

Sirach 1:1 - 4:10

As well as such inspiring passages as Chapter 24 (a hymn to Wisdom), Chapter 34:14-20 (on divine providence), Chapter 39:12-35 (in praise of the Creator), and the concluding hymn (51:13-30), we can find many gems of wisdom from Ben Sira, a remarkable teacher whose career in Jerusalem spanned the final decades of the third century BC and continued into the early years of the second century.

There are times (but very few) where Christians reading this text can imagine Jesus saying: 'It was said to you of old, but I say'. One obvious example is Chapter 12:1-7, where the author assumes that God hates sinners, and encourages his students to do the same. He speaks quite beautifully about forgiveness, but it does not extend to one's enemies. He displays a special antipathy to the Samaritans. He encourages a caring attitude to those in need, but his attitude to women witnesses to the prevailing assumption of his day that they are inferior to men.

Yeshua, son of Eleazar, and grandson of Sira (henceforth 'Ben Sira'), was a Jewish teacher, living and working in Jerusalem (see Sirach 50:27). He studied the Torah, the Prophets and the other Writings that were the sacred heritage of his people, and he spent his life communicating the fruits of his study to his Jewish students. At a time when Greek culture (Hellenism) was influencing the whole region, including Judea, he wanted his students to appreciate the wisdom of their own traditions. In his teaching he drew on these traditions, especially on the wisdom contained in the Book of Proverbs, and applied it to the changed circumstances of the late third and early second centuries BC.

His book pre-dates the period of Antiochus Epiphanes IV (175-164) and the Maccabean revolt

Judea was controlled from Egypt in 3rd century BC
and from Syria in the 2nd century



Ben Sira grew up in the last decades of the third century BC, when Judea was still controlled from Egypt. Many Jews were impressed by the Greek understanding of what it means to be human, and by Greek ideas about how to live so as to experience a fulfilled life and contribute to the building of a better world. Ben Sira was not blind to the merits of the dominant culture. However, he was convinced that true wisdom (that is to say, insight into the art of living) was found in Jerusalem, not in Egypt or Athens. He remained faithful to the conviction that his people were specially chosen by God, the Lord of creation and history, who had revealed to them the way of true wisdom. Ben Sira knew Simeon II (high priest from 219 to 196), and gives him high praise in his book (see Sirach 50:1-21). He was determined to ensure that the young men were well schooled in their traditions, and so able to choose wisely against the pressures of Hellenism when it went against their ancient customs.

There are two key limitations that Ben Sira inherited from the tradition.

1. He assumed that physical death was the end of life, the end of communion with God. Twenty or so years after he published his work the people of Judea suffered intense persecution from Antiochus IV. It was this persecution that gave birth to the insight that divine justice requires that there be more to human life than what we experience this side of the grave. Communion with God must exist beyond death. Not all embraced this idea, but at least the idea had struck root. It did not occur to Ben Sira.

2. Ben Sira, along with all the writers of the Older Testament, never questions the assumption that whatever happens is willed by God. If it is a pleasant happening, God is rewarding a person for his goodness. If it is an unpleasant experience God is punishing him (correcting him) for his sin.

There are two other areas where Ben Sira's thought falls short of the kind of Wisdom we have learned to expect thanks to Jesus.

1. He speaks of the importance of forgiveness (see 28:2-7) but he does not extend this forgiveness to one's enemies, and he remains locked in the prejudices of his contemporaries, especially in relation to the Samaritans (see 50:26).

2. He assumes that males are superior. There are no women mentioned in his long list the illustrious ancestors of his people (chapters 44-49), and his teaching on marriage is only from the male perspective. The fact that he is teaching young males may go part of the way to explain this, but some of his remarks in regard to women are stunningly biased (see, for example, 25:19).

The Assembly of Rabbis at Jamnia (Javneh) towards the end of the first century AD judged that, though it was composed in Hebrew it was not sufficiently ancient to be included in the Canon. However, the Greek translation made by Ben Sira's grandson in Egypt some time after 117BC is included in the Greek Bible and so was inherited by Christian Jews. In fact Sirach was so popular among the Christians that it was given the Latin title 'Ecclesiasticus' (the Book of the Church).

The only second century book that found its way into the canon was the Book of Daniel, and that seems to be because it does contain some ancient material, and because of its prophetic style.

Foreword composed by Ben Sira's grandson

Many great teachings have been given to us through the Law and the Prophets and the other writings that followed them, and for these we should praise Israel for teaching and wisdom.

The author of the Foreword is writing for Jews in the Hellenized cities of Egypt. However impressed they might be with Greek wisdom, he wants them to know that they have a wisdom superior to the Greeks, a **teaching** (Greek: παιδεία) and a **wisdom** (Greek: σοφία) of which they can be proud. 'Teaching' (Hebrew: מוֹסֵר) refers to the handing on of tradition from one generation to the next, in the home, in the synagogue and in the classroom. 'Wisdom' (Hebrew: חֵכְמָה) covers all areas of know-how (skill). It applies especially to skill in the art of living a good life, in relation to one's neighbour, one's world, and one's God. The author of the Foreword wants his contemporaries to know the rich understanding of life that is offered in the Jewish Scriptures, and the value of the Torah, to anyone who chooses to live as a faithful Jew.

Foreword, verses 2-4

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 those who do not have them. So my grandfather Jesus, who had devoted himself for a long time to the study of the Law and the Prophets, and the other writings of our ancestors, and had acquired considerable proficiency in them, was himself led to write something pertaining to instruction and wisdom. This he did so that by becoming familiar also with his book those who love learning might make even greater progress in living according to the Law.

Sirach 1:1-10 see Proverbs 8:22-31

All wisdom is from YHWH, and with him it remains forever.

The sand of the sea, the drops of rain, the days of eternity –
who can count them?

Heaven's height, earth's breadth, the depth of the abyss –
who can work them out?

Wisdom was created before all other things,
and prudent understanding from eternity.

The root of wisdom – to whom has it been revealed?

Her subtleties—who knows them?

There is but One, wise, and greatly to be feared,
seated upon his throne – the Lord.

He it is who fashioned her; he gazes upon her and knows her measure;

he has poured her out upon all he has made,
upon every living thing, according to his bounty;
he has lavished her upon those who love him.

After the Introduction (verses 1-10), Ben Sira sings of wisdom in a poem of 22 lines, divided into two equal parts (verses 11-21 and 22-30). The 22 lines represent the 22 letters in the Hebrew alphabet. It is a way of stating the all-encompassing nature of wisdom.

The key theme is 'fear of YHWH' = being faithful to the covenant

Sirach 1:25

Among wisdom's treasures are wise sayings

'wise saying' (παράβολή ; Hebrew māshāl, מִשָּׁל). It is the title given to the Book of 'Proverbs'. The word covers a wide range of genres. Essentially it is a saying that involves the use of metaphor or simile. It says one thing, inviting the reader to apply the truth to other situations

Sirach 2:1-5

My son, when you come to serve the Lord,
prepare yourself for testing.

Be sincere of heart and steadfast,
and do not be impetuous in time of calamity.

Cling to him and do not forsake him,
so that your future will be prosperous.

Accept whatever befalls you,
and in times of humiliation be patient.

For gold is tested in the fire,
and those God favours, in the crucible of humiliation.

If we sin, suffering is seen as punishment. If we are faithful, suffering is seen as a test. When affliction comes upon us we must remain 'steadfast', 'accepting' and 'patient'. Above all we must keep our heart directed to God. We must 'cling to him and not forsake him'.

Sirach 2:6-9

Trust in him, and he will help you;

make your ways straight, and hope in him.

You who fear the Lord, wait for his mercy (ἐλεος);

do not stray, or you will fall.

You who fear the Lord, trust in him, and your reward will not be lost.

You who fear the Lord, hope for good things, for lasting joy and mercy.

The Greek word ἐλεος translates a number of Hebrew words. One is תָּנַן to show favour. When used of God it refers to the many particular ways in which God graces his people, or an individual. Another is the root רַחַם, from which is derived the noun רַחֲמִים which speaks of God's tender compassion, and is related to the word for womb [רֶחֶם]. Another is חֶסֶד, which speaks of God's fidelity to the covenant he has made with his people. These are qualities attributed to God in the creedal formula that recurs throughout the Bible.

Sirach 2:10-11

Consider the generations of old and understand:

has anyone trusted in the Lord and been disappointed?

Has anyone persevered in the fear of the Lord and been forsaken?

Has anyone called upon him and been rebuffed?

For the Lord is compassionate [οἰκτίρων] and merciful;

he forgives sins and saves in time of distress.

οἰκτίρων the only time Ben Sira uses the word

The Psalmist pleads with YHWH to remove (נִשְׁׁרָף) the sphere of guilt from the sinner (Psalm 32:5). YHWH is also asked to ‘look away from’ the sin (Psalm 51:11); to ‘cover over’ (כִּסָּה) the sin (Psalm 32:1); to rub it out (מָחָה; Psalm 109:14); to wash it away (כִּבַּס; Psalm 51:4,9); to purge it away (טָהַר; Psalm 51:7); to atone for it (כִּפֶּה; Psalm 79:9); to not remember it (זָכַר; Psalm 25:7).

Sirach 2:12-18

Woe to fearful hearts and slack hands,
to the sinner who walks a double path! {Judaism & Hellenism!}

Woe to the fainthearted who have no trust! They will have no shelter.

Woe to you who have lost hope!

What will you do when YHWH's reckoning comes?

Those who fear YHWH do not disobey his words;
those who love him keep his ways.

Those who fear YHWH seek to please him,
those who love him are filled with his law.

Those who fear YHWH prepare their hearts.

They who fear YHWH and bow themselves down in his presence.

Let us fall into the hands of YHWH, but not into the hands of humans;
for equal to his majesty is his mercy, and equal to his NAME are his works.

The Merciful One

Sirach 3:1-16 is about honouring one's parents

Sirach 3:17-20

My son, carry out your tasks with gentleness;
then you will be loved more than one who gives gifts.
The more you humble yourself the greater you are,
and you will find favour in the sight of the Lord.
Many are the lofty and the noble, but he reveals his plan to the humble.
For great is the might of the Lord; but by the humble he is glorified.

Matthew 11:25-29

Jesus said, "I thank you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, because you have hidden these things from the wise and the intelligent and have revealed them to infants ... Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me; for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls.

Sirach 3:21-24

Do not seek what is too sublime for you,
do not investigate what is beyond your power.
Attend to what has been committed to you,
for what is hidden is not your concern.
Do not meddle in matters that are beyond you,
for more than you can understand has been shown you.
For long is the list of human speculations – evil and misleading fancies!

Ben Sira is warning his students against the ‘misleading speculations’ of the Greeks, and the attraction of the knowledge of which they boast. For him, true wisdom, ‘more than you can understand’ has been revealed by God, and nowhere more fully than in the Torah. They should humble themselves before God, ‘attend to what has been committed to them’ in God’s revelation, and humbly obey God’s will. That is the path of true wisdom.

Sirach 3:26

Those whose hearts are hardened will be burdened by troubles

Sirach 3:29-31

A wise heart appreciates proverbs,
to the attentive ear wisdom is a delight.

As water extinguishes a blazing fire,
so almsgiving atones for sin.

The kindness you have done will cross your path as you journey;
when you fall you will find support.

Sirach 4:1-6

My son, do not mock the life of the poor,
or keep needy eyes waiting.

Do not grieve the hungry, or ignore the downtrodden.

Do not add to the troubles of the oppressed,
or delay giving to the needy.

Do not reject a suppliant in distress,
or turn your face away from the poor.

Do not avert your eye from the needy,
and give no one reason to curse you;

for if in bitterness of soul he should curse you,
his Creator will hear his prayer.

Sirach 4:7-10

Endear yourself to the congregation [συναγωγή];
bow your head low to the leaders.[later, the Sanhedrin]
Give a hearing to the poor, and return their greeting gently.
Rescue those suffering injustice from their oppressors;
and do not be hesitant in giving a verdict.
Be a father to orphans, and be like a husband to their mother;
you will then be like a son of the Most High,
and he will love you more than does your mother.