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The Exodus Traditions in the Book of Ben Sira

1 Introduction

Ben Sira's interest in the history of Israel is well attested in the final section of the book, the "Praise of the Ancestors" (Sir 44–50). In these chapters, inspired by the ancient biblical accounts, the author presents a gallery of famous characters in chronological order, beginning with Enoch and ending up with his own contemporary, the High Priest Simon. From the period of the covenants with the patriarchs, we pass through the time of the prophets and kings, ending up with the reconstruction of Jerusalem and the temple.¹

The attentive reader immediately notices that the construction of this historical survey lacks some important, indeed fundamental, building blocks which are relegated to silence. Notably surprising, for example, is the fact that there is no mention of the departure of the Israelites from Egypt (Exodus 14–15). By contrast with Wisdom 10–19, a Hellenistic re-reading of the Exodus, Sirach 44–50 is silent with regard to the foundational event of the constitution of Israel.² The same thing happens in Sir 16,6–11ab, a sapiential reflection on the history of the people, and in Sir 16,26–17,14, which passes from the creation to the covenant at Sinai without any interval.³ No hint, therefore, of the pursuit by the Egyptians, the miracle of the Red Sea, the drowning of Pharaoh's army with his chariots and his horses...

On the other hand, the work of Ben Sira is not lacking in passages which take their inspiration from the books of Exodus,⁴ Numbers and Deuteronomy⁵ and refer to the Exodus traditions (the miracles, the plagues, Pharaoh, the rebellion of the people, the gift of the Law...). These are the passages in which we are especially interested. However, since we cannot be exhaustive and must make a choice, we shall confine ourselves here to the following texts: Sir 44,23fg–45,5; 45,18–19 and 38,5.

1 Cf. Ska, *L'Éloge des Pères*, 181–193.

2 For a comparison between Sir 44–50 and Wisd 10–19, cf. Gilbert, *The Review of History*, 319–334.

3 Cf. Wénin, *De la création à l'alliance sinaïtique*, 147–158.

4 Reiterer, *The Influence of the Book of Exodus*, 100–117.

5 Veijola, *Law and Wisdom*, 144–164 and Beentjes, *Deuteronomistic Heritage*, 275–296.

2 The Praise of Moses (Sir 44,23fg–45,5)

Moses, the son of Amram and Jochebed, is a central character in the history of Israel. The references to his person and his deeds are concentrated chiefly in the Pentateuch and particularly in the Exodus traditions. In fact, outside the Pentateuch, the references to Moses are rather scanty (cf. Ps 105,26; 106,16.23.32; Jer 15,1; Mic 6,4; Neh 9,14...). Even so, there was abundant material at his disposal and Ben Sira had to make a choice. What was he to say about Moses and what keep quiet about? What aspects to emphasise and what just to pass over lightly? As Benjamin G. Wright correctly observes, “most of Ben Sira’s praise of Moses focuses on the Exodus events and the giving of the Law, although he shapes them to fit his own agenda and themes”.⁶ In fact, it takes only five verses for Ben Sira to give his encomium on one of the great leaders and masters of Israel, much loved in late Judaism.

According to Otto Kaiser, “the verses devoted to Moses are highly emphatic, bringing out in extremely terse phrases his exceptional position amongst all mankind and his special gifts from God, which culminate in his transmitting the divine law of life to Israel in 45:5”.⁷ Kaiser’s observation is completely correct. However, in our opinion, the sketch of Moses is not without irony. Some speak even of cynicism,⁸ but that seems to be going too far. The irony emerges, in the first place, in the comparison of the brief space which Ben Sira dedicates to Moses (9 bicola) with the 40 bicola devoted to the High Priests Aaron and Phinehas, of the tribe of Levi, and considered the ancestors of the Zadokites (cf., also, 50,1–21). Moreover, it is surely ironic to affect to “forget” Moses’ mission as liberator of his people, an essential element of Old Testament theology.

Here is the translation of the Hebrew text according to MsB (when the Ms is defective we follow Gr). For a detailed analysis of the textual questions, we refer to the studies by Friedrich V. Reiterer, Patrick W. Skehan and Markus Witte.⁹

44,23f–g He brought forth¹⁰ from him (i.e. Jacob / Israel) a man,
who found favour in the sight of all the living.

⁶ Wright, *The Use and Interpretation*, 191.

⁷ Kaiser, *Covenant and Law*, 242.

⁸ Morla Asensio, *Eclesiástico*, 217.

⁹ Reiterer, *Urtext und Übersetzungen*, 117–142; Skehan/Di Lella, *The Wisdom of Ben Sira*, 509–510; Witte, *Mose, sein Andenken sei zum Segen*, 164–166.

¹⁰ It is ironic that exactly the same Hebrew verbal form is used to narrate the exodus event in Ps 136,11.

- 45,1 Beloved¹¹ of God and humans,
Moses, whose memory is blessed.
- 45,2 He made him glorious like the angels/holy ones¹²
and strengthened him with/in fearful things.¹³
- 45,3 By his word he wrought swift miracles¹⁴
and sustained him in the king's presence.
He gave him commandments for his people¹⁵
and revealed to him his glory.
- 45,4 For his faithfulness and meekness
he chose him out of all flesh.
- 45,5 He permitted him to hear his voice
and let him draw near into the dark cloud.
He placed in his hand the commandment,
the law of life and understanding,
that he might teach to Jacob his statutes,
and his decrees and ordinances to Israel.

After the reference to the patriarch Jacob/Israel ("from him", 44,23f),¹⁶ Ben Sira begins his panegyric of Moses without, however, mentioning his name yet (the same for Solomon in 47,12). In this way, the reader's expectations are heightened with regard to this extraordinary man "who found favour in the sight of all the living" (44,23g). The expression "to find favour in the eyes of" (מצא חן בעיני), frequent in the Exodus narrative, is to be understood as the favour of his people, of Pharaoh's daughter (Exod 2,5–10), of the priest of Midian and his daughters (Exod 2,15–22), of Pharaoh's servants as well as the favour of the Egyptian people (Exod 11,3).¹⁷ Of undisputed prestige and blessed memory, Moses was loved both by God and human beings (45,1). So far, a characterisation of Moses that is very general and does not leave room for any details.

11 According to Gr (= Syr and Lat).

12 According to Antonino Minissale, the Lxx translates "holy ones" (ἁγίους) in the sense of angels, after Exod 7,1^{Lxx} which is how it translates the Hebrew אלהים ("I will make of you a god for Pharaoh") on account of a theological scruple (Minissale, *Siracide*, 213). Cf., also, Wright, *The Use and Interpretation*, 192. Cf. Witte's reconstruction of the Hebrew text: וַיִּכְנֹהוּ אִישׁ אֱלֹהִים, "und er gab ihm den Namen Mann Gottes" (and he named him man of God) (Witte, *Mose, sein Andenken sei zum Segen*, 165, note 17).

13 According to MsBmg (= Gr, Syr and Lat).

14 According to Gr.

15 According to Gr and Syr. Cf. Segal's reconstruction of the Hebrew text: וַיִּצְוֵהוּ אֱלֹהִים (Segal, *Sēfer ben-Sīrā*, 307).

16 The absence of Joseph, apart from a brief mention in 49,15, is surprising.

17 Skehan/Di Lella, *The Wisdom of Ben Sira*, 510.

Beginning with 45,2 until the end of the passage, Ben Sira composes, according to the expression of M. Witte, “eine funktionale heilsgeschichtliche Biographie”,¹⁸ where he collects the most important actions and accomplishments of the life of Moses. We should note that all these actions and accomplishments are presented as gifts and favours which come from God.¹⁹ Venerated in a superhuman way, Moses was able to perform “fearful things” (במוראים) (45,2b) and “swift signs” (אותות מהר) (45,3a) in the presence of the king (45,3b), that is, the Pharaoh. The two expressions we have singled out probably refer to the account of the ten plagues which afflicted Egypt before the Exodus (Exod 7,1–11,10),²⁰ even if the plagues are never described as “fearful” in the book of Exodus. In this connection, B.G. Wright suggests that the reading of Exodus 9, and in particular of verses 20 and 30, would have induced Ben Sira to link the “fearful things” with “the fear of God”, a theme very dear to him.²¹

As for the Pharaoh of Egypt, he is mentioned only once as such in Sirach, that is in 16,15. This verse, like the following one, is attested in HbII (MsA), GrII and Syr (absent, however in GrI and Lat) and they represent a late expansion of the text. Verses 15 and 16, in fact, are not only too long but also interrupt the author’s argument. This opinion is shared by Marco Rossetti and, more recently, by Severino Bussino, authors who have studied the addition in some depth.²²

We record the translation of the Hebrew text of v. 15 according to MsA:

The Lord hardened the heart of Pharaoh, who did not recognize him,
in order to manifest his deeds under heaven.

With the mention of Pharaoh’s hardened heart (cf. Exod 7,3; 9,12; 10,27; 11,10; 14,4.8), the verse is linked to the historical exposition of 16,6–11ab and offers a concrete example of what is stated in 16,14b: “everyone will receive according to his deeds”. In Rossetti’s words, “The king of Egypt is for everybody the example of someone who remains unconcerned and unrepentant in the face of God’s

¹⁸ Witte, *Mose, sein Andenken sei zum Segen*, 170.

¹⁹ Cf. Petraglio, *Il libro che contamina le mani*, 101: “Ben Sirac, presentando Mosè, compone il suo testo mostrando Dio come unico soggetto” (In his presentation of Moses, Sirach composes his text showing God as the only subject).

²⁰ Cf. Deut 4,34; 26,8; 34,11–12.

²¹ Wright, *The Use and Interpretation*, 192.

²² Rossetti, *Le aggiunte ebraiche e greche*, 607–648; Bussino, *The Greek Additions*, 176–189.

action, and precisely for this reason, the Lord will render his heart still harder preventing him from reaching the truth”.²³

Now let us return to the praise of Moses. Without making any mention of the Exodus from Egypt,²⁴ beginning with 45,3c, Ben Sira concentrates on the Sinai experience and, in particular, on the gift of the Law. Several words of a legislative character (מצוה, “commandment”; תורה, “law”; חקים, “statutes”; עדות, “decrees”; and משפטים, “ordinances”) are concentrated at the end of the passage (45,5cdef) and are placed to indicate the central role of the Law in the sage’s thought and work. We do not know if the sentence in 45,3c (cf. the verb צוה, “to command”) refers to the giving of the Decalogue or not, but, in the light of the context, it is very probable that this is the case (cf. 45,5c). In 45,3d, the revelation of the glory of God echoes some Exodus passages such as Exod 24,15–17; 33,18–23; 34,5–8. We should note that, in 45,4, the portrait of Moses acquires more concrete traits than those mentioned at the beginning (cf. 44,23g–45,1). Like Abraham, who was found faithful in trial (44,20), Moses is described as a faithful and humble man (Num 12,3.7). It is precisely because of “his faithfulness and humility” that he was chosen by God. In 45,5abcd, Ben Sira seems to have been inspired by various texts from Exodus, Numbers and Deuteronomy where there is mention of the voice of God (Exod 33,11; Num 12,8; Deut 5,22; 34,10), the entry of Moses into the cloud (Exod 20,21; 24,28; Deut 5,22) and the handing over of the commandments (Exod 32,15; Deut 9,15).

The passage reaches its climax in 45,5ef, where we learn of the mission which God entrusted to Moses. It is a question of communicating and teaching the “Law of life and understanding” (תורת חיים ותבונה) to his people Israel. As Burkard M. Zapff puts it, in Sir 45,5ef, Moses is presented as “the paradigm of the Legislator, who is the link between the Law and wisdom as well as the ancestor of all wisdom teaching”.²⁵

²³ Rossetti, *Le aggiunte ebraiche e greche*, 639: “Il re di Egitto è per tutti l’esempio di chiunque rimanga impassibile ed impenitente di fronte all’agire di Dio, ed il Signore, proprio per questo, gli renderà il cuore ancora più duro impedendogli di raggiungere la verità”.

²⁴ Reiterer, *Der Pentateuch*, 176: “Wenn auch der Auszug aus Ägypten nicht ausdrücklich erwähnt wird, bedeutet doch jene Rettungstat den geistigen Hintergrund” (Even if the departure from Egypt is not expressly mentioned, that act of salvation constitutes the spiritual background). Cf., also, Zapff, *Jesus Sirach*, 326.

²⁵ Zapff, *Jesus Sirach*, 327: “5e.f sieht in Mose das Paradigma des Gesetzeslehrers, der aufgrund der Verbindung von Gesetz und Weisheit zugleich der Urahn jeglicher Weisheitslehre ist”; cf. Reiterer, *Der Pentateuch*, 177.

3 Aaron and Korah's Rebellion (Sir 45,18 – 19)

The High Priest Aaron is certainly one of Ben Sira's favourite characters. As we have already mentioned, his memorial is three times longer than that of his brother, Moses (Sir 45,6–22). For the most part, this greater length is the result of the laudatory and vivid description of his imposing liturgical vesture.²⁶ In his praise of Aaron, our sage reveals his enthusiasm for the legitimate cult which he will take up again in Sir 50,1–21, a passage entirely devoted to the High Priest Simon.

Without entering into a discussion over the structure of the periscope,²⁷ we now turn our attention to Sir 45,18–19. These two verses form a tiny unit which interrupts the praise of Aaron with an historical account describing in harsh tones an event in which the High Priest was involved during the journey in the desert. We are speaking of the rebellion of Korah, Dathan and Abiram recounted in Num 16,1–17,15, of which Ben Sira here offers us a much shorter version with some very interesting details. Here we use the translation of the Hebrew text according to MsB:

- 45,18 Strangers burned with anger against him (i.e. Aaron)
and were jealous of him in the wilderness.
The men of Dathan and Abiram
and the band of Korah in their vehement anger.
- 45,19 The Lord saw it and became angry
and destroyed them in his burning anger.
He brought a miracle against them
and consumed them in his flaming fire.

The beginning of the unit is very emphatic. The first information about the conspirators which the reader receives is not their names (cf. Num 16,1) but a somewhat pejorative description. They are זרים (foreigners, strangers). But how is this term to be understood in the context? It could mean people who do not belong to the family of Aaron and so are not authorised to perform priestly functions²⁸ or else, as F.V. Reiterer has recently suggested, behind this provocative and hostile “outsiders” there could be hidden an allusion to Ben Sira's contemporary opponents.²⁹ The second piece of information concerns the object of the con-

²⁶ Calduch-Benages, *Le vesti di Aronne*, 69–81.

²⁷ Cf., in this connection, Reiterer, *Aaron's Polyvalent Role*, 27–30.

²⁸ Cf. Skehan/Di Lella, *The Wisdom of Ben Sira*, 513 and Mopsik, *La Sagesse de ben Sira*, 286: “étrangers à la prêtrise” (strangers to the priesthood).

²⁹ Reiterer, *Aaron's Polyvalent Role*, 51.

spiracy. While, in the Numbers account, Korah, Dathan and Abiram rebel against Moses and Aaron (Num 16,3), in Ben Sira's text, Aaron becomes the only target of the protest. In this way, all the attention is placed on him. The third piece of information is the reason for the rebellion. The fact that Korah, Dathan and Abiram were contesting the authority of the two brothers, just as it is recounted in Numbers, is avoided. In Ben Sira's judgement, the single stimulus for the conspiracy is jealousy with regard to Aaron. He is the principal character, and the whole focus is on him.

Ben Sira does not hide his antipathy towards the conspirators, whom he also describes as a wrathful and angry band (lit.: בעוז אפם, "in the violence of their anger", 45,18d).³⁰ We should note the play of words on the term "anger" (אף). The anger of Korah, Dathan and Abiram directed against Aaron finds its response in the following verse (19ab) where, on seeing them, God is angered (ויתאנף) and in his wrath (lit.: בחרון אפו, "in the heat of his anger") strikes them a mortal blow. Finally, in 19cd, God's punishment is presented as a wonderful, extraordinary action, that is, a miracle (אֵוֶה). It is easy to see here an allusion to Num 16,30–35, where there is an account of a miracle performed by God against the rebels: first, the earth opened wide its mouth and swallowed up Dathan and Abiram alive, and then a fire came forth from God and devoured the band of Korah (cf. Ps 106,17–18). This would be the miracle spoken of in our text.³¹

Now we have to ask ourselves, why did Ben Sira want to recount this episode? Couldn't he have done without it? What message lies hidden behind this dramatic evocation of the past? If we read between the lines, we can discover some allusions to the situation of the priesthood in Ben Sira's day. The priesthood was a basic institution in ancient Jewish society and it is logical to suppose that it aroused the admiration of some (our author included) and gave raise to rejection and attacks by others (the opponents).³² The record of the conspiracy recounted in Numbers and in particular the punishment which God inflicts on the rebels could be understood, bearing in mind Ben Sira's predilection for the priestly class, as "a warning to any potential 'usurper' of the priesthood".³³

³⁰ According to Roland De Vaux, the adherents of the Korah clan were "full of intrigue, battling their way forward, first as doorkeepers, then as singers and finally even usurping priestly functions" (De Vaux, *Ancient Israel*, 393).

³¹ Skehan/Di Lella, *The Wisdom of Ben Sira*, 513; Zapff, *Jesus Sirach*, 332; Wright, *The Use and Interpretation*, 200.

³² In Sir 45,19ab, F.V. Reiterer glimpses the priests contemporary with Ben Sira desiring that the glory of God strike their enemies (cf. Reiterer, *Aaron's Polyvalent Role*, 51).

³³ Wright, *The Use and Interpretation*, 200.

Let us add a final observation. In addition to Sir 45,18–19, Ben Sira alludes to the rebels' conspiracy in 16,6, even if in this text he does not mention anyone by name: "Against a sinful band fire is enkindled; upon a godless people wrath flames forth" (cf. Wisd 18,20). It is precisely with this verse that he begins a historical demonstration of the punitive intervention of God (16,6–11ab), which forms part of 15,11–18,14, a long passage devoted to the subject of theodicy.³⁴ Through some examples drawn from the history of Israel, our sage teaches that God punishes the wicked for their sin of pride: Korah, Dathan and Abiram (v. 6; cf. Num 16,1–30), the giants of antiquity (v. 7; cf. Gen 6,1–7), the inhabitants of Sodom (v. 8; cf. Gen 19,1–29), the Canaanites who dwelt in Palestine (v. 9; cf. Josh 11,16–20), the Israelites who came out of Egypt (v. 10; cf. Exod 12,37) and rebelled against God several times with their murmuring and perished in the desert (cf. Sir 46,6; Num 11,21; 14,20–23) and, finally, by way of summary, the "stiff-necked" people (v. 11ab; cf. Exod 32,9; 33,5; 34,6–7). The pole position which Ben Sira grants to Korah, Dathan and Abiram in this rogues' gallery speaks for itself.

4 The doctor and the miracle of the sweetening of the waters (Sir 38,5)

The final text (Sir 38,5) we wish to consider is in 38,1–15, a passage commonly described as the "praise of the doctor".³⁵ This passage reveals how Ben Sira understands the medical profession and the medicine practised in his day. We have to remember that, in ancient Judaea of the second century B.C., the confrontation between Hellenistic novelty and the tradition of the fathers was beginning to come alive. This confrontation was wide-ranging including also the concept of health and sickness. While the Old Testament looks on doctors with evident suspicion (Job 13,4; Isa 3,7; Jer 8,22; 46,11; 51,8), in the Hellenistic world, by contrast, they enjoy a good name and high esteem. While in the Old Testament the idea that illness is the effect of sin prevails (Num 12,9–10) along with that of healing as the effect of God's forgiveness (2 Chr 16,2), in the Hellenistic environment ill-

³⁴ Cf., among others, Prato, *Il problema della teodicea in Ben Sira*, 209–299; Gilbert, *God, Sin and Mercy*, 118–135; Beentjes, *Theodicy in the Wisdom of Ben Sira*, 509–524.

³⁵ Among the numerous studies on this pericope, I cite only some of the most recent: McConvery, *Ben Sira's 'Praise of the Physician'*, 62–86; Wainwright, *Gendering Healing*, 257–272; Fasce, *La lode del medico*; Zapff, *Sir 38,1–15 als Beispiel*, 347–367.

ness is fought with a secular science, that is, with a use of medicine that is rational in orientation.

In 38,1–15, Ben Sira in a masterly way successfully integrates the Jewish faith with the scientific progress of his time in the matter of pharmacology and medicine.³⁶ In the words of Silvana Fasce, the sage of Jerusalem “moves naturally between the ancient and the new, not so much in introducing the new as in consolidating the Jewish tradition, within which examples and cultural currents of Alexandrian Greek origin operate: in fact the praise of the doctor begins with the obsequious recognition of his service [the reference is to the Greek text],³⁷ but is immediately set in a religious perspective which proclaims that the doctor and his science are gifts of divine creation”.³⁸

The “praise of the doctor” can be divided into two large sections: 38,1–8 (advice on how to behave towards the doctor) and 38,9–15 (advice on how to deal with illness). Verse 1a acts as introduction to the whole passage and v. 15 encloses the conclusion in the form of a warning. We shall focus on the first part because it is that which is of interest to our subject. It is made up of two strophes: vv. 1–3 and vv. 4–8. The first strophe emphasises the importance of the doctor. The respect due to him and to the practice of medicine has a religious motivation: his profession and his wisdom (understood as the art of healing) come from God. It is precisely this that is the reason for his standing among the great. Since the doctor was generally a court official, he received his salary from the king³⁹ and respect from those who exercised authority. In brief, having received his wisdom from God, the doctor becomes his close collaborator in the healing process.

Verse 4 sees the beginning of the second strophe where attention is shifted from the doctor to the cures (תרופות, ἀαμακῶς) which he employs in his treat-

³⁶ We should recall the great founding doctors of the Alexandrian school: Erasistratus of Ceos (c. 304–250 B.C.) and Herophilus of Chalcedon (c. 335–280 B.C.). Their teaching and methodology had a decisive influence in the following centuries. Cf. Fasce, *La lode del medico*, 35–38.

³⁷ Sir 38,1Gr: “Honour the doctor for his service”. The Hebrew text is distinguished by its utilitarian tone: “Make friends with the doctor before you need him” (MsB); “Make friends with the doctor because of his usefulness” (Mss Bmg, D).

³⁸ Fasce, *La lode del medico*, 31–32: “Ben Sira [...] si muove con naturalezza fra l’antico e il nuovo, non tanto per introdurre il nuovo, quanto per consolidare la tradizione giudaica, entro cui agiscono istanze e correnti culturali di provenienza greco-alessandrina: infatti la lode del medico parte con l’ossequioso riconoscimento delle sue prestazioni, ma subito si inquadra in una prospettiva religiosa, proclamando che il medico e la sua scienza sono doni della creazione divina”.

³⁹ The following Spanish proverb seems to have been inspired by Sir 38,2: “Dios es quien sana y el médico se lleva la plata” (God heals and the doctor receives the fee).

ment. Also created by God, these cures are natural medicines drawn from the earth. Despite their horrible taste, the sensible person should never disregard them.⁴⁰ In the following verse, Ben Sira unexpectedly interrupts his exposition with a rhetorical question which provokes the reader's curiosity:

38,5MsB Was not the water sweetened by a twig
so that all might learn his power?

The question evokes a well-known episode recounted in the book of Exodus.⁴¹ After three days of journeying in the desert without finding water, the Israelites reached Mara, an oasis of bitter water (in Hebrew מרה signifies "bitter") and thus undrinkable. They murmur against Moses, asking him to solve the problem, and he, without delay, turns to God to find a solution. The Lord showed Moses a piece of wood (עץ) which, when immersed in the water, rendered it sweet (Exod 15,23–25).⁴²

What message did Ben Sira intend to transmit with this biblical allusion? Do we have here, as some maintain, a simple proof from Scripture to give authority to his teaching? In answering these questions, I can do no less than take up and amplify the observations made in this connection by F.V. Reiterer in an essay of his on the influence of the book of Exodus on Ben Sira.⁴³ First, Ben Sira does not evoke the miraculous character of the episode but the natural properties and the therapeutic benefits of the wood which, in the final instance, come from God. This idea is shared by S. Fasce: "Behind a gesture which could appear magical and behind a phenomenon which could be understood as the effect of a thaumaturgical action, Ben Sira discerns a natural power, a property of the plant, and, therefore, again, an aspect of the divine creation for the benefit of humanity".⁴⁴ In our opinion, Ben Sira is also implicitly promoting the study of plants and their healing properties. Second, in the face of the people who are desperate through the lack of drinking water, Moses seeks the Lord's help. It is no human power

⁴⁰ Cf. Jer 8,22; Papyrus Insinger 32,12: "He [God] created remedies to end illness, wine to end affliction" and 24,2: "Do not slight a small illness for which there is a remedy; use the remedy" (Lichtheim, *Late Egyptian Wisdom*, 230.222).

⁴¹ In Sir 2,10 too, for example, the sage makes use of rhetorical questions to ask about Israel's past. Cf., in this connection, Calduch-Benages, *En el crisol de la prueba*, 123–148.

⁴² Water is rendered drinkable also in 2 Kgs 2,19–22 and Ezek 47,8–11.

⁴³ Cited in note 4.

⁴⁴ Fasce, *La lode del medico*, 49: "Alla base di un gesto che potrebbe apparire magico e alla base di un fenomeno che potrebbe essere inteso effetto di un'azione taumaturgica, Ben Sira scorge un potere naturale, una proprietà della pianta, quindi ancora un aspetto della creazione divina, per l'utilità dell'uomo".

that renders the bitter water drinkable but Moses' supplication to the Lord.⁴⁵ Third, Moses is presented indirectly as the prototype of the doctor even if he never practised this profession. Just like Moses, the doctor receives his vocation and authority from God, maintains a close relationship with him through prayer, and is appointed to perform a task on behalf of the people. In sum, like Moses, the doctor is only an instrument of divine salvation.⁴⁶

5 Conclusion

This study has allowed us to grasp, if not completely, at least in some aspects, how Ben Sira employs the Exodus traditions. It has become clear that he employs them in his own way, that is in the service of the teaching which he wants to transmit and of his way of arguing. In the words of B.G. Wright, the sage "had his own interests, agendas and ideological commitments".⁴⁷ Ben Sira is not interested in citing the Bible in order to give authority to his words (even if, at times, he employs it also with this aim, cf. 2,10), but mainly in the service of his teaching. In other words, our sage expects not only that his disciple knows the ancient Scriptures but that he is also able to understand the purpose of the biblical quotation/allusion and its meaning in the present context. Knowledge and interpretation of ancient texts thus become pedagogical tools employed by Ben Sira with great creativity.

In the praise of Moses, for example, the use of the Exodus traditions is wholly oriented towards the gift of the Law. As a result, Moses is presented not as the liberator of the people (as one gathers from the account in Numbers), but as the interpreter and master of the Law *par excellence* (cf. 45,17 concerning Aaron). Not by chance, the Law, together with wisdom and the fear of the Lord, is at the base of his theological teaching (cf. 19,20). The reference to the rebellion of Dathan, Abiram and Korah in the praise of Aaron seems to be aimed at turning the attention of his disciples to the priestly class and particularly to its detractors. Finally, the reference to the episode of the waters of Marah in the passage on the doctor reveals, on the one hand, Ben Sira's interest in medicine as a science (openness

⁴⁵ Philo's account describes the immediate help which God grants in reply to Moses' supplications (cf. Philo, *De Vita Mosis* I, 181–185 and, also, Josephus, *Antiquitates Iudaicae* III, 6–7).

⁴⁶ Cf. Zapff, *Sir* 38,1–15, 361: "Wie Mose, so ist auch der Arzt demnach nichts anderes als Vollzugsorgan des heilenden Jhwh, hat also in Mose [...], eine Art Paradigma" (Like Moses, the physician is but an instrument of God who heals. He has thus in Moses [...], a kind of paradigm).

⁴⁷ Wright, *The Use and Interpretation*, 206.

to the Hellenistic world) and, on the other, his concept of the doctor as a collaborator in creation and instrument of the salvation of God (faithfulness to Jewish tradition and faith). Moreover, the context of sickness and healing in which this passage is inserted recalls the theology of trial to which both Israel in the desert and the disciple in his search for wisdom are subjected (cf. 2,1). In the work of our sage, the crossing of the desert with all its trials becomes the paradigm for the long and troubled way through which the disciple must pass to reach the wisdom he desires.⁴⁸

In conclusion, Ben Sira has recourse to the Exodus traditions with a predominantly pedagogical purpose (the same goes for the other biblical texts he uses). The selection of passages, the manipulation of the language and the new context where they are inserted reveal the main centres of interest of his teaching on which his disciples have to reflect. At the same time, however, as Wright claims, his use of Scripture “opens a window also into the broader concerns of Jews, or at least a particular segment of elite Jews, in the early second century BCE”.⁴⁹

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⁴⁸ Cf. Calduch-Benages, *En el crisol de la prueba*, 88–94; *Trial Motif*, 135–151.

⁴⁹ Wright, *The Use and Interpretation*, 207.

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