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Thinking Beyond the Hebrew Bible: A Response to Christian Frevel

Abstract: In “Thinking Beyond the Hebrew Bible: A Response to Christian Frevel,” Alma Brodersen makes a further contribution to analyzing the potential development from bodily to abstract thinking in the Hebrew Bible. Her response widens the focus to include ancient texts outside the Hebrew Bible, namely from the Book of Ben Sira and the Dead Sea Scrolls. These texts date from the later period of the development from bodily to abstract thinking outlined in Frevel’s contribution. At the same time, they clearly connect thinking with various body parts. These findings seem to contradict the argument that there was a development towards abstract thinking and raise questions for future research.

In “Thinking Beyond the Hebrew Bible: A Response to Christian Frevel” (“Denken über die Hebräische Bibel hinaus: Eine Antwort auf Christian Frevel”) führt Alma Brodersen die Analyse einer möglichen Entwicklung von körperbezogenem zu abstraktem Denken in der Hebräischen Bibel weiter. Die Antwort weitet den Fokus auf antike Texte außerhalb der Hebräischen Bibel, nämlich Texte im Sirachbuch und in den Qumranschriften. Diese Texte werden an das Ende der Entwicklung von körperbezogenem zu abstraktem Denken, die in Frevels Beitrag gezeichnet wird, datiert. Gleichzeitig verbinden diese Texte in auffallender Weise Denken mit Körperteilen. Dieser Befund scheint einer Entwicklung hin zu abstraktem Denken entgegenzustehen und wirft Fragen für weitere Forschung auf.

1 Thinking Beyond the Hebrew Bible

In his paper, Christian Frevel shows a tendency towards a development of thinking in the Hebrew Bible from bodily to abstract thinking. In my response, I will focus on this tendency and look into other ancient Hebrew texts beyond the Hebrew Bible. The two most important examples for ancient Hebrew texts outside the Hebrew Bible are Ben Sira and the Dead Sea Scrolls.¹ Ben Sira can be dated to the 2nd century BCE,² the Dead Sea Scrolls from the 3rd century BCE to the 1st cen-

1 Cf. Clines 1993, 14.

2 Cf. Witte 2012a, 737.

ture CE.³ Both are thus examples of late Hebrew texts dating from around the same time as the 2nd century BCE Book of Daniel⁴ which stood at the end of the tendency shown in Frevel’s paper.

2 Ben Sira

The Book of Ben Sira is not included in the Hebrew Bible, and is found today in some Christian bibles (such as Roman Catholic or Greek Orthodox bibles) but not others (such as Lutheran bibles).⁵ Written in Hebrew and translated into Greek in the 2nd century BCE, the Hebrew text of the book was lost for centuries, and even today the Greek text is the oldest complete extant version. However, in spectacular rediscoveries, Hebrew fragments of about two thirds of Ben Sira have been found near Cairo and near the Dead Sea since the late 19th century CE.⁶ In this response, I will only include texts preserved in Hebrew,⁷ leaving aside comparisons between Hebrew and Greek texts and issues of ancient translations.⁸

As a book concerned with wisdom,⁹ Ben Sira includes many reflections on thinking, and often uses words which according to Frevel’s paper are associated with bodily thinking.

In Ben Sira, לב “heart” is very frequently associated with thinking.¹⁰ Sir 3:29 is a good example: “A wise heart (לב חכם) will understand the proverbs of the wise, and an ear attending to wisdom will rejoice.” Sir 6:37 states about God: “he will make your heart (לב) understanding”. Sir 36:24 speaks of a לב מבין, an “understanding heart” which can detect lies.

ראה “to see” and עין “eye” are also used in connection with thinking, such as in Sir 37:27 “test your life and see (ראה) what is bad for it and do not give it to it” and Sir 42:1 [41:27] “finding favour in the eyes (עין) of every living being”. How-

3 Cf. Lange 2003, 1884.

4 Cf. Witte 2012b, 654.

5 Cf. Marböck 1999, 309–310; Witte 2012a, 726.

6 Cf. Witte 2012a, 732–734, 737.

7 For the Hebrew texts, cf. Rendsburg/Binstein 2013.

8 On such issues cf. Witte 2015.

9 Cf. Witte 2012a, 727.

10 A lemma search on לב in BibleWorks 2017 shows 57 occurrences in the Hebrew Sir. Explicitly and in at least 11 occurrences (Sir 3:29; 6:20, 32, 37; 12:16; 13:26; 16:24; 36:24[19]; 38:26; 50:23, 28), heart is associated with thinking or wisdom. A more detailed study of all occurrences in the preserved Hebrew manuscripts would be desirable: for example, in Sir 50:27 Manuscript B could read לבן “to a son” (thus Beentjes 1997, 90; Rendsburg/Binstein 2013) rather than לבו “from his heart” (thus BibleWorks 2017).

ever, ראה “to see” and עין “eye” are more regularly used for physical seeing (e. g. ראה in Sir 43:11) or God’s watch over humans (e. g. ראה and עין in Sir 15:19).

Hearing (שמע “hear”, און “ear”) what is spoken (אמר “speak”) is more frequently associated with thinking. Sir 4:24 notes: “wisdom is known through speech (אומר) and understanding through the answer of a tongue”; Sir 6:33 states: “if you are willing to listen (שמע), then incline your ear (און), you will be taught”; and Sir 16:24 advises: “Listen (שמע) to me and receive my knowledge, and on my words set the heart (לב)”. And again, a good example is Sir 3:29 which also mentions the heart: “A wise heart (לב חכם) will understand the proverbs of the wise, and an ear (און) attending to wisdom will rejoice.”

השב “think” and מהשבת/מהשבת “thought” are used for thinking without mentioning the body, for example in Sir 51:18 “I resolved (השב) to do good” and Sir 37:16 “the beginning of every work is thought (מהשבת)”. However, they also appear in combination with heart, for example in Sir 12:16: “An enemy hesitates with his lips but with his heart (לב) thinks (השב) deep pits.”

The head (ראש) does not play any role in connection with thinking.¹¹ Overall, in Ben Sira there is a strong connection of thinking and the body, especially heart and ears.

3 The Dead Sea Scrolls

The Dead Sea Scrolls are a vast body of different texts, and in this response I can only give a broad overview based on a study edition of the Dead Sea Scrolls¹² and a dictionary which focuses on non-biblical texts.¹³

In the Dead Sea Scrolls, לב/לבב “heart” frequently designates the centre of human thinking and emotions, it is the seat of wisdom.¹⁴ For example, the 4QSapiential-Hymnic Work A (4Q426) states: “God gave in my heart (לבב) knowledge and intelligence”.¹⁵ 4QSongs of the Sage^b (4Q511) also places knowl-

11 Cf. Dahmen 2016, 580. Thus also Ellis 2013, 17–18, esp. fn. 46 (emphasis in original): “The linkage ‘superior = mind = head’ does not develop in the Hebrew Bible or the Book of Ben Sira because the body part that is held responsible for volition and thought is more likely to be the heart than the head or brain. The *heart* cannot function as the ‘superior’ portion of this naturalizing equation because the heart is located at the center of the body, and thus would signify in a hierarchy based on the binary center/periphery.”

12 García Martínez/Tigheelaar 1997; 1998.

13 Fabry/Dahmen 2011/2013/2016.

14 Cf. Fabry 2013, 470–471.

15 Cf. García Martínez/Tigheelaar 1998, 892.

edge in the heart: “God made the knowledge of intelligence shine in my heart (לבב).”¹⁶

ראה “to see” and עין “eye” can also be used for thinking, optical and cognitive recognition are intertwined.¹⁷ The Damascus Document^a (CD-A) states: “listen (שמע) to me and I shall open your eyes (עין) to see (ראה) and to understand the deeds of God”.¹⁸ As this last example also shows, שמע “hear” is also associated with understanding (just like און “ear”).¹⁹ In Aramaic Dead Sea Scrolls, אמר “speak” can also mean “think”.²⁰

השב “think” and מהשבה “thought” can be used for abstract thinking but can also be combined with לב “heart”,²¹ for example in 4QInstruction^d (4Q418): “refine your heart (לב), and with much intelligence your thoughts (מהשבה)”.²²

As in Ben Sira, the head (ראש) does not play any role in connection with thinking.²³ Overall, in the Dead Sea Scrolls there is a strong connection of thinking and the body, especially heart and eyes.

4 Conclusion

A tendency towards a development from bodily to abstract thinking seems to be contradicted by both Ben Sira and the Dead Sea Scrolls. Thinking is commonly associated with hearts and ears in Ben Sira, and with hearts, ears and eyes in the Dead Sea Scrolls.

However, bodily thinking is only one aspect of the larger development shown in Frevel’s paper. Other aspects would have to be explored as well, for example how נפש “life” is used not for the throat but for a person like a reflexive pronoun both in Ben Sira²⁴ and in the Dead Sea Scrolls.²⁵ Ben Sira could also be explored as an example of a text containing thinking about thinking where wisdom is even personified (for example in Sir 51 – the prime example of Sir 24 is not preserved in Hebrew).

16 Cf. García Martínez/Tigheelaar 1998, 1032.

17 Cf. Tilford 2016, 576–577; Hansberger 2016, 99, 102.

18 Cf. García Martínez/Tigheelaar 1997, 552.

19 Cf. Fabry 2016, 1001–1003; Zanella 2011a, 122–124.

20 Cf. Metzenthin 2011, 224.

21 Cf. Zanella 2011b, 1083–1087, 1090–1092.

22 Cf. García Martínez/Tigheelaar 1998, 866.

23 Cf. Dahmen 2016, 580–586.

24 Cf. e.g. Sir 37:19.

25 Cf. Bonfiglio 2013, 1014–1015.

Nevertheless, at least the connection of thinking and the body is prominent in Ben Sira and the Dead Sea Scrolls. How could this be explained? Do these late Hebrew texts use earlier concepts? Are they exceptions to a general development? Do they relate to different cultures? Could there be a difference between texts in- and outside the later Hebrew Bible? Or do we have to rethink a development in the Hebrew Bible in light of additional sources?

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