanes (175-174 B.C.) whose intolerance towards the monotheistic faith of the Jews led to the Maccabean-revolt.¹⁷

THE PRAISE OF THE FATHERS (44:1-50:26)

As noted above, in regards to subject and form the model of this book of wisdom sayings, proverbs, poems was without any doubts the Bible. Attached to this wisdom anthology we find a „historical portrait gallery”, a survey of the history of Israel from the beginnings to the present day of Ben Sira. The hymn praising the forefathers of ancient Israel is implanted in

¹¹ 24:8-22.

¹² 31:13-20;39:12-35.

¹³ Rózsa, Huba, *op. cit.*, 843-844.

¹⁴ See Schürer, III/1, 198-200.

¹⁵ See Di Lella, A. A., *The Anchor Bible, The Wisdom of Ben Sira*, 9-16.

¹⁶ Schürer III/1, 200. Fergusson, Everett, *A kereszténység bölcsője*, Osiris Kiadó, Budapest, 1999, 341-345.

¹⁷ 1Macc 2:1-30. The main reason behind the revolt is found in the thinking of the faithful: observance of the Law and the devotion to God ready to sacrifice their life.

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a comprehensive concept – a hymn describing God of the creation of world and mankind¹⁸ precedes the praise of the fathers. Israel is part of the creation and as in such divine wisdom is manifested in the deeds of forefathers and ancient heroes who shaped the history of the nation. The literary structure and the framework of the hymn is formed similarly to the rest of Ben Sira's work: it is a loose structure of poems woven together by the wisdom of God. The reinterpretation of the history of ancient Israel is described in a chain of separate poems connected by the wisdom of God. Ben Sira is convinced in his belief in the continuity of history. History is presented as a continuous presence of God, a bond between God and His people. God is the driving force of history via the mighty men, the heroes who fulfilled their historical task with the help of divine wisdom.¹⁹ Ben Sira places the very existence and presence of Israel in historical perspective – this is undoubtedly a novum in biblical literature. Some people will be remembered in historical recollection and others will be lost in the mists of time. The pious men faithful to God and the glorious heroes will be remembered.²⁰

Ben Sira constructs the prophile of the hero through five types of great men who shaped history each in his own potential: *the patriarch, the priest, the judge, the prophet and the king*. A glimpse at this list makes it clear that it was not the individual excellence or merit, not even heroism that were considered as the main criteria of the selection. It was much rather centered around a distinctive office and the concept of office determines the pattern as a whole.

The general pattern of characterization:²¹

- a designation of office,
- the mention of divine approbation or election,
- a reference to covenant,
- mention of the person's character or piety,
- an account of the deeds,
- reference to the historical situation of the hero's time,
- mention of rewards.

The introductory lines appoint the „*man of glory*” worthy of mention²², moreover a list of the criteria of this glory is offered. Although bravery and valour are found among the criteria, not one warrior or military leader is represented in this historical portrait gallery. In Ben Sira's historical perspective neither battles nor victorious or disastrous military campaigns

¹⁸ From 42:12 onwards.

¹⁹ Rózsa, Huba, *ibid.*

²⁰ The two qualities used in the Hebrew text are *chesed* (piety) and *chavod* (glory).

²¹ This system was set up by Burton L. Mack. In: Mack, Burton L.: *Wisdom and the Hebrew Epic. Ben Sira's Hymn in Praise of the Fathers*, Chicago Studies in the History of Judaism, The University of Chicago Press, 1985. 11-26.

²² 44:3-6. The Hebrew manuscript calls them „*anshe hashem*” („men who have acquired a name”). In Genesis the expression is used to designate the descendants of the unity of the sons of God and the daughters of men (Gen 6:4).

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bear importance. Military success is nevertheless an inherent part of Israel's history due to Joshua, king David and king Hezekiah.

JOSHUA (46:1-8)

Mighty in war was Joshua son of Nun, successor to Moses in the prophetic office, who well deserved his name, and was a great saviour of the chosen people, wreaking vengeance on the enemies who opposed him, and so bringing Israel into its inheritance.

Ben Sira regards Joshua as a servant and an aid to Moses in the prophetic office²³ – the reason he was given a place in the anthology. Most likely an Old Testament reference to Joshua as a wise man has not escaped Ben Sira's attention who held wisdom in very high esteem:

*Joshua son of Nun was filled with the spirit of wisdom, for Moses had laid his hands on him, and him the Israelites obeyed, carrying out the order which Yahweh had given to Moses.*²⁴

Except for a reference in Deuteronomy²⁵ Joshua's (Hebrew „Yahweh is salvation”) military talent and success are not mentioned in the Torah, his portrait as a warrior is depicted in the Book of Joshua and in the Book of Judges.²⁶ The first step in his military career is recalled in the Book of Numbers – Joshua appears among the 12 men appointed to investigate and gather information about the land of Canaan.²⁷ In the unrest of the people after hearing the account of the spies Joshua stays with the loyal Caleb²⁸ who supported Moses and Aaron, thus both were rewarded by God and could enter the Promised Land.²⁹ Joshua is praised in biblical tradition, as military leader and prophet, he led the people of God to their new homeland and as the perpetrator of the conquest of Canaan he is regarded a significant personality in the historical tradition of Israel.³⁰

*How splendid he was when, arms uplifted, he brandished his sword against cities!
Who had ever shown such determination as his? He himself led the battles of the Lord.
Was not the sun held back by his hand, and one day drawn out into two?
He called on the Most High, the Mighty One, while pressing the enemies from all directions,
and the great Lord answered him with hard and violent hailstones.*

²³ Exod 32:17, 24, 13; 33:11, 24:13, Numbers 11:28.

²⁴ Deut 34:9.

²⁵ Deut 17:9-13.

²⁶ Josh 6; 8; 10; 12:7-23 and Judges 2:21-23.

²⁷ Numbers 13:8.

²⁸ Numbers 14:6.

²⁹ Numbers 14:30-38, 26:65, et al.

³⁰ Biblical accounts depict Joshua as the example of the charismatic leader: he is the last representative of the great generation who actually was present at the Exodus. Joshua is indeed a gibbor chail (Hebrew, brave warrior) as described by Ben Sira as well. He fights together with his men, he is an aide to Moses in the prophetic office. See Haag, Herbert, *Bibliai Lexikon*, Szent István Társulat, Budapest, 1989, 246-249, 889-891.

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He fell on that enemy nation, and at the Descent destroyed all resistance to make the nations acknowledge his warlike prowess and that he was waging war on behalf of the Lord.³¹

According to biblical tradition it was Joshua who led the Israelite tribes to the land of Canaan and the successful conquest of the western bank of the River Jordan is also attributed to him. The crossing of the Jordan must be regarded the first successful military action achieved by the tribes led by Joshua, which was followed by another military success: the siege and the destruction of Jericho. The acquisition of preliminary information and practical knowledge was regarded remarkably important in devising the strategy of the city's capture, although victory was achieved without any doubt by following God's commands.³² Ben Sira chooses not to make mention of any of these important motives (the creativity of Joshua's military mind and his obedience to God) and perhaps he does not wish to accentuate the rather merciless end of the city and her inhabitants.³³ Recalling the most important and glorious military achievements of Joshua Ben Sira describes the siege and occupation of Ai, and Joshua's intervention in the siege of Gibeon to give military aid to the allies of the Israelites. Ben Sira also reflects on the events at the valley of Beth-Horon.³⁴ Lacking superior possession of information the first attack against the city of Ai failed. At that point Joshua revealed great psychological sense not letting the force of the attack slow down and keeping his warriors' high spirit he ordered a further attack based on a maneuver of deception. The attack surprised and overwhelmed the exhausted defending force in the city. As a military leader he displayed his extraordinary bravery: he personally led the main force of his army in the act of pretence of trying to flee desparately.³⁵ Ben Sira's words - *How splendid he was when, arms uplifted, he brandished his sword against cities!* – recalls the moment when Joshua lifted up his sword thus signalling to the warriors in ambush.³⁶ In compliance with the rules of biblical historiography Ben Sira emphasizes that Joshua's

³¹ Ecclus 46:3-6. In the Hebrew text we read: *The Lord was watching over His people's battles*. Contrary to the Greek translation which accentuates the hopelessness of fighting against God Ben Sira emphasizes God's presence in His people just wars and battles demonstrating that the chosen people receives divine support in these wars.

³² Yahweh then said to Joshua, 'Look, I am putting Jericho, its picked troops and its king, at your mercy (6:2) and following this statement the instructions are revealed. Joshua follows God's orders thus Yahweh was with Joshua, whose fame spread throughout the country (6:27).

³³ The only people saved from death were Rachab and her family and Rachab was a prostitute as well as a traitor of her own people after all (6:25).

³⁴ Joshua 7.

³⁵ His extraordinary talent as a military leader is well demonstrated by the quality of his forces. He led an irregular army force and he played without any doubt an important role in the training of his troops and finally he could set up a potent military force which was able to react to unexpected situations and bear the stress and depression of defeat. The most comprehensive study of Joshua's military campaigns is offered in Gabriel, Richard A., *The Military History of Ancient Israel*, Praeger, Westport, Connecticut London, 2003, 109-152.

³⁶ Joshua 8:18-19.

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military success and the force of his right hand originates in the will of God. This assertion fits well in Ben Sira's conception.

The repeated siege of the city of Ai has not presumably been incorporated in the anthology for its strategic value or importance in military history, on the contrary, Ben Sira valued this event for his own perception of history. Military success, the heroic deeds of warriors, the genius of a commander – these are all mere tools in the hand of God who controls and rules everything. The failure of the first siege of Ai was the consequence of Achan's sin. Israel was to experience the impact of the sin of a person - *But the Israelites were unfaithful to the curse of destruction. Achan son of Carmi, son of Zabdi, son of Zerah, of the tribe of Judah, took something that fell under the curse of destruction, and the anger of Yahweh was aroused against the Israelites*³⁷ - on the whole of the people.³⁸

In Ben Sira's anthology the portrait of Joshua becomes complete with the interpretation of the siege of Gibeon (which was an act of military aid to the allied forces in need) and the killing of the fleeing enemy in the valley of Beth-Horon. In the siege and destruction of Ai the rulers of Canaanite cities saw a warning sign, then followed the example set by the Gibeonites and Joshua - they also formed an alliance to stop the advance of the conquering force of the Israelites. The besieged Gibeon asks the help of his dynamic and forceful ally. Joshua's tactic was based on speed and surprise – he took advantage of the geographical situation and led an overwhelmingly forceful attack against the armed Canaanites besieging Gibeon. Once again, Ben Sira's interest lays not in the military aspects and details of the event, he focuses and accentuates divine presence and divine intervention³⁹ on behalf of the chosen people in their fights and battles, failures and victories. To complete the military operation Joshua and his men are set to pursue the fleeing Amorites who become entrapped in the valley of Beth-Horon. In order to be able to keep the territory conquered so far and to take advantage of previous military success Joshua faces an extremely difficult situation. There is not much time however, a decision needs to be made concerning the enemy. And Joshua orders the destruction of the Canaanites.⁴⁰ The miracle described in the Bible is recalled by Ben Sira as if to justify the cruel outcome of the siege:

*There was never a day like that before or since, when Yahweh obeyed the voice of a man -- for Yahweh was fighting for Israel.*⁴¹

The basic principle of the historian's concept –according to Ben Sira – appears here: if the past is made present the historical events of the past would be placed in a kind of timeless era and the recollection of events of the past simultaneously becomes the historian's

³⁷ Joshua 7:1.

³⁸ God reveals to Joshua that the people had to become free of the object under curse and sanctify themselves and punish the sinner to become worthy of the covenant of God. The account of Achan's sin is recalled in Joshua 7:16-26. The need for the warriors to sanctify themselves before going into battle is similarly emphasized in the Maccabean tradition in 1Macc 3:46-59.

³⁹ Joshua 10:10. Yahweh threw them into disorder at the sight of Israel, defeating them completely at Gibeon.

⁴⁰ Herzog-Gihon, *Bibliai csaták*, 57.

⁴¹ Joshua 10:14. God intervened on Joshua's plea.

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assessment at the same time. Two different historical and temporal sections appear side-by-side: the age of the events of the narrative (c. second half of 13. cent. B.C.) and the age of the author, Ben Sira (first half of 2. cent. B.C.). For the author of the biblical narrative the task of the chronicler was the ultimate goal. And he gives a detailed description of the events. Ben Sira, on the other hand, although appreciates Joshua's talent and extraordinary qualities never seems to emphasize human achievement, bravery, boldness or the force of arms. The emphasis is transferred: God's presence and influence in war is unquestionable. The hero is in direct contact with God, seeks His advice and intervention if needed. In his interpretation of the conquest of Canaan instead of giving a detailed account of the events Ben Sira highlights the moments illustrating and proving his historical perspective, his vision of the past. The conquest of the Promised Land is regarded as a problem of theology and not a mere historical event.⁴² Thus it becomes clear why Joshua steps in front of us as a prophet and why he is praised for his heroic fights as a „*man of valour*” at the same time. We must note that each and every victory and successful military move is achieved via divine intervention. Joshua appears as an intermediary, an agent to implement God's wonders. Victory comes not a result of human efforts, it is the gift of God. Ben Sira reveals the secret behind Joshua's great deeds: he was a man of God and the instrument of God in devising and carrying out military operations in order to realize His plan. It was God who fought for His people. This hymn, „Praise of the Fathers” was intended to keep and cherish the memories of these religious, pious men who were loyal to tradition in thus shaping the collective memory of the nation. According to Ben Sira this appears to be the ultimate goal of historiography.

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⁴² Gerhard von Rad points out the importance of the narrative method employed in the accounts recalling the conquest of Canaan (Joshua 1-10). Each episode reaches its climax in the emphasis of the miraculous aspect of the action (crossing the Jordan, the siege of Jericho, the victorious battles of Joshua) but the narrator maintains the realistic atmosphere and reacts to the psychological aspect of the events at the same time. In: *Az Ószövetség teológiája*, I-II, Osiris Kiadó, Budapest, 2000, 238-242.

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