

SIRACH 44:1 – 50:24

¹Let us now sing the praises of men, faithful to the covenant, each in his own time. ²The Most High apportioned to them great glory, the glory that was his from ancient days:

³There were those who ruled in their kingdoms, and made a name for themselves by their valour; those who gave counsel because they were intelligent; those who spoke in prophetic oracles; ⁴those who led the people by their counsels and by their knowledge of the people's lore; they were wise in their words of instruction, framing proverbs and maxims; ⁵those who composed musical tunes, or put verses in writing; ⁶men endowed with resources, living peacefully in their homes –

⁷all these were honoured in their generations, and were the pride of their times.

⁸Some of them have left behind a name, so that others declare their praise. ⁹But of others there is no memory; they have perished as though they had never existed; they have become as though they had never been born, they and their children after them. ¹⁰But these also were godly men, whose righteous deeds have not been forgotten; ¹¹their wealth will remain with their descendants, and their inheritance with their children's children. ¹²Their descendants stand by the covenants; their children also, for their sake. ¹³Their offspring will continue forever, and their glory will never be blotted out. ¹⁴Their bodies are buried in peace, but their name lives on generation after generation. ¹⁵The assembly declares their wisdom, and the congregation proclaims their praise.

The whole of the Hebrew text of chapter 44 has been recovered. Having extolled the praises of God the creator of the beautiful universe, Ben Sira now turns to extol the wonder of God's action in the famous ancestors of his people.

In verses 3-6 he lists twelve categories of heroes. What they have in common is that they were 'faithful to the covenant' (Hebrew *ḥesed*; חֶסֶד). Their lives were resplendent with God's glory (verse 2). In the following chapters he gives outstanding examples of men who belonged to each of these categories. They were 'the pride of their times' (verse 7), and Ben Sira wants his contemporaries to remember them and to emulate them, and in this way offer praise to God.

There are those who have not been remembered, but their fidelity to God lives on in their families (verses 8-14).

The list is headed by Enoch (verse 16; see Genesis 5:24).

Noah (verses 17-18) is described as having been 'just' (as in Genesis 6:9) and 'blameless' (as in Genesis 7:1). The 'lasting sign' is the rainbow (see Genesis 9:12-17).

In Genesis 17:4-5 Abraham is called 'the great father of a multitude of nations' (verse 19). His unquestioning obedience is expressed in Genesis 12:1-4 and 15:1-6. The covenant is found in Genesis 17:9-14. Its sign is circumcision. The 'test' is described in Genesis 22:1-14.

God renewed with Isaac the promise made to Abraham (see Genesis 17:19 and 26:3-5, 24).

The story of Jacob receiving the blessing of the firstborn is found in Genesis 27:1-29. For the account of God renewing the covenant with him see Genesis 28:4, 14. In Exodus 4:22, the people Israel are declared by God to be his firstborn.

The final statement in verse 23 is a reference to Moses (see the following passage).

¹⁶Enoch pleased the Lord and was taken up, a sign for the knowledge of future generations.

¹⁷Noah was found just and blameless; in the time of wrath he kept the race alive. With a covenant the flood ended. ¹⁸A lasting sign sealed the assurance given to him that all flesh should never again be blotted out by a flood.

¹⁹Abraham was the great father of a multitude of nations, and no one has been found like him in glory. ²⁰He kept the law of the Most High, and entered into a covenant with him; he certified the covenant in his flesh, and when he was tested he proved faithful. ²¹Therefore the Lord assured him with an oath that the nations would be blessed through his offspring; that he would make him as numerous as the dust of the earth, and exalt his offspring like the stars, and give them an inheritance from sea to sea and from the Euphrates to the ends of the earth.

²²To Isaac also he gave the same assurance for the sake of his father Abraham.

The blessing of all people and the covenant ²³he made to rest on the head of Jacob; he acknowledged him as the firstborn, and gave him his inheritance; he divided his portions, and distributed them among twelve tribes.

From his descendants God brought forth a godly man, who found favour in the sight of all.

^{44:23}**From Jacobs' descendants God brought forth a godly man, who found favour in the sight of all,**
^{45:1}**Moses who was beloved by God and people. It is good to remember him.**

²**God made him equal in glory to the angels, and gave him awesome powers. ³He performed swift miracles through his words and glorified him in the presence of kings. He gave him the commandments for his people, and revealed to him his glory.**

⁴**Because he was trustworthy and meek, God consecrated him, choosing him from all humankind.**
⁵**He allowed him to hear his voice, and led him into the cloud,**

and gave him the commandments face to face, the law of life and knowledge, so that he might teach Jacob his statutes, and Israel his covenant decrees and judgments.

The Hebrew for the whole of chapter 45 has been recovered. 44:23 – 45:5 speak of Moses. His intimacy with God is expressed in the Torah:

YHWH used to speak to Moses face to face, as one speaks to a friend.

– Exodus 33:11

With Moses I speak face to face... and he beholds the form of YHWH.

– Numbers 12:8

In regard to his 'awesome powers':

Moses was unequalled for all the signs and wonders that YHWH sent him to perform in the land of Egypt, against Pharaoh and all his servants and his entire land.

– Deuteronomy 34:11

Exodus 33:18-23 and 34:5-8 portray God revealing his glory to Moses.

In line with tradition, Moses is spoken of as being 'trustworthy' (אֱמֻנָה; see Numbers 12:7) and 'meek' (עָנָו; see Numbers 12:3).

God gave Moses the commandments (מִצְוֹת), the Law (תּוֹרָה), his statutes (תְּקִימָה), covenant decrees (עֲדָוֹת), and 'judgments' (מִשְׁפָּטִים).

The length of the section devoted to Aaron is an indication of the importance to Ben Sira of the temple cult and the priesthood. This is further indicated in the Appendix devoted to Ben Sira's contemporary, the high priest Simeon II (see 50:1-24). Exodus 29:9 and 40:15 speak of the office of the high priest as 'perpetual' (verse 7).

Verses 8-13 focus on the splendid vestments of the high priest (see Exodus 28:1-43 and 39:1-31).

Verse 13 is interesting. It was just after Ben Sira's time that the Seleucid ruler, Antiochus Epiphanes IV, in 175BC replaced the legitimate high priest, Onias III, with his brother Jason, who offered Antiochus a substantial bribe (see 2Maccabees 4:7-10). Soon after, his son, Onias II, was assassinated (see 2Maccabees 4:34). The line of legitimate high priests ended with his death.

The laws governing the sacrifice of the morning and evening cereal offerings can be found in Leviticus 6:12-16.

⁶He exalted Aaron, a holy man like Moses who was his brother, of the tribe of Levi. ⁷He made his office perpetual when he endowed him with its dignity. He made him magnificent and enveloped him in an aura of majesty.

⁸He clothed him in perfect splendour, and adorned him with the symbols of authority: the linen undergarments, the long robe, and the ephod. ⁹And he encircled him with pomegranates, with many golden bells all around, to send forth a sound as he walked, to make their ringing heard in the temple as a reminder to his people; ¹⁰with the sacred vestment, of gold and violet and crimson, the work of an embroiderer; with the oracle of judgment, Urim and Thummim; ¹¹with twisted crimson, the work of an artisan; with precious stones engraved like seals, in a setting of gold, the work of a jeweler, to commemorate in engraved letters each of the tribes of Israel; ¹²with a gold diadem upon his turban, inscribed like a seal with "Holiness," a distinction to be prized, the work of an expert, a delight to the eyes, richly adorned.

¹³Before him such beautiful things did not exist.

No outsider ever put them on, but only his sons and his descendants in perpetuity.

¹⁴His sacrifices shall be wholly burned twice every day continually.

¹⁵Moses ordained him, and anointed him with holy oil; it was an everlasting covenant for him and for his descendants as long as the heavens endure, to serve God by his priestly ministry and bless his people in his name. ¹⁶He chose him out of all the living to offer sacrifice to the Lord, incense and a pleasing odour as a memorial portion, to make atonement for the people of Israel.

¹⁷In his commandments he gave him authority to make statutes and judgments, to teach Jacob the testimonies, and to enlighten Israel with his law.

¹⁸Outsiders conspired against him, and envied him in the wilderness, Dathan and Abiram and their followers and the company of Korah, in wrath and anger. ¹⁹But YHWH saw it and was not pleased, and in the heat of his anger they were destroyed; he performed wonders against them to consume them in flaming fire.

²⁰He added glory to Aaron and gave him a heritage; he allotted to him the best of the first fruits, and prepared bread of first fruits in abundance; ²¹for they eat the sacrifices of YHWH, which he gave to him and his descendants. ²²But in the land of the people he has no inheritance, and he has no portion among the people; for YHWH himself is his portion and inheritance.

The ordination of Aaron and his sons by Moses is described in Leviticus 8:1-13. An important function of the high priest was to bring about ritual purification in order to re-establish communion with God ('make atonement', verse 16):

The priest who is anointed and consecrated as priest in his father's place shall make atonement, wearing the linen vestments, the holy vestments. He shall purge the holiest part of the sanctuary, and he shall make atonement for the tent of meeting and for the altar, and for the priests and for all the people of the assembly. This shall be an everlasting statute for you, to make atonement for the people of Israel once in the year for all their sins. And Moses did as YHWH had commanded him.

– Leviticus 16:32-34

Verses 18-19 refer to the episode recorded in Numbers 16:1 – 17:15.

YHWH alone is the priests' 'portion and inheritance'(verse 22). They had no tribal land, but lived off the temple offerings (see Numbers 18:8-19).

Phinehas was Aaron's grandson ('third in line'). The event alluded to is recorded in Numbers 25:1-15.

The expression 'covenant of peace' (verse 24) is taken from Numbers 25:12.

Ben Sira concludes with a prayer for those who hold the office of high priest. He is thinking especially of his contemporary Simeon II.

²³Phinehas son of Eleazar ranks third in line. He was zealous for the God of all, and stood firm, when the people turned away, in the noble courage of his soul; and he made atonement for Israel.

²⁴Therefore a covenant of peace was established with him, that he should be leader of the sanctuary and of his people, that he and his descendants should have the dignity of the high priesthood forever.

²⁵Just as a covenant was established with David son of Jesse of the tribe of Judah, that the king's heritage passes only from son to son, so the heritage of Aaron is for his descendants alone.

²⁶And now bless the Lord who has crowned you with glory. May the Lord grant you wisdom of heart to judge his people with justice, so that their prosperity may not vanish, and that their glory may endure through all their generations.

¹Joshua son of Nun was mighty in war, and was aide to Moses in the prophetic office. He became, as his name implies, a great saviour of God's elect, to take vengeance on the enemies that rose against them, so that he might give Israel its inheritance. ²How glorious he was when he lifted his arm and brandished his sword against the cities! ³Who could withstand him when he fought the battles of YHWH?⁴Was it not through him that the sun stood still and one day became as long as two?

⁵He called upon God Most High, when enemies pressed him on every side, and God Most High answered him with hailstones of mighty power. ⁶which he rained down upon the hostile forces, till on the slope he destroyed the foe, so that the nations might know that he was fighting in the sight of YHWH; for he was a devoted follower of God.

⁷And in the days of Moses he proved his loyalty, he and Caleb son of Jephunneh: they opposed the congregation, averted God's anger from the people, and stilled their wicked grumbling. ⁸Because of this these two alone were spared out of six hundred thousand infantry, to lead the people into their inheritance, the land flowing with milk and honey. ⁹God gave Caleb strength, which remained with him in his old age, so that he went up to the hill country, and his children obtained it for an inheritance, ¹⁰so that all the Israelites might see how good it is to follow YHWH.

The Hebrew text of chapter 46 has all been recovered. The story of Joshua succeeding to Moses is found in Numbers 27:18-23. His exploits are found in the Book named after him.

The legend of the sun standing still is found in Joshua 10:12-13.

This is the first time Ben Sira has used the expression 'God Most High' (verse 5; Hebrew 'ēl 'ēl 'elyôn; אֱלֹהִים אֱלֹהִים; see later 47:5, 8; 48:20).

For God's use of hailstones to defeat Israel's enemies see Joshua 10:11-12. 'The slope' is the descent from Beth-horon (see Joshua 10:10-11).

The story of Joshua and Caleb is found in Numbers 14:1-10.

The number six hundred thousand is found in Exodus 12:37 and Numbers 11:21.

On Caleb's strength see Joshua 14:7, 10-11.

After a brief introduction to the Judges (see the Book of that name), Ben Sira focuses on Samuel, a priest a prophet, the last of the judges, and the one who anointed Israel's first and second kings.

The story of the vow made by Hannah, Samuel's mother (verse 13), is found in 1Samuel 1:2, 10-11. For Samuel's offering sacrifices see 1Samuel 7:7-9.

It was Samuel who anointed Saul (1Samuel 9:15-17; 10:1), the first king, and then David (1Samuel 16:13).

Samuel's judging 'by the law of YHWH' is a reference to 1Samuel 7:2-6. His doing the rounds as judge is described in 1Samuel 7:16-17.

Verse 16 refers to the time when the Philistines advanced on the Israelites at Mizpah (1 Samuel 7:7-13).

Samuel's integrity is praised in 1Samuel 12:1-5.

Samuel went to the witch of Endor to consult Samuel's ghost (see 1Samuel 28:8-19).

¹¹The judges also, each one of them, whose hearts did not fall into idolatry and who did not turn away from the Lord – may their memory be blessed!

¹²May their bones send forth new life from where they lie, and may the names of those who have been honoured live again in their children!

¹³Honoured among people, dear to his Maker, pledged in a vow from his mother's womb as one consecrated to YHWH in the prophetic office, was Samuel, the judge who offered sacrifice.

At God's word he established the kingdom and anointed rulers over his people.

¹⁴By the law of YHWH he judged the congregation, and he made the rounds of the settlements of Jacob.

¹⁵By his faithfulness he was proved to be a prophet, and by his words he became known as a trustworthy seer.

¹⁶He called upon God when his enemies pressed him on every side, and he offered in sacrifice a suckling lamb.

¹⁷Then the Lord thundered from heaven, and made his voice heard with a mighty sound; ¹⁸he subdued the leaders of the enemy and all the rulers of the Philistines.

¹⁹Before the time of his eternal sleep, Samuel bore witness before YHWH and his anointed: "No property, not so much as a pair of shoes, have I taken from anyone!" And no one accused him.

²⁰Even after he had fallen asleep, his guidance was sought; he made known to the king his death, and lifted up his voice from the ground in prophecy, to blot out the wickedness of the people.

¹After him came Nathan who appeared before David.

²As the fat is set apart from the communion offering, so David was set apart among the Israelites.

³He made sport of lions as though they were young goats, and of bears as though they were lambs of the flock.

⁴In his youth did he not kill a giant, and take away the people's disgrace, when he whirled the stone in the sling and struck down the boasting Goliath? ⁵For he called on God Most High, and he gave strength to his right arm to strike down a mighty warrior, and to exalt the power of his people.

⁶So they glorified him for the tens of thousands he conquered, and praised him for the blessings bestowed on him, when the glorious diadem was given to him. ⁷For he wiped out his enemies on every side, and annihilated his adversaries the Philistines; he broke their power to our own day.

⁸In all that he did he gave thanks to God Most High, proclaiming his glory; he sang praise with all his heart, and he loved his Maker.

⁹He placed singers before the altar, to make sweet melody with their voices. ¹⁰He gave beauty to the festivals, and arranged their times throughout the year, while they praised God's holy name, and the sanctuary resounded from early morning.

¹¹The Lord took away his sins, and exalted his power forever; he gave him a covenant of kingship and a glorious throne in Israel.

The Hebrew text of chapter 47 has all been recovered.

Ben Sira compares David to the choicest part of the sacrificial animal, the fat that was burnt on the altar (see Exodus 29:13).

The story of David's wrestling with lions and bears is found in 1Samuel 17:34-36.

David's slaying of Goliath is recorded in 1Samuel 17:32-51.

The victory song chanted by the women is found in 1Samuel 18:7.

In verses 8-10 Ben Sira extols David as a composer of psalms, and as the one responsible for the place of music in the cult (see 1Chronicles 15:16) Verses 9-10 draw on the tradition found in 1Chronicles.

David did sin (see 2Samuel 11:1-5), but repented and was forgiven.

Verses 12-22 are devoted to David's son, Solomon, described by Ben Sira as 'wise' (see 1Kings 5:7). Thanks to David, Solomon's reign was notable for its peace.

The story of Solomon building the temple is found in 1Kings 6:1-38.

According to the First Book of Kings:

Solomon composed three thousand proverbs, and his songs numbered a thousand and five.

– 1Kings 4:32

This accounts for his being named in the Book of Proverbs, the Song of Songs and the Book of Wisdom.

The 'glorious name' conferred upon Israel is *yedîdî* ('my beloved'; see Jeremiah 11:15; compare 2Samuel 12:25 in regard to David).

In verses 19-21 Ben Sira focuses on Solomon's sins which caused him to lose favour with God, who, on his death, arranged for the breakaway of the northern kingdom. It was his alliances with foreign nations through his marriages that is named as his chief sin (see 1Kings 11:1-10).

Solomon proved unfaithful, but not God. Because of God's faithfulness to his commitment, the Davidic kingship will last forever. It was nearly four hundred years since the last Davidic king sat on the throne of Judah. The Messianic hope was still well and truly alive in the time of Ben Sira.

¹²After him a wise son rose up who because of him lived in security:

¹³Solomon reigned in an age of peace, because God made all his borders tranquil, so that he might build a house in his name and provide a sanctuary to stand forever.

¹⁴How wise you were when you were young! You overflowed like the Nile with understanding. ¹⁵Your influence spread throughout the earth, and you filled it with proverbs having deep meaning. ¹⁶Your fame reached to far-off islands, and you were loved for your peaceful reign.

¹⁷Your songs, proverbs, and parables, and the answers you gave astounded the nations.

¹⁸You were called by that glorious name which was conferred upon Israel. You heaped up gold like iron and amassed silver like lead.

¹⁹But you brought in women to lie at your side, and through your body you were brought into subjection.

²⁰You stained your honour, and defiled your family line, so that you brought wrath upon your children, and they were grieved at your folly,

²¹because the sovereignty was divided and a rebel kingdom arose out of Ephraim.

²²But God will never withdraw his commitment, or cause any of his promises to perish; he will never blot out the descendants of his chosen one, or destroy the family line of him who loved him. So he gave a remnant to Jacob, and to David a root from his own family.

Sin in the northern kingdom

²³Solomon rested with his ancestors, and left behind him one of his sons, broad in folly and lacking in sense, whose policy drove the people to revolt.

Then one arose who should not be named, the sinner who led Israel into sin, who brought about the ruin of Ephraim, ²⁴and caused them to be exiled from the land.

²⁵Their sinfulness grew more and more, and they gave themselves to every evil.

Ben Sira speaks first of Solomon's son, Rehoboam (see 1Kings 11:43). He does not name him, but cleverly uses 'broad' (Hebrew *reḥōb*) and 'people' (Hebrew *'ām*), which when combined produce his name. Rehoboam's folly is described in 1Kings 12:1-19.

The one who 'should not be named' is Jeroboam who led the revolt of the northern tribes. His sins (see 1Kings 14:16) led eventually to the exile to Assyria (see 2Kings 17:20-23).

The increasing sinfulness of the people of the northern kingdom (see 2Kings 17:21-22) sets the scene for the appearance of the great prophet, Elijah.

The Hebrew text of chapter 48 has all been recovered. The reference to 'fire' in verse 1 recalls 2Kings 1:10-12. The prophet Malachi includes the promise:

Behold, I will send you the prophet
Elijah before the great and terrible day
of YHWH comes.

– Malachi 4:5

He describes that day as 'burning like a furnace' (Malachi 4:1; see Sirach 48:1).

The 'famine' is recorded in 1Kings 18:3. The legend of his shutting up the heavens is found in 1Kings 17:1. The threefold bringing down fire is in 1Kings 18:38, and 2Kings 1:10 and 12.

Elijah restored life to the son of the widow of Zarephath (see 1Kings 17:17-22).

He sent down to destruction the descendants of King Ahab (see 1Kings 21:19-24).

Ben Sira identifies Horeb with Sinai. The scene is recorded in 1Kings 19:8-18.

Jehu was anointed by Elijah to inflict this retribution (see 1Kings 19:16-17). Elijah anointed Elisha to succeed him as a prophet (see 1Kings 19:16).

His being swept up into heaven in a fiery chariot is recorded in 2Kings 2:11.

The statement 'it is written' (verse 10) indicates that Ben Sira is relying on the promise expressed by the prophet Malachi (see Malachi 4:5-6). 'To restore the tribes of Israel' comes from Isaiah 49:6.

¹Then like a fire appeared the prophet whose words were a flaming furnace.

²He brought a famine upon them, and in his zeal he hemmed them in.

³By the word of God he shut up the heavens, and also three times brought down fire.

⁴How awesome you are, Elijah! Whose glory is equal to yours?

⁵You brought a dead child back to life from Sheol, by the will of YHWH.

⁶You sent kings down to destruction, and nobles from their sickbeds.

⁷You heard threats at Sinai, judgments of vengeance at Horeb.

⁸You anointed the man to inflict this retribution, and the prophet to succeed you.

⁹You were taken aloft in a whirlwind, in a chariot with horses of fire.

¹⁰At the appointed time, it is written, you are destined to return to put an end to the wrath of God before the day of YHWH, to turn back the hearts of parents to their children, and to restore the tribes of Israel.

¹¹Happy is he who shall have seen you before he dies! ...

The final words of verse 11 have been lost.

¹²When Elijah was enveloped in the whirlwind, Elisha was filled with his spirit. He performed twice as many signs, and marvels with every utterance of his mouth. Never in his lifetime did he tremble before any ruler, nor could anyone intimidate him at all.

¹³Nothing was too hard for him, and when he was dead, his body prophesied.

¹⁴In his life he did wonders, and in death his deeds were marvellous.

¹⁵Despite all this the people did not repent, nor did they forsake their sins, until they were carried off as plunder from their land, and were scattered over all the earth.

The story of Elisha being ‘filled with his spirit’ is found in 2Kings 2:9-10, 15. There we are told that Elisha received a double portion of Elijah’s spirit. Elisha’s ‘miracles’ are recorded in 2Kings 2-9.

‘His body prophesied’ is a reference to 2Kings 13:21.

The scattering ‘over all the earth’ refers to the exile to Assyria and elsewhere that took place after the destruction of Samaria in 722BC.

Judah is called 'a tiny people' since the northern kingdom no longer existed (and compare Isaiah 24:6).

The Deuteronomists see Hezekiah as one of the truly great kings of Judah. For the fortification of Jerusalem see 2Chronicles 32:5. The construction of the tunnel which brought water from the Gihon Spring into the city is recorded in 2Kings 20:20.

Sennacherib's invasion is described in 2Kings 18:13-37. His commander is mentioned in 2Kings 18:17-35.

Hezekiah's prayer is recorded in 2Kings 19:14-19.

2Kings 19:35 gives a plague as the reason for the failure of the Assyrians to capture Jerusalem.

For Isaiah's instructions to King Hezekiah see 2Kings 19:1-7 and 20:1-11.

Examples of Isaiah's 'visions' are found in Isaiah 1:1; 2:1; 6:1-13.

The story of the sun moving backwards is recounted in 2Kings 20:8-11.

For Isaiah's seeing of the future see Isaiah 42:9.

¹⁵Judah remained, a tiny people, but with a ruler from the house of David. ¹⁶Some of them did what was right, but others kept on sinning.

¹⁷Hezekiah fortified his city, and brought water into its midst; he tunnelled through the rock with iron tools, and built cisterns for the water.

¹⁸In his days Sennacherib invaded the country; he sent his commander and departed; he shook his fist against Zion, and in his arrogance blasphemed against God. ¹⁹Then their hearts were shaken and their hands trembled, and they were in anguish, like women in labour. ²⁰But they called upon God Most High, spreading out their hands toward him.

He quickly heard them from heaven, and delivered them through Isaiah.

²¹The Lord struck down the camp of the Assyrians, and his angel wiped them out.

²²For Hezekiah did what was pleasing to the Lord, and he kept firmly to the ways of his ancestor David, as he was commanded by the prophet Isaiah, who was great and trustworthy in his visions.

²³In Isaiah's days the sun went backward, and he prolonged the life of the king.

²⁴By his dauntless spirit he saw the future, and comforted the mourners in Zion. ²⁵He revealed what was to occur to the end of time, and the hidden things before they happened.

¹The name of Josiah is like blended incense prepared by the skill of the perfumer; his memory is as sweet as honey to every mouth, and like music at a banquet.

²He grieved over our betrayals, and destroyed the abominable idols.

³He kept his heart fixed on God; in lawless times he lived a virtuous life.

⁴Except for David, Hezekiah, and Josiah, all of them were great sinners, for they abandoned the law of the Most High; the kings of Judah right to the end.

⁵So God gave their power to others, and their glory to a foreign nation,

⁶who burnt down the holy city, and made its streets desolate.

⁷Jeremiah foretold this, for they had mistreated him, who even in the womb had been consecrated a prophet, to pluck up and ruin and destroy, and likewise to build and to plant.

The Hebrew text of chapter 49 has all been recovered. King Josiah reigned from 640-609BC. Of him the Deuteronomist writes:

Before him there was no king like him, who turned to YHWH with all his heart, with all his soul, and with all his might, according to all the law of Moses; nor did any like him arise after him.

– 2Kings 23:25

Josiah grieved when he heard the Torah read (see 2Kings 22:10-13, 19). His destroying of the idols is described in 2Kings 23.

God raised up King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon to capture Jerusalem and exile its king and citizens (see 2Kings 25:1-15).

Jeremiah foretold the destruction of the city (see Jeremiah 20:7-10; 37:13-16; 38:4-6). His consecration in the womb is noted in Jeremiah 1:5, and his vocation ‘to pluck up and ruin and destroy, and likewise to build and to plant’(verse 7) derives from Jeremiah 1:10.

Ezekiel's vision is described in Ezekiel 1:4-28.

Ezekiel refers to Job in Ezekiel 14:14, 20.

Ben Sira mentions the Twelve Prophets. In the Hebrew Canon the scroll containing their prophecies is listed after Ezekiel.

Zerubbabel as governor, and Jeshua as high priest, led the exiles back to Judah from Babylon (see Ezra 3:1 – 6:22). The signet ring derives from Haggai 2:23.

The account of Nehemiah rebuilding the walls of Jerusalem is found in Nehemiah 2:17 – 7:3. We might have expected Ben Sira to mention Ezra.

He concludes his praise of the ancestors by a second reference to Enoch (see 44:16).

The translation of Joseph's body from Egypt to Canaan is recorded in Exodus 13:19.

Shem, son of Noah (Genesis 6:10), is the ancestor of the Semites. Seth, son of Adam (Genesis 4:25; 5:3), kept the human race going after the death of Able and the banishment of Cain. Enosh was his son (Genesis 4:26).

This is the first occurrence of the idealisation of Adam in Jewish literature.

⁸It was Ezekiel who saw the vision of glory, which God showed him above the chariot of the cherubim.

⁹He also mentioned Job who held fast to all the ways of justice.

¹⁰May the bones of the Twelve Prophets send forth new life from where they lie, for they comforted the people of Jacob and delivered them with confident hope.

¹¹How shall we extol Zerubbabel, who was like a signet ring on God's right hand, ¹²and Jeshua son of Jozadak? In their days they built the house and erected the holy temple, destined for everlasting glory.

¹³The memory of Nehemiah also is lasting; he rebuilt our ruined walls, restored our shattered defences, and set up gates and bars.

¹⁴Few have ever been created on earth like Enoch, for he was taken up from the earth.

¹⁵Nor was anyone ever born like Joseph; even his bones were cared for.

¹⁶Shem and Seth and Enosh were honoured,

but above every other created living being was Adam.

¹The leader of his brothers and the pride of his people was the high priest, Simeon son of Johanan, who in his time repaired the house, and fortified the temple. ²It was in his time that the retaining wall was built for the residence precinct with the King's temple. ³In his days a water cistern was dug, a reservoir like the sea in circumference. ⁴He took care of his people against brigands, and fortified the city against the enemy.

⁵How splendid he was as he appeared from the Tent, as he came out from the house of the veil. ⁶Like the morning star among the clouds, like the full moon at the festal season; ⁷like the sun shining on the temple of the King, like the rainbow gleaming in splendid clouds; ⁸like blossoms on the branches in springtime, like lilies by a spring of water, like a green shoot on Lebanon on a summer day; ⁹like fire and incense in the censer, like a vessel of hammered gold studded with all kinds of precious stones; ¹⁰like an olive tree laden with fruit, and like a cypress towering in the clouds.

¹¹When he put on his glorious robes and clothed himself in perfect splendour, when he went up to the holy altar, he made the court of the sanctuary glorious. ¹²When he received the portions from the hands of the priests, as he stood by the hearth of the altar with a garland of brothers around him, like young cedars on Lebanon. Like poplars by the brook they clustered around him. ¹³All the sons of Aaron in their splendour held the Lord's offering in their hands before the whole congregation of Israel.

The Hebrew text of chapter 50 has all been recovered. Ben Sira now describes the splendour of the liturgical ritual and vestments of Simeon, son of Johanan, who served as high priest from 219 to 196BC. The expression 'in his time' indicates that Simeon is no longer living when Ben Sira is writing. Our only source of information concerning Simeon is this passage of Ben Sira and *Antiquities* Book 12 of Josephus.

From verse 5 through verse 21 Ben Sira shares his excitement at witnessing the splendour of the temple cult.

The high priestly vestment have already been described in Sirach 45:8-12.

The 'altar' of verse 12 is the bronze altar located in the court facing the Temple (see 2Chronicles 4:1).

Ben Sira continues his description of the beauty of the liturgy.

¹⁴Once he had completed the service at the altar, and arranged the sacrificial hearth for the Most High, the Almighty, ¹⁵and held out his hand for the cup and poured a drink offering of the blood of the grape at the foot of the altar, a pleasing odour to God the Most High, ¹⁶the sons of Aaron shouted; they blew their trumpets of hammered metal; they sounded a mighty fanfare as a reminder before the Most High.

¹⁷Then all the people together quickly fell to the ground on their faces in adoration before the Most High, before the Holy One of Israel. ¹⁸Then the singers praised him with their voices in sweet and full-toned melody. ¹⁹And the people of the land would shout for joy, praying to the Merciful One, as the high priest completed the service at the altar by presenting to God the sacrifice that is his due.

²⁰Then Simeon came down and raised his hands over the whole congregation of Israelites, to pronounce YHWH's blessing with his lips, and to glory in his name; ²¹and the people bowed down in worship a second time, to receive the blessing from the Most High.

²²And now bless the God of all, who everywhere works great wonders, who fosters our growth from our mother's womb, and deals with us according to his will.

²³May he grant you wisdom of heart, and may he abide among you as peace. ²⁴May his kindness towards Simeon be lasting, and may he fulfil for him the covenant with Phinehas so that it may not be taken from him or his descendants, while the heavens last.

The blessing (verse 20) is given in the Book of Numbers:

YHWH spoke to Moses, saying:
 Speak to Aaron and his sons, saying,
 Thus you shall bless the Israelites:
 You shall say to them, 'YHWH bless
 you and keep you; YHWH make
 his face to shine upon you, and be
 gracious to you; YHWH lift up his
 countenance upon you, and give you
 peace.' So they shall put my name on
 the Israelites, and I will bless them.

– Numbers 6:22-27

When his grandson translated Ben Sira's work into Greek, he altered verses 23-24, since Simeon's priestly line came to an end with the assassination of his son, Onias II (see 2Maccabees 4:34).

