

CONFRONTING THE SOURCES: THE INTERTESTAMENTAL PERIOD

by

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A paper presented at Association of Jewish Studies Boston December, 1986

I offer an elective course entitled “Reconstructing the History of the Intertestamental Period.” The course is divided into four segments spanning four semesters over a two-year period. The first segment deals with the finalization of the Pentateuch; the dissolution of prophecy; and the establishment of the Aaronide system as the normative form of Judaism. The second segment deals with the rise of the Pharisees and the collapse of Aaronide hegemony. The third segment deals with the apocryphal and pseudepigraphical literature, while the fourth segment deals with Hellenistic literature and Christian origins.

The basic philosophy which energizes these courses may be best summed up by paraphrasing Anan ben David’s exhortation: “Search out the sources and do not rely on scholarly authority.” It therefore follows that students are requested not to read the secondary literature until the sources have been read and thoroughly discussed in class. They are asked to read the sources as though these sources had just been discovered; and as though the only tools at hand are those which they themselves will shape and fashion. The sources are therefore read in class, and the class as a whole determines what mental steps seem to be necessary as they confront the sources.

Such a casting-aside of secondary literature and such exclusive concentration on the sources has a salutary effect. Students finding themselves put on the same plane as seasoned scholars are energized to use their critical faculties without experiencing that paralysis that comes with feelings of inferiority, and ignorance. The student feels that he or she is engaged, as is the professor and seasoned scholar, in a search for knowledge and truth—a search which may, but need not be, successful, as the history of scholarship makes only too clear. This approach is also reassuring since the sources only are studied and analyzed; scholarly presuppositions are not superimposed; each thought step is dictated by the source itself; and each student’s voice is heard during the process of adjudicating jointly what the texts do or do not mandate.

Such a focus on the sources is not only well within the parameter of possibility for the study of the intertestamental period, but is mandated by the nature of the sources themselves. The total corpus of extant sources for the biblical and intertestamental periods is small enough for every student to read through, while the source themselves are such that they block solutions to the very problems that they pose. The Pentateuch does not tell us explicitly that it is a composite work; that this layer was early, and that layer late; that the layers were joined together by this individual or that; this group or that; this class or that. As a consequence, Pentateuchal scholarship brings with it no incremental buildup of secure knowledge on which new incremental knowledge can be built.

The fact then that even the most brilliant of scholars have been defeated again and again by the sources, gives the student the courage, on one hand, to try again, and, on the other hand the consolation that if failure be one’s fate, then one joins that goodly company of great scholars who bravely sallied forth to their Waterloos.

How, then, do I try to achieve my objectives over a four-semester period? Let me concentrate on the first segment of the course, a segment which seeks to determine structure of Judaism which emerged with the promulgation of the finalized Pentateuch. Only one source, The Wisdom of Ben Sira, can be drawn upon. It is pivotal and critical. Although scholars may argue as to whether Ben Sira wrote his book around 280 B.C.E. or 180 B.C.E., there can be no argument about the fact that Ecclesiasticus was written *after* the Samaritan schism (c.350 B.C.E.), a schism

in which both sides tenaciously clung to the finalized Pentateuch as the repository of God's immutable revelation to Israel. Ecclesiasticus in this respect is self-validating. The author is not only a Scribe dedicated to the pursuit of Wisdom, but a devoted student of the Pentateuch and a participant-observer of his society, as his vignettes of the peasant, the artisan, the Scribe, and the High Priest of his day Simon, makes evident. Sporting such credentials, Ben Sira can be used as the jumping-off point for reconstructing the Judaism as it flourished under the aegis of the finalized Pentateuch.

The selection of Ecclesiasticus, as a self-validating source, exposes the student to a methodology that focuses exclusively on the source itself. Ben Sira is not validated as a source on the say-so of scholars, nor on my say-so, but by Ben Sira himself. By reading Ben Sira, the students discover that the Pentateuch is God's revelation to Moses for Ben Sira. He or she also discovers that the High Priest Simon, whether Simon I or Simon II, is exercising prerogatives set down in the Pentateuch. Such a discovery requires no previous knowledge on the part of the student; no exposure to secondary literature; no dependence on the teacher's expertise. All the student needs is the text of Ben Sira; the text of the Pentateuch; and Josephus' account of the Samaritan schism in *Antiquities*.

Exposed to these texts, the student has little choice but to agree that Ben Sira must have written his book after the finalization and promulgation of the Pentateuch; that he must have venerated the Pentateuch as the word of God, and that he stands in awe of the High Priest of his day. The student likewise cannot help but notice that Ben Sira makes no mention of living prophets; multiple shrines; or synagogues; or oral laws.

The next step is to raise the question as to how Ben Sira read the Pentateuch. Did he read the Pentateuch as though it were the undifferentiated word of God, or did he read it selectively? He read it selectively. Did he read it literally, or did he read it *mi drastically*? He read it literally. Did he superimpose his concepts and notions on the text, or did he simply paraphrase it. He simply paraphrased it.

These answers become clear when for example, the student reads Chapters 48-50. Here Ben Sira parades before us Adam, Seth, Noah, Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Moses and Aaron. Each in turn receives his due, but some receive more due than others. Thus, while Moses is singled out for his having been chosen by God to give the people of Israel God's revelation, Aaron is singled out as the revelation itself. The centrality of Aaron is made clear not only by the twenty-one verses Ben Sira lavishes on Aaron as against the skimpy few, five in all, that he gives to Moses, but by the glorious portrait of Aaron that he paints, and the underlining of the absolute authority that God bestowed upon Aaron and his descendents for all time.

With the primacy of Aaron and of his priestly descendents spelled out so clearly and unambiguously by Ben Sira, the student recognizes the fact that the system of Judaism which Ben Sira took for granted in his day was that system which had at its center the sacrificial cult, Aaron as its founder and Aaron's descendents as its ministers. And that this system was an operational reality, is confirmed for the student when he or she reads Chapter 50 in which Ben Sira gives us a glittering description of the High Priest of his day, Simon I or Simon II, as he carries out his priestly duties and performs his role as grand expiator as he enters on Yom Kippur as prescribed in the Book of Numbers.

It thus becomes evident to the student that though Ben Sira had the completed Pentateuch before him, and though he clearly affirms that it was Moses to whom it had been revealed, he focuses exclusively on the cultus and the Aaronide priesthood. He does not focus on Deuteronomy, where the entire tribe of Levites are given altar rights, and where Moses, in his deathbed blessing, assigns to Levi authority over the revelation; nor does he focus on those texts in Exodus and Numbers which allow for multiple altars and which make no provision for a priestly class. Rather does he focus exclusively on the Aaronide layer.

The next logical step is to enter the Pentateuch with Ben Sira as our guide and select those texts, which like the Rebellion of Korah and his fellow-Levites, clearly identify themselves with

the Aaronide system. Once again the mind of the student confronts the sources and sees that Ben Sira is only mirroring the extent to which the Pentateuch is overwhelmingly Aaronide in its focus. For though the Pentateuch reveals three systems of authority—the prophetic, the levitical/monarchial/prophetic, and the Aaronide, it is the Aaronide system of authority which has had the most verses by far heaped upon it; the most legislation assigned to it; and the harshest punishments stored up for those who would challenge it. And it is this level of the Pentateuch which Ben Sira regarded as normative.

We then ask: How far back does the Aaronide system go? To answer the student turns from Ben Sira to the third division of the Canon, the Hagiographa, and looks first at Chronicles, Ezra and Nehemiah. There he or she finds that the Aaronide system is normative throughout. According to the Chronicle's historical reconstruction, the sons of Aaron enjoyed a monopoly of altar rights from the very moment that the cultus was established in Jerusalem, and according to Ezra and Nehemiah the Aaronide system was normative in the post-exilic period as well.

At this point, the student is asked to compare the reconstruction of the period of the monarchy in the books of Kings Chronicles with the books of

Kings. Again, neither secondary literature nor the authority of the teacher is needed to convince the student that whereas the Aaronides are everywhere to be found in Chronicles, they are nowhere to be found in Kings. Not even Zadok, the first High Priest, in Kings is linked to Aaron. Indeed, he sports no genealogy at all.

This absence of Aaronides from the books of Kings raises questions as to what priestly system did function during the monarchical period—a question that is addressed not by some magisterial decree but a look at other biblical sources, namely the prophetic books, beginning with the post-exilic prophets. Here the student can see that though Levites as priests are mentioned in Malachi, Zechariah, and Ezekiel, the Aaronides are mentioned not at all. Indeed, Ezekiel who strips the Levites of their priestly rights, assigns these rights to the sons of Zadok, not on the ground that they are the sons of Aaron who had been given exclusive rights to the priesthood when he had crushed the rebellion of Korah in the wilderness, but on the ground that the sons of Zadok were the only Levitical priests who had kept their charge and not proposed God's holy sanctuary.

And when the student goes farther back to Jeremiah, Isaiah, Micah, Hosea, and Amos, he or she discovers that Aaronides are nowhere mentioned, and that Aaron is only mentioned once in Amos, but only alongside Moses and Miriam in the wilderness as a leader but not as a priest.

Having moved back from Ben Sira and Chronicles-Ezra where the Aaronide system is normative, the student discovers that the Aaronides disappear with Malachi. Instead of the Aaronides, he finds the Levites serving as priests as mandated by the book of Deuteronomy. It is as though these prophets were fully aware of Deuteronomy, but not aware of the Aaronide texts that loom so large in the finalized Pentateuch. And when the student pushes back to even earlier sources, he discovers that no prophet before the time of Josiah makes any reference to Levites.

Indeed, the cultic system that the early prophets castigate is one where multiple altars are the rule and where priests are neither Levites nor Aaronides, but priests—exactly as one would have anticipated from the texts in Exodus that allow for multiple altars, but do not mandate a priesthood.

Confronted with this fall-away of the Levites, the student is then asked to take a close look at the account of Josiah's reformation as is given in II Kings. Here he or she sees for himself or herself that the discovery of the book, its authentication, its promulgation, and the tearing-down of the high places involve the collaboration of a High priest, a king, and a prophet, two of whom, the priest and the king, are legitimized by Moses alongside the prophet in the book of Deuteronomy but not in the non-Aaronide level of Exodus-Numbers.

Having made this journey of discovery, the student is then confronted with the delicate question as to how he or she is to make sense of what the sources reveal. For it is evident that although the Aaronide system flourished in the time of Ben Sira and was assumed to be the

normative system by the authors of Chronicles and Ezra-Nehemiah, the authors of the books of Kings make no mention of the Aaronides, nor does any prophet.

The student sees that there are three mutually exclusive authority systems in the Pentateuch—the prophetic, the prophetic-Levitical-priestly-monarchial, and the Aaronide. This he or she concludes from the juxtaposition of texts and not from the juxtaposition of secondary sources. At no time has the instructor intruded with his interpretation. His only function has been to see to it that the sources are read—and read in full—and discussed in class. Indeed, his only determinative role has been limited to the decision that the first source to read be Ben Sira, but even this decision was acted on only after the class had engaged in a free and open discussion and had agreed that the rationale was one to which they could give its assent.

Now that the sources have been read and discussed by the student, he or she is ready to tackle the secondary literature with the assurance that he or she knows from first-hand reading what the sources have to say. The student is urged to weigh and measure every scholarly opinion in the light of the sources and render a critical judgment. He or she is also encouraged to come up with alternative solutions to the problems raised in class and in the secondary literature.

This method which has been spelled out with respect to how the sources lead us to the conclusion that the system of Judaism which flourished after the finalization of the Pentateuch was the Aaronide system is the same method that is used in the three subsequent segments of the course with Ben Sira as our control text. To deal with the problem of the Pharisees, we begin exclusively with the sources that are self-legitimizing because they specifically refer to the Pharisees and Sadducees: Josephus, the New Testament, the Tannaitic literature, and we allow the sources to lead us to the next logical steps that have to be taken. Similarly, the apocryphal and pseudepigraphic literature is first read raw without scholarly intermediation or intrusion. The same hold true for the Hellenistic literature, the Letter of Aristeas, III and IV Maccabees, and Wisdom of Solomon and Philo.

With every source emerging out of intertestamental Judaism absorbed, with every form and mode of Judaism elicited from these sources clearly in mind, and with every literary form and mode familiarized, the student is then ready to bring all this source knowledge to bear when he or she begins to study the Gospels, Acts, the Epistles of Paul and the other books of the New Testament once again with the professor's admonition, "Look to the sources and rely not either on my opinion or anyone else's. The sources, the sources, ye shall pursue."