

Wisdom of Ben Sirach

Sirach (Wisdom of Ben Sirach/Sirach/ Ecclesiasticus) is the longest wisdom book in the Bible having 51 chapters. The book contains not only short sayings like the Book of Proverbs but also long discussions on wisdom. This is a book modeled on the Book of Proverbs with the difference that Proverbs originated from a compilation of materials by different authors spanning several centuries, and the sayings in the book are not arranged according to any order, whereas Ben Sirach is the work of a single Jewish author of the early 2d century B.C.; he also tried to arrange the sayings thematically.

The book contains moral, cultic, and ethical maxims, folk proverbs, psalms of praise and lament, theological and philosophical reflections, homiletic exhortations, and pointed observations about life and customs of the day.⁷⁸ Unlike most of the biblical books, this book gives the name of its author in chapter 50:27: "Instruction in understanding and knowledge I have written in this book, Jesus son of Eleazar son of Sirach of Jerusalem, whose mind poured forth wisdom." The book is therefore known as the Wisdom of Ben Sirach; in short it is called Sirach.

The book should have been written in Hebrew between 196-175 B.C. Today we have only the Greek translation of the book which was probably done in 132 B.C. In the foreword to the translation of the book, the grandson of the author states that he arrived in Egypt in the 38th year of the reign of King Euergetes, and that he spent many days and sleepless nights of hard work in preparing his Greek translation for publication. The epithet "Euergetes," ('benefactor') was given to only two Lagid kings: Ptolemy III Euergetes I (246-221 B.C.) and Ptolemy VII Physkon Euergetes II (170-164 and 146-117 B.C.). Since the former reigned only 25 years, the latter must be the Euergetes in question. He began his rule in 170 together with his brother Ptolemy VI (181-146), and died fifty-three years later in 117. Calculating from 170, Ptolemy VII's official accession year, the 38th year (when the grandson migrated to Egypt) would be 132 B.C.⁷⁹ The young man who translated the book must have reached in Egypt in 132 B.C. and he must have begun the translation of it without much delay. This also means that Sirach was written after Job and Ecclesiastes and those theologies probably had their influence on the society. Sirach also refers to Simon the High Priest in 51:1-21 (i.e., Simon II, high priest in the period 219-196 B.C.) whom the author might have seen; however, he does not mention about the persecution of Antiochus IV Epiphanes (175-164 B.C.) which means that the book should be written between 196-175 B.C.

The Jews of the first century still considered it as part of the inspired scripture. The rabbis then used to quote from this book. The book was translated into several languages in the first century which shows the respect that the book received from the Jews in Palestine. Jews at Masada had a Hebrew copy of Ben Sirach which was written stichometrically, which was a method reserved for copying only the scriptures.⁸⁰ It was also translated into Greek in the second part of the second century itself; the presence of the book in LXX, the Bible of the Diaspora, shows that Jews considered it as part of sacred writings.

The book won great reverence and publicity in the early church. Early Christians loved to read from this book because it exalted all the general moral principles. The Latin name Ecclesiasticus 'Church Book' should have originated from the popularity of the book among the Christians. By the end of the first century A.D. the Pharisees rejected the book by saying that although it was written in Hebrew it did not exist during time of Ezra. The real reason might be the popularity that the book got among the Christians or the similarity of its teachings to that of the Sadducees. The Church Councils of Hippo (393 A.D) and Carthage (397, 419 A.D.) accepted the book (that was part of LXX) as canonical. The Jews of today do not consider Sirach as inspired. Since the Protestants basically accepted the Jewish scriptures, they do not consider Sirach as canonical.

Sirach was a scribe and therefore he was a man of knowledge. After having read the Law, Prophets, and writings of the fathers with attention, he had written this book with the intention of instructing other people who do not know the Law and Prophets: "Many great teachings have been given to us through the Law and the Prophets and the others that followed them, and for these we should praise Israel for instruction and wisdom. Now, those who read the scriptures must not only themselves understand them, but must also as lovers of learning be able through the spoken and written word to help the outsiders. So my grandfather Jesus, who had devoted himself especially to the reading of the Law and the Prophets and the other books of our ancestors, and had acquired considerable proficiency in them, was himself also led to write something pertaining to instruction and wisdom, so that by becoming familiar also with his book those who love learning might make even greater progress in living according to the law" (Prologue of Sirach). Wisdom writings would be read by all people without any distinction of national or religious boundaries. Accordingly, one could even say that Sirach has employed wisdom tradition as a means to communicate moral and religious message to other nations.

The vision on life of Sirach is elucidated in Sir 39:1-5: "... he who devotes himself to the study Of the law of the Most High Will seek out the wisdom of all the ancients, And will be concerned with prophecies; 2 He will preserve the discourse of notable men And penetrate the subtleties of parables; 3 He will seek out the hidden meanings of proverbs And be at home with the obscurities of parables. 4 He will serve among great men and appear before rulers. He will travel through the lands of foreign nations, For he tests the good and the evil among men. 5 He will set his heart to rise early to seek the Lord Who made him, And will make supplication before the Most High; He will open his mouth in

From the book one can conclude that Sirach was a man of prayer who lived in Jerusalem (cf. 50:27), but made several journeys to distant lands (34:12-13; 8:15-16); on his way he analyzed all his experiences in the light of his wisdom, the Law, and the Prophets. He then wrote all this knowledge for the benefit of other people.

In order to have a clear understanding of the Book of Sirach, it is good to have a little knowledge about the socio-political situation in Jerusalem of the time of Sirach. In 539 B.C. Persians conquered Babylon and liberated the Jewish exiles from there. Palestine was thereafter under the control of the Persians till 332 B.C. In that year, Alexander the Great defeated the Persians and Palestine came under the rule of the Greeks. In 323 when Alexander died, his great kingdom was divided into four and these four kingdoms were given to Alexander's four generals. Now one of the four, Ptolemy, got Egypt in the southern part of Palestine, while Seleucus got Syria in the north of Palestine. Afterwards, these two kingdoms often fought against one another for the control of Palestine. In 301 B.C. Ptolemy I, brought Palestine under his control that then lasted for a hundred years. Ptolemies had followed the policy of the Persians and thus the local populations were given a certain amount of freedom with regard to their internal affairs. Accordingly the high priest of the Jews was not only the spiritual leader but also an imperial princess. He was also entrusted with the duty of collecting taxes for the Egyptians. As the result of this arrangement, the Jews could enjoy some of the privileges granted by the emperor, and attain economic growth by means of trade with the Egyptians. It was thus a peaceful period.

In the war of Panion (Caesarea Philippi) of 199-198 the Syrian King Antiochus III (223-187) defeated the Egyptians then ruled by Ptolemy IV (203-181); subsequently, Palestine was brought under the control of the Syrians. According to Historian Josephus, Jewish leadership of this time helped the Syrians against the Egyptians (Antiquities 12, 3, 3). As a gesture of gratitude, the Syrian emperor granted the necessary wood for the repair of the temple in Jerusalem. He also reduced some other taxes previously charged from the Jews (cf. Sir 50:1-4). Antiochus then declared war against Rome and was subsequently defeated first in the battle of Thermopylae in 192 B.C. and finally in the battle of

Magnesia in 190 B.C.; in order to pay the imposed tribute to Rome, he then tried plunder his own temple of Bel; in this attempt, he was assassinated; his successor Seleucus IV was also killed; then his younger brother Antiochus IV Epiphanes (175-164 B.C.) came to power. It was he who tried his best to bring the Jews under the power of Hellenistic culture. Sirach must have written his book around 180 B.C. before the ascension of Antiochus IV Epiphanes the throne.

Alexander had a great dream of creating a unified world. He wished to have a single world with one unique culture, one language for all, and a society of equals. The yearning behind the military activities of Alexander was this great dream. His generals had personalized this splendid idea and after the death of Alexander they tried to implement this notion in their kingdoms: they taught their language and culture in their kingdoms. Many of the Jews were attracted to this idea. Being a constant traveler, Sirach saw the imminent danger of assimilation. He saw that many Jews were no more attracted by the traditional ideas. His book therefore was a reaction to this attitude of the Jewish society. Even then he did not try to play down the greatness of the Hellenistic culture; rather he tried to exalt the greatness of the Jewish culture above the Hellenistic. He taught the Jews that real wisdom was not in the Greek capital of Athens but in Jerusalem; the books of revelation of the Jews, he said, were much greater than the philosophical works of the Greeks: (24:1-8). Thus, the centre of wisdom according to Sirach is Jerusalem.

The Law, Prophets and Writings in Sirach

One finds the first mention in the Bible of the traditional threefold division of the Holy Scriptures into the Law, Prophets, and writings in the prologue of Sirach. Deviating from the general trend of among the wisdom sages that was prevalent till that time, the Law and Prophets were objects of Sirach's reflections. As evident from the prologue of the book, Sirach tried to interpret the Law, Prophets and writings of the fathers for the Hellenized community. Through this interpretation he communicated his visions and views. For example he interpreted the Deuteronomic Law "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might" (6:5) in the following way linking it with administrators of divine cult: 29 "With all your soul fear the Lord, And revere his priests. 30 With all your might love your Maker, And do not neglect his ministers" (Sir 7:29-30).

Exodus 20:12 teaches one to respect his parents: "Honor your father and your mother, so that your days may be long in the land that the Lord your God is giving you" (cf. also Deut 5:16); the basis for the whole teaching in Sirach chapter 3 is this law: "Listen to me your father, O children; honor their father atone for sins" (Sir 3:1-16).

Love of God, according to Deuteronomy, consists in the obedience to the law of God (Deut 10:12-13; 30:16). The same idea is taught in Sirach: (2:15-16).

Compare also Deut 24:17-22 and Sir 4:8-10.

Sirach either quotes from or points to the books of Pentateuch, Joshua, Samuel, Kings, Chronicles, Nehemiah, and makes allusions to the Prophets Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, Haggai, and Malachi. Sirach 49:10 remembers the 12 minor prophets; 47:6-11 praises David and holds the traditional view that Psalms were written by him, and Sir 47:14-17 holds the tradition that Proverbs were written by Solomon.

Although the Law and the Prophets were the objects of reflections of Sirach, his basic mode of thinking was that of the wisdom sages. Among the wisdom books, Proverbs was the most important one that seems to have influenced Sirach. For example the personified wisdom says the following in Proverbs: "The Lord created me at the beginning of his work, The first of his acts of long ago" (8:22).

Sirach presents the same idea in the following way: "Wisdom was created before all things, And prudent understanding from eternity" (1:4).

According to Proverbs "The fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge; Fools despise wisdom and instruction" (1:7; and 9:10; 31:30). The same teaching is repeatedly given by Sirach. From his wide experience he recognized fear of God as true wisdom. Man can acquire wisdom only if he has fear of God:

"The whole of wisdom is fear of the Lord,
And in all wisdom there is the fulfillment of the law" (19:20).

This notion is visible in the beginning of the book itself: 1 All wisdom is from the Lord, And with him it remains forever. 2 The sand of the sea, the drops of rain, And the days of eternity - Who can count them?" (1:1-2); "To fear the Lord is the root of wisdom, And her branches are long life" (1:18).

He calls fear of God as the beginning of wisdom (1:14), as the fullness of wisdom (1:16), as the crown of wisdom (1:18), and as the root of wisdom (1:20):

1 2 To fear the Lord is the beginning of wisdom; She is created with the faithful in the womb.

1 3 She made among men an eternal foundation, And among their descendants she will be trusted" (1:12-13).

Only after this basic teaching, that Sirach unfolds his treasure of knowledge before the readers. Man is inefficient to attain wisdom without the help of God, because wisdom is a gift of God. God gives this gift to those who love him (1:10) and those who obey his commandments. So Sirach has the following to say:

"If you desire wisdom, keep the commandments, And the Lord will lavish her upon you" (1:26).

2 7 "Those who survive her will recognize That nothing is better than the fear of the Lord,
And nothing sweeter than to heed The commandments of the Lord" (23:27).

Similarly, like the hymns of praise (psalms), there are several hymns of praise in Sirach. See for example the following hymns: (Sir 42:15-43:33) (Sir 50:22-24). (See also 1:1-10; 18:1-7; 39:12-35; 42:15-43:33; 51:1-12).

Since the thought of the sages surpass religious, cultural, and national boundaries, and the experience of humankind are always the same everywhere, Sirach tried to personalize not only the wisdom of his ancestors but also the wisdom that he acquired from other nations and peoples as he travelled abroad; he tried to give this wisdom to his Jewish readers. Scholars today think that Sirach had taken several ideas from the Greek culture. They also think that the Egyptian Instructions of Duauf (cf. ANET, 432-434) gives basis for Sir 38:24- 39:11.

Although Sirach was very open to all cultures and religions, he did not hold a syncretistic notion of things. All faiths meant not the same for him. His mind was open but remained very faithful to the faith of his ancestors and respected it. By taking elements from other religions, he thought, one would enrich his own religion and culture. Notably, many Jews at the time of Sirach were attracted to Greek culture and were ready to forsake the traditions of their fathers. Sirach told them that Jerusalem was the real centre of wisdom (23:3-8). He saw the Jews as the most esteemed people on earth (24:12) and Jerusalem as the holy city of the only God (24:11).

There were two basic things that persuaded Sirach to exalt Jerusalem: 1) the great impression that the Greek culture and philosophy had created on the Jews and 2) the persecution that the righteous Jews had been suffering from the authorities under foreign rule. These things began to discourage

many to hold on to the Jewish way of life. Sirach declared to them that if anyone wants to acquire real wisdom, instead of clinging to the Greek philosophy, he has to obey the law of God (15:1) and be ready to withstand trials against his faith (2:1-10; 4:17-19). If one is ready to cling to his God even amidst his sufferings, God will protect him (2:10-11). One has to strive continuously to acquire wisdom:

"My child, from your youth choose discipline,
And when you have gray hair you will still find wisdom"
(6:18; cf. also 14:20-27).

If one does so, wisdom would embrace him like a mother and like a new bride (15:2). Although wisdom guides people to glory (4:11-16), unfortunately, she is unattainable for many (6:22). One can acquire wisdom only having fear of God and by obeying his commandments; he should also keep himself away from sins: "If they go astray she will forsake them, And hand them over to their ruin" (4:19). As a result fools and sinners will not succeed in attaining wisdom: "7. The foolish will not obtain her, And sinners will not see her. 8 She is far from arrogance, And liars will never think of her" (15:7-8).

Retribution

Sirach basically admits the main teaching of Proverbs, i.e., retribution. For example, note the following verses: (9:11-12).

"He makes room for every act of mercy; everyone receives in accordance with one's deeds" (16:14). "Afterward he will rise up and repay them, and he will bring their recompense on their heads" (17:23) and (27:26-27).

The book concludes with a command to do good works that God rewards you in time: "Do your work in good time, And in his own time God will give you your reward" (51:30). The recognition of this principle however is not exclusive or exaggerated. Together with Job and Ecclesiastes Sirach advises to accept the God-given life as it is and to enjoy the happiness given by the creator.

Like Job, Sirach thought that certain experiences were beyond human understanding: (2:1-5).

"One's enemies are friendly when one prospers, But in adversity even one's friend disappears" (12:9).

Sirach might be thinking of the friends of Job when he speaks this verse. One should also know that if he wants to be wise he should pass through the experiences of Job: (4:11-18).

According to Qoheleth, human life is a gift of God and man can unhesitatingly enjoy the life given to him. The same idea is found in the following words of Sirach: (14:14-16).

When Job and Ecclesiastes asked people to accept the given life as it is, this was the consequence of the thinking that God was transcendent and that he stood above human comprehension. The same notion would be shared by Sirach: (16:21).

On the one hand Sirach believed that God was just and he would reward each one according to his works; on the other hand, like Job he taught that the reasons for all human sufferings were not comprehensible for man. One may become successful in life even without being righteous; one may suffer evil even if he is righteous. When all these concepts were brought together to a mature level

Sirach seems to have come to the following conclusion: "26 For it is easy for the Lord on the day of death To reward individuals according to their conduct.2 7 An hour's misery makes one forget past delights, And at the close of one's life one's deeds are revealed" (11:26-27).

Life After Death

Even at the time of Sirach Jews did not begin to believe in Life after death. Sirach thought that after death man would go to the residence of darkness, the underworld: (17:27-28) and (30:1-4).

Sirach also wishes that the righteous judges of Israel live through their children: "May their bones send forth new life from where they lie, And may the names of those who have been honored Live again in their children" (46:12).

Sirach and Monotheism

The sages were seeking the creator-God. This search led them to the notion of one creator of the whole world; if there is only one creator for the whole universe there is only one God. This idea subsequently led them to monotheism. The same God has created, sees, and preserves the whole universe; he lives forever: (36:1-5).

The true God is eternal (42:21); he created everything through his word (39:18-21; 42:15); he also knows everything that happens in the universe (39:19-20; 42:18-20). The divinely established order in the universe bears testimony to the know-ledge and the glory of this God (43:1-33). God has created all things in the world, and he has marvelously put together all events that happen there (16:26-30). Man can only wonder by looking at this great work: "How desirable are all his works, And how sparkling they are to see" (42:22).

Sirach is a Pointer to the New Testament Theology

Notably the first biblical author who calls God his father is Sirach. Considering God as the father of an normal individual in fact agrees with the basic vision of the Sirach. The sage is looking for the personal God who intervenes in the personal life of the individual. He is not looking for his national God. (23, 1-6)

IO Lord, Father and Master of my life,
do not abandon me to their designs,
and do not let me fall among them!....."

The sage being a seeker of God who intervenes in the personal life of the individual, and not the God of the Law and the Prophets, slowly comes to the recognition of God as his father. This is the point where Sirach comes very close to the New Testament. One of the important teachings of the New Testament is that God is the father and that believers are the children of God in Jesus Christ (cf. Mt 5:43-48; 6:9-13). Even two centuries before the birth of Jesus, Sirach is thinking arrives at this theological level. This theological excellence and the magnitude of exhortations in all possible areas of human life made the book renowned among the Jews of the second century B.C. and was translated into different languages.

The Psalms envision God as the Father of the anointed king, and the Book of Deuteronomy and the Prophets envision God as the Father of the community of Israel: Psalm 2, 7 (see also 2 Sam 7, 14)

I will tell of the decree of the Lord:

He said to me, "You are my son; today I have begotten you.