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978-0-521-09775-8 - Ecclesiasticus or the Wisdom of Jesus, Son of Sirach

John G. Snaith

Excerpt

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ECCLESIASTICUS

OR

THE WISDOM OF JESUS SON OF SIRACH

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HOW THE BOOK WAS WRITTEN

Ecclesiasticus was originally written in Hebrew about 190 B.C. by Jesus ben ('son of') Sirach, an experienced Jewish teacher who lived in Palestine, probably in Jerusalem. The book seems to be a collection of his teaching material, and became so popular that his grandson, on emigrating to Egypt about 132 B.C., translated it into Greek for the benefit of Jews who could not read Hebrew, even adding a preface (pp. 5–6) to explain the reasons for his translation. This Greek translation together with the translator's preface was accepted by the early Christian church as part of the Bible under its Greek title 'The Wisdom of Ben Sirach', and forms the text for the N.E.B. translation. 'Sirach' is the Greek form of the original Hebrew name 'Sira' used in this commentary. The title Ecclesiasticus appeared first in the Latin translations and was given to the book possibly either because of its frequent use in the Christian church or because of its superficial similarity to Ecclesiastes. Although, as described below, Hebrew texts have been discovered for many chapters, reflecting an earlier stage of development than the Greek, the Greek continued to be used by the Christian church. This is partly because the Hebrew text is incomplete, partly because the early popularity of the book led to many different, unreliable changes in the text and partly because the Greek text had become traditional. So popular

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was the book that later copyists added more verses to emphasize certain religious precepts, verses which often appear in the footnotes of the N.E.B. The Hebrew was never accorded scriptural authority by the Jews and, although it was popular reading matter, the rabbis frequently warned against giving the book too great importance or authority.

THE DISCOVERY OF HEBREW FRAGMENTS

In 1896 the store-room (*genizah*) of an ancient synagogue in Cairo was excavated, and four manuscripts of a Hebrew text of Ben Sira's work were discovered, covering most of 3: 6 - 16: 26, 30: 11 - 38: 27 and 39: 15 - 51: 30, together with small parts of other chapters. More fragments of the Genizah text were published in 1930 and in 1957-9, some found by relatives among the papers of a famous Hebrew scholar after his death in New York. Several small fragments of scrolls from Qumran near the Dead Sea (discovered soon after 1948) have been identified as parts of the 'Wisdom of Jesus Son of Sirach' or 'Ben Sira', and in 1964 a scroll containing 39: 27 - 43: 30 was discovered in the excavations at Masada. Different manuscripts of the Hebrew, Greek and Syriac texts vary considerably, and the textual study of this book is probably harder and more complicated than that of anything in the Old Testament. The Qumran and Masada manuscripts of the Hebrew probably date from the first century A.D. and, although the Genizah manuscripts are copies from probably the eleventh or twelfth century and show signs of careless copying, comparison with the earlier texts and with the Greek and Syriac suggest that the Genizah texts basically reflect a stage of development prior to the Greek translation. Some scholars would therefore prefer to use the Hebrew as the basis for translation rather than the Greek.

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WHAT THE BOOK IS ABOUT

The life-time scrap-book of a lecturer or teacher always contains a variety of material – so too this book. Like Proverbs it contains many sayings handed down in poetic form through the centuries on all kinds of secular subjects: family life, relations with friends, treatment of old people, discipline of children, borrowing and lending money, mourning for the dead, business partnerships, behaviour of guests and hosts at banquets, the value of medicine and doctors, the evils of gossip, etc. Sayings on particular subjects are grouped together more than in Proverbs. Like Proverbs, Ecclesiasticus shows many points of contact with the international proverbial literature of the Ancient Near East, particularly with Egyptian books like the *Instruction of Ani* and the *Instruction of Amen-em-opet* (both probably dating from between the tenth and sixth centuries B.C.), and the passage contrasting manual workers and learned scholars in 38: 24 – 39: 11 seems to have been based on a satirical passage in the Egyptian *Maxims of Duauf* popular from the thirteenth century onwards. Such works were probably used in Egypt for training civil servants and administrative officials, and Ben Sira's stress on foreign travel, first-hand experience and behaviour in positions of responsibility in society suggests that the education he tried to provide was of a similar kind. The occasional interruption of series of proverbs with hymns or doctrinal passages (like ch. 24) recalls the Egyptian rather than the Hebrew style of proverbial book, and it is in these passages that the author's own attitude to life and theology appears most prominently.

The teaching of the hymns and doctrinal poems is unmistakably Jewish, and prepares the way for much later rabbinic (and Christian) doctrine. The poem on God's ordering of creation in 33: 7–15 offers an explanation of the existence of good and evil in the world side by side. The passage on pursuit of wisdom in 4: 11–19 encourages man with almost evangelical fervour to persevere in seeking wisdom until he receives the

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sudden joy of possession and enlightenment. In 16: 24–17: 24 a description of God's control of the world, with tremendous emphasis on his all-seeing providence, is followed by a passionate appeal for repentance in 17: 25–32. In ch. 24, with its personification of wisdom as a semi-divine female figure reminiscent of Prov. 8, wisdom's home on earth is in Jerusalem and the temple, and the self-consciousness of the Jews as God's chosen people breaks through the internationalism; in 24: 23 wisdom is further identified with the 'covenant-book of God Most High, the law which Moses enacted', encouraging the reader to view the law as the revealed will of God as did the later Pharisees. Ben Sirā's Jewish consciousness is shown most of all in his recital of the history of the Jews through the Old Testament period in chs. 44–50, which are full of phrases echoing biblical narratives, and in particular his description of the return of Elijah (48: 10) shows anticipation of later rabbinic teaching. Even the secular portions of the book frequently mention 'the fear of the Lord', particularly at the end of sections; in chs. 1 and 2 Ben Sirā describes this phrase as denoting a warm personal relationship of trust towards God which underlies all his advice and teaching on doctrinal and secular matters alike.

This mixture of social advice and Jewish doctrinal exposition explains the later popularity of the book, and seems to represent a certain stage in the development of rabbinic Judaism. The sayings of Ben Sirā often sound like the sayings handed down in *Pirqe Aboth* ('The Sayings of the Fathers', abbreviated *Aboth* in this commentary), the earliest tractate (division) of the *Mishnah*, the oral Jewish law, considered by the Pharisees to be as authoritative as the written law (the first five books of the Old Testament from Genesis to Deuteronomy, often called the Pentateuch). The *Mishnah*, collected from originally oral sources and written up by the middle of the second century A.D., formed the basis for later Judaism. The *Mishnah* has been translated into English by H. Danby (*The Mishnah* (O.U.P., 1933)), and all references to the *Mishnah* in this

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commentary refer to this volume. One verse is identical in *Ecclus.* 7: 17 and *Aboth* 4: 4. *Aboth* 1: 2 reads: 'By three things the world is sustained: by the Law, by the (Temple-) Service, and by deeds of loving-kindness' – a saying which superficially seems to sum up certain aspects of Ben Sira's own work, although *Ecclesiasticus* is much richer in its material than this statement would imply. Later Jewish teaching collected in the Babylonian Talmud (an expansion of the earlier Mishnah completed by the middle of the sixth century A.D. but reflecting several centuries' development) often shows strong similarities with Ben Sira's thought. Thus Ben Sira's wide-embracing work, written about 190 B.C., illustrates the development of main-stream Judaism at a time when the composition of the books of the Old Testament had just about ceased and most surviving Jewish literature is either highly sectarian (like the scrolls from the religious community that lived at Qumran) or concentrated on particular aspects of belief (like the apocalyptic works dealing with the future). But, whereas in many respects he seems progressive (as in the section on medicine and doctors in 38: 1–15), in other respects he clings to the past (as in his refusal to believe in life after death). The work provides an admirable link between the Old Testament and the later Judaism appearing in the New Testament.

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Preface

THE AUTHOR'S GRANDSON EXPLAINS HIS
TRANSLATION

A LEGACY of great value has come to us through the Law, the prophets, and the writers who followed in their steps, and for this Israel's traditions of discipline and

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wisdom deserve recognition. It is the duty of those who study the scriptures not only to become expert themselves, but also to use their scholarship for the benefit of the outside world through both the spoken and the written word. So my grandfather Jesus, who had applied himself industriously to the study of the law, the prophets, and the other writings of our ancestors, and had gained a considerable proficiency in them, was moved to compile a book of his own on the themes of discipline and wisdom, so that, with this further help, scholars might make greater progress in their studies by living as the law directs.

You are asked then to read with sympathetic attention, and make allowances if, in spite of all the devoted work I have put into the translation, some of the expressions appear inadequate. For it is impossible for a translator to find precise equivalents for the original Hebrew in another language. Not only with this book, but with the law, the prophets, and the rest of the writings, it makes no small difference to read them in the original.

When I came to Egypt and settled there in the thirty-eighth year of^a the reign of King Euergetes, I found great scope for education; and I thought it very necessary to spend some energy and labour on the translation of this book. Ever since then I have been applying my skill night and day to complete it, and to publish it for the use of those who have made their home in a foreign land, and wish to become scholars by training themselves to live according to the law.

[a] Or there at the age of thirty-eight in...

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* Just as the preface of a modern book often explains the author's purpose in writing, so this preface explains why this translator translated into Greek the Hebrew book of his grandfather, Jesus ben Sirā.

The translator says he emigrated from Palestine to Egypt in the thirty-eighth year (probably 132 B.C.) of the reign of King Euergetes (Ptolemy VII Euergetes Physcon, whose dates are usually given as 145–117 B.C. but who had been joint king since 170 B.C.). In Egypt he joined a considerable Egyptian–Jewish population. Early in the sixth century Jeremiah and other refugees had fled to Egypt for asylum from Babylonian invaders; in the fifth century there had been a contingent of Jewish soldiers and their families near Aswan at Elephantiné, guarding the southern border of Egypt; when the high priest Onias was exiled from Jerusalem in 162 B.C., he built a replica of the Jerusalem temple at Leontopolis in the north-eastern part of the Nile delta. Indeed, the Ptolemies, the descendants of one of Alexander the Great's Greek generals and the rulers of Egypt from 323 to 30 B.C., depended on Jewish military help to maintain their authority over the native Egyptian population, and encouraged Jewish immigration to this end. Many Greek papyri fill in day-to-day details of the life of Jews in most parts of Egypt who had taken over Greek ways of life and become hellenized. According to the Jewish Alexandrian writer Philo there were nearly a million Jews living in Egypt in his time (the first century A.D.).

Many Jews, living in a Greek environment in Egypt, forgot both colloquial and religious Hebrew, and were in danger of not *living as the Jewish law* directed. Already in the third century B.C. translation of the Old Testament into Greek was started with a rendering of the Pentateuch, commonly called the Septuagint. Ben Sirā's grandson was fired by missionary enthusiasm to bring to Greek-speaking Jewry the riches of Palestinian Jewish learning and piety, which he found represented in his grandfather's book. Otherwise, he felt, *Israel's traditions of discipline and wisdom* would not gain the *recognition*

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they deserved. It was not enough for Hebrew-speaking rabbis and scribes *to become expert themselves*, but they should also *use their scholarship for the benefit of Jews who had made their home in a foreign land*, the Jews of the Dispersion. This translation stands in a succession of similarly 'evangelistic' Jewish works in the Graeco-Roman world together with the Wisdom of Solomon. The Roman Jewish historian Josephus wrote his long book *Antiquities* to show that the Jews had as distinguished a history and ancestry as had the Greeks, and he also tried to defend Judaism against criticism and attack in his *Contra Apionem* ('Against Apion', a particularly fierce critic of the Jews). Similarly Philo wrote many philosophical works presenting Jewish belief in Greek philosophical terms.

Translation from one language to another poses problems at any level and at any time. Here the translator shows in his preface that, because of the difficulties of translation, the Greek is necessarily inferior to *the original Hebrew*. It is impossible for us to assess the accuracy of the Greek translation in view of the problems of the Hebrew manuscripts previously discussed, but the preface shows how responsibly the translator approached his task.

When this book was published in its Greek form, the Jewish *scriptures* had already fallen into three divisions. Two were complete: *the law*, containing the first five books from Genesis to Deuteronomy, and *the prophets*, both the former prophets, containing Joshua, Judges and the books of Samuel and Kings, and the latter prophets, containing Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel and the twelve minor prophets (as indicated in 49: 10). The contents of *the writings* were not yet completely defined; the Psalms, Job, Proverbs and possibly the books of Chronicles, Ezra and Nehemiah were probably regarded as scripture, but some books, for example, Ecclesiastes and Esther, remained of doubtful status until the end of the first century A.D. *

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ECCLUS. I: 1-10

The ways of wisdom

WISDOM AS GOD'S CREATION

ALL WISDOM IS from the Lord; 1
 Wisdom is with him for ever.
 Who can count the sand of the sea, 2
 the drops of rain, or the days of unending time?
 Who can measure the height of the sky, 3
 the breadth of the earth, or the depth of the abyss^a?
 Wisdom was first of all created things; 4
 intelligent purpose has been there from the beginning.^b
 Who has laid bare the root of wisdom? 6
 Who has understood her subtlety?^c
 One alone is wise, the Lord most terrible, 8
 seated upon his throne.
 It is he who created her, surveyed and measured her, 9
 and infused her into all his works.
 To all mankind he has given her in some measure, 10
 but in plenty to those who love him.

* This belief in the divine origin of wisdom is found in the Old Testament proverbial literature, notably in Prov. 8: 22-4; wisdom does not represent the accumulated knowledge of man's experience in the world but was created by God even before the world, and is therefore peculiarly his own. Everything in the world is governed by the 'intelligent purpose' (verse 4) which is God's wisdom. This doctrine,

[a] *Some witnesses add* or wisdom. [b] *Some witnesses add* (5) The fountain of wisdom is God's word on high, and her ways are the eternal commandments. [c] *Some witnesses add* (7) Who has discovered all that wisdom knows, or understood her wealth of experience?

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ECCLUS. I: 11–20

The ways of wisdom

basic to the book, is later developed by the identification of wisdom with the Jewish law.

2–3. God's majesty is stressed, as in some other Hebrew poems (Job 38–41; Isa. 40: 12–14), by rhetorical questions which, unanswerable by man, are intended to humble him and make him aware of God's greatness. The second question reflects the ancient view of the world as flat, of subterranean waters and of *the sky* as of limited extent. The parts of divine wisdom which are beyond man's understanding are called its 'subtlety' (verse 6), and form the 'root' and most important part of it.

5–7. Verses 5 and 7 (printed in the footnotes) are found only in some manuscripts. Verse 5 was probably added as a note to refer readers to the later identification of wisdom with the law, and verse 7 presents an alternative version of verse 6.

8–10. *One alone is wise*: Jewish monotheism became more dogmatic as the Jewish faith competed with the many different religions and philosophies of the Graeco-Roman world. Any rational principle observable in creation was created by, and subject to, the one transcendent God. But, whereas the one creator sustains the life of *all mankind*, he is especially generous to those who love him, i.e. the Jews, the people through whom he chose to reveal his law and wisdom. This doctrine of the special love of God for the Jews, sometimes called his 'election love', appears from time to time in Ecclesiasticus side by side with proverbial lore common to many nations.

The statement that *the Lord is most terrible* leads on to a description of the reverence for God that men must have if they are to receive wisdom. *

THE FEAR OF GOD AS THE WAY TO WISDOM

- 11 The fear of the Lord brings honour and pride,
cheerfulness and a garland of joy.
- 12 The fear of the Lord gladdens the heart;