

THE RELIGIOUS IDEAS AND THEOLOGY OF BEN SIRAH

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\* ABBREVIATIONS \*

I.J.A. - - - The International Journal of Apocrypha

J.B.L. - - - Journal of Biblical Literature

O.T. - - - Old Testament

ENCYCL. BIBL. - - Encyclopoedia Biblica

J.E. - - - - Jewish Encyclopaedia

J.Q.R. - - - Jewish Quarterly Review

\* INTRODUCTION \*

The scope of this paper as described in the title necessarily excludes the lengthy discussion of the date, life and purpose of the author, but inasmuch as a general idea of the time and purpose of the work is essential to the study of the religious contents of the book called "Ecclesiasticus", a cursory study of the date and purpose of the work is here given.

The Date.

There are two clues in the book itself that would indicate the date. Firstly, in the prologue<sup>L</sup> and secondly in Chap. I.1 the name Simon the son of Onias the high priest furnishes the terminus a quo of the book.

The problem of the approximate date then resolves itself into determining the date of Euergetes the king and the identification of Simon the son of Onias. There were two Ptolemys who bore the surname Euergetes<sup>2</sup>. Since one reigned but twenty-five years and the prologue mentions the thirty-eighth year of Euergetes the reference could be only to the second Euergetes whose full name was Plotemaeus VII Physcon Euergetes II, and whose reign is reckoned from the year 170 B.C.E.<sup>3</sup> The thirty eighth year to which the grandson of Ben Sirah refers would be 132 B.C.E. This would make the date of Ben Sirah about the year 190 B.C.E.

There were five high priests who bore the name of Simon the son of Onias, two of whom Simon I (B.C.E. 300-290) and Simon II (B.C.E. 219-199) could possibly have been the object of Sirah's panegyric.<sup>4</sup> The latter is best known in history and is the one whom the Pirke Aboth (1.2) designates as the Smead suggests that the reason for this appellation being that Simon II was the

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1. "having come into Egypt in the Eighth and thirtieth year Euergetes the King"

2. Schurer: "Geschichte des Jüdischen Volkes in Zeitalter Jesu Christi-2nd version Vol III p. 26)

3. Cheyne, - Job and Solomon p. 180.

4. Smead - Weisheit des Jesus Sirah p. XVII. note 2)

last Zadok to observe the law. Because of Ben Sirah's insistence upon law and his reverence for the upholders of the law, and since Simon II is by far the most renowned of the Simons, Ben Sirah unquestionably refers to Simon II. The death of Simon II is said to be 199 B.C.E. (Cheyne - Job and Solomon p. 180). The passage in Chapter 50 seems to have been written after the death of Simon II for it states "It is Simon the son of Onias the great priest who in his life prepared the house and in his days strengthened the Temple (I.1) seeming referring to the life work of Simon the II. The reference then being that the date of 190 B.C.E. deduced from the reference to Energetes is borne out by examination of the second reference. The view that Ben Sirah lived and wrote somewhere between 200-170 B.C.E. held by most scholars.<sup>1</sup> The Energetes referred to could not have been Ptolemy Energetes II for M. Hart suggests that no sane Jew would have come to Egypt during his reign because of the known hostility to the Jew of this ruler.<sup>2</sup> Scholars however are not inclined to accept this date.

#### The Purpose and Character of the Book.

The grandson of Ben Sirah in the prologue of the book states definitely the purpose and scope of the book:

"My grandfather Jesus, having much given himself to the study of the law and the prophets, and the other books of our fathers, and having gained great familiarity therein, was drawn on also himself to write something pertaining to instruction and wisdom in order that those who love learning and are addicted to these things, might make progress much more by living according to the law."<sup>3</sup>

The task of Ben Sirah, if we are to believe his grandson, was ~~xx~~ clear. It was that of education. Mr. G. Margoliouth<sup>4</sup> states that "it seems to be clear

1. M.J. Hart (Ecclesiasticus pp. 249 quoted by Oesterly) champions a much earlier date. 310, B.C.E

2. *ibid* p. 249

3. Prologue to Ecclesiasticus

4. 1. J.A. p. 12 (quoted by Oesterly)

that Ben Sirah was in the latter part of his life, the head and probably founder and sole teacher of an academy for the moral instruction of the youth of Jerusalem. The fact is implied in 11:23 when the author says "draw near unto me ye unlearned and lodge in the house of instruction." The Hebrew text found at Cairo makes this point clearer still for it has "and lodge in My house of instruction". But even apart from the more pointed Hebrew phrase the invitation "Draw near to me" of the first line is "sufficient to show that Ben Sirah himself was the teacher to whom the youths of Jerusalem were asked to come for instruction." The suggestion of Margoliouth seems plausible. Ben Sirah was a teacher. In addition he was a scribe. Many are the passages that emulate the scribes and the priests, but in XXXVIII, 24 - XXXIX, 3 the references seem to refer directly to himself. In the former "leisure increaseth wisdom to the scribe" and the latter "He will seek out the hidden meaning of the proverbs, and be conversant in the dark sayings of the parables" furthermore in the prologue the description of Ben Sirah as given by his grandson is typical of that of the scribe. It may be safely stated that Ben Sirah was scribe and teacher.

There is some indication in the text that Ben Sirah's interest was not in the common youth of Jerusalem, but rather in a specific group, i.e., those studying to become scribes. In XXXIX-2-12 after explaining in the previous chapter the desirability or undesirability of the various occupations he approaches the profession of the scribe. Being a scribe and imbued with his profession, he gives unstinted praise to those who work in the name of the Lord. He paints the reward of the scribe in vivid colors:

"Many shall commend his understanding

And his name shall live from generation to generation."

"Nations shall declare his wisdom  
And the congregation shall tell out his praise.

If he continue, he shall leave a greater name than a thousand;

And if he die, he addeth thereto.

(XXXIX 9-11)

And as if he were exalting the scribes in order to inspire the students in their work, he continues:

Yet more will I utter, which I have thought upon;

And I am filled as the moon at the full.

Hearken unto me, ye holy children,

And bud forth as a rose growing by a brook of water:

(XXXIX -12-13)

Ben Sirah appeals to his holy children. The appellation "holy" takes on great significance if we assume the children before him were those who intended to engage in scribal duties. His hope that they, as a result of his glorious picture of the scribe, will become inspired and "bud forth as a rose" becomes clear.

In XLII 2-14, there are definite instructions to the scribe.

Of these things be not ashamed,

And accept no man's person to sin thereby;

Of the law of the Most High, and his covenant;

And of Judgment to do justice to the ungodly;

Of reckoning with a partner and with travelers, etc.

(XLII -1-3)

Charles<sup>1</sup> states that the injunction is obviously addressed to the scribes

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1. Charles: Apocrypha and Pseudépigrapha p. 469.



who are responsible for the administration of the law and justice. What is more likely is that Ben Sirah again addresses himself to his holy children that mean to practice the work of the scribes. He gives them here the ethics of the profession. It is not likely that Ben Sirah would address his fellow scribes by the appellation "My Children", as he does in XLI, 14 at the beginning of the section on "shame" and things to be "ashamed of." It is quite true that the terms "my son" and "my children" are terms used in wisdom literature in a general sense, yet the reference here seems to be definite. At least the conjecture may safely be hazarded that Ben Sirah was a teacher of either the children of scribes or else that ~~he~~ those that meant to undertake the works of scribes. The book of Ecclesiasticus may well be an elaboration of his text book.

Oesterly (Cambridge Bible XXIV) suggests: "his work has the 'primary object of setting in clear light the superior excellence of Judaism over Hellenism. In a sense, therefore, Ecclesiasticus may be regarded as an apologetic work inasmuch as its aim is at combatting the rising influence of Greek thought and culture among the Jews." Such a conclusion seems to be wholly unwarranted by the text. In fact, there are very few intimations of Hellenism or Greek influence in Ben Sirah. The idea of wisdom as emanating from God (I<sup>9</sup>) and the idea of identifying wisdom with the Shechinah (XXIV<sup>1-12</sup>). Here wisdom is represented as accompanying God during creation, the description of wisdom being almost a perfect picture of the Shechinah. The fact that wisdom is represented as coming forth from the mouth of the Most High akin perhaps to the conception of the Logos <sup>1</sup> may be Greek influences, yet these are the rare exceptions. Cheyne<sup>2</sup> finds no Greek influence other than the attitude toward medical science.<sup>3</sup>

1. It is interesting to note that the passage XXIV, 1-12 is probably based upon proverbs VIII, 22; and in the proverbs we do not find the above ideas, with the exception of wisdom as the companion of God in creation expressed.

2. Cheyne - Job and Solomon, p. 190.

3. XXXVIII, 1. Honor a physician according to thy need of him with the honor due unto him. Compare with:

אֲדַבֵּר לְפָנָיו וְיִשְׁמַע לְקוֹלִי

(IV.14 יוֹשִׁיעַ)

and 2 Chr. XVI, 12 (Cited by Cheyne)

9. and Ben Sirah's taste for the Greek style of banquet.<sup>1</sup> But other than these he states: "By Greek philosophy Sirah, as far, as we can see, was wholly uninfluenced"<sup>2</sup>

If, as we infer, that the Wisdom of Ben Sirah was merely ~~the~~<sup>an</sup> enlarged moral and religious hand book, one would not expect to find definite theological or philosophical conceptions. Quite so in our case. As Dr. Battenweiser points out with regard to the Hebrew phrases of Ben Sirah, "Which abound in phrases and sentences taken piecemeal from other writers and strung together."<sup>3</sup> So we may say with regard to the thought. For the most part Ben Sirah elaborates on the proverbs. In fact one writer suggests that his originality is in the fact that the work is an evolution of the essay out of the proverb.<sup>4</sup> Many aphorisms are taken bodily from the proverbs and psalms. In the variations at times there seems to be some originality as indicated by Cheyne in Job and Solomon page 184.

a. Better a man that tills for himself

Than he that glorifies himself and has no bread.  
(Proverbs XII, 9.)

b. Better he that labours and abounds in all things

Than he that glorifies himself and hath no bread.

(Sir. X 27 )

More often though the cleverness is not so apparent. In the main the aphorisms of Ben Sirah are quotations or elaborations from quotations. As the grandson of Ben Sirah states in the Prologue, Ben Sirah had faithfully studied the law and the Prophets. His work was to draw proverbs and aphorisms from the sources. As a consequence we find no definite or original points of view as a rule. We also discover many contradictions in ideas but these may be traced to the schools and tendencies found in Jewish literature itself, for instance in XVII, 17 and XXIV, 12, God is nationalistic but in XVIII, 13, the mercy of

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1. XXXII, 3-5

2. Ibid p. 190 (Cheyne)

3. Battenweiser: "Are there any Maccabean Psalms," J.B.L. 1917 p. 225.

4. Moulton, I, J.A. page 14.

God is upon all flesh and there we find a universalistic conception. This theme will be amply illustrated in the main theme of the paper. What the writer wishes to point out here is that we need expect in the study of Ben Sirah no original or startling theological or religious notions. The wisdom of Ben Sirah is really a Jewish guide to life. The author has saturated himself with Jewish literature and with the view of instruction, he has correlated the ideas, he has gleaned, into a compendium of proverbs. There are religious ideas and theological conceptions present. These we mean to examine, But we shall discover that in the main the ideas and conceptions are those of the Old Testament.

## CHAPTER I

## GOD'S RELATION TO MAN

## GOD CONCEPTION

The first perplexing problem of Ben Sirah's God conception to be examined is that of God's corporeality or spirituality. It is difficult indeed to determine whether God was spirit or matter, corporeal or incorporeal. The anthropomorphic passages are many:

XLV, 5: "He made him to hear his voice,  
And led him into the thick darkness,  
And gave him commandments face to face."

XVII, 3: "And made them according to his own image"

More numerous are the passages speaking of the feelings of God.

XLV, 19: "The Lord saw it, and it displeased him;  
And in the wrath of his anger (i.e. Congregation of Korach)  
They were destroyed."

XII, 6. "For the Most High also hateth sinners,  
And will repay vengeance to the ungodly."  
(See also XV, 13 - XXVII, 24)

XVI, 18-19 "Behold, the heaven and the heaven of heavens,  
The deep, and the earth, shall be moved, when he shall  
visit..  
The mountains and the foundations of the earth together  
Are shaken with trembling when he looketh upon  
them.

It will be noticed readily that these anthropomorphic passages practically all of them can be traced to the Old Testament. All except the last refer directly to Biblical incidents and while the language is not copied laboriously, the conception of God is quite the same as is found in the Old Testament. In the last reference God looks "upon the earth". This is probably a figure of speech. Yet despite these unquestionable anthropomorphisms we find indication of a tendency against these embodiments of God.

XVII, 13. "Their eyes saw the majesty of his glory;  
And their ear heard the glory of his voice

XLIII, 31. "Who hath seen him that may declare him?

The former verse refers to the account in Ex. XIX. 16-20 while in Exodus were brought forth "out of the camp to meet God" (Ex. XIX. 17). In Ben Sirah the people saw merely the majesty of his glory and their ear heard the glory of his voice. They neither saw God nor his glory nor did they hear his voice. The latter verse is a definite protest against the idea that any man has ever seen God.

We find then two contrary conceptions of God. These are representative of the two tendencies in the old testament, i.e., the materialization and spiritualization of God. Ben Sirah seems to believe that God is spirit and yet he quotes from the Old Testament unconcernedly of God's wrath and his love, of Moses seeing God face to face and of making man <sup>in</sup> the image of God. We might argue that since the grosser anthropomorphism such as the "might of God" or the "outstretched" arm of God are <sup>not</sup> to be found in Ben Sirah and since these references find abundant usage in the Old Testament, it is quite evident that Ben Sirah avoided them. Also the fact that in XLIII, 31, Ben Sirah expresses his antipathy to the materialization of God and he seemingly consciously avoids anthropomorphisms in XVII. 13. These facts would indicate that the personal view of Ben Sirah was against the materialization of God and that for him God was spirit.

Ben Sirah is exalted and sublimated by the very idea of God. Man may exalt God to the extent of human capacity, may put forth all his strength, and yet fall short in his attempt to utter adequately the greatness of God. (43, 38) In a passage that abounds with the idea and language of the psalm Ben Sirah gloriously expresses his implicit faith in God.

XXXIV, 15-17:

"Blessed is the soul of him that feareth the Lord:

To whom doth he give heed? And who is his stay?

The eyes of the Lord are upon them that love him

A mighty protection and strong stay.

A cover from the hot blast, and a dover from the noonday,

A guard from stumbling and a succour from falling

He raiseth up the soul, and enlighteneth the eyes:

He giveth healing, life, and blessing. "

Such devotion could exist only if God were to him the absolute power beyond and above the earthly <sup>the</sup> creator and <sup>the</sup> judge.

Ample evidence <sup>of God as Creator</sup> is found in our book. In Chapter XLII-15, XLIII-33.

Ben Sirah utters a hymn of glory to God for his creative activity, for his power in nature.

The sun when he appeareth, bringing tidings as he goeth forth,

Is a marvellous instrument, the work of the Most High:

(XLIII, 2)

By his counsel he hath stilled the deep,

And planted islands therein.

(XLIII, 23)

And by his word all things consist.

(XLIII, 26)

Then the Creator of all things gave me a commandment;

And he that createth me made my tabernacle to rest -

(XXIV, 8)

For the Lord made all things;

And to the godly gave he wisdom.

(XLIII, 33)

All the works of the Lord are exceeding good,

And every command shall be accomplished in his season.

(XXXIX, 16)

He himself made man from the beginning

(XV, 14)

Not only is God creator, but he is omnipotent, the most High.

For first she was disobedient in the law of the Most High.

(XXIII, 23)

All these things are the book of the covenant of the Most High God,

(XXIV, 23)

Bestow thy treasure according to the commandments of the Most High;

(XXIX, 11)

And thus look upon all the works of the Most High;

(XXXIII, 15)

He is the Mighty One (XLVI, 5) declaring the things that are past and the things that shall be (XLII, 19)

All things are in the hands of God.

(VI, 14)

Ben Sirah stresses God's omniscience.

For Great is the wisdom of the Lord,

He is mighty in power, and beholdeth all things;

(XV, 18)

'He searcheth out the deep, and the heart,  
 And he hath understanding of their cunning devices:  
 For the Most High knoweth all knowledge,  
 And he looketh into the signs of the world  
 (XLII, 18,19)

The mighty works of his wisdom he hath ordered,  
 Who is from everlasting to everlasting:  
 Nothing hath been added unto them, nor diminished  
 from them;  
 (XLII, 21)

He beholdeth from everlasting to everlasting;  
 And there is nothing wonderful before him.  
 (XXXIX, 20)

Omnipotent, omniscient and Creator, God is also one and eternal. One  
 he is from everlasting to everlasting. (XLII, 21)

There is no God but only Thou, O Lord.  
 (XXXVI, 5)

Man's days in comparison with God are "as a drop of water from the sea  
 and as a grain of sand" (XVIII, 9)

Ben Sirah sums up his attitude toward his God by exclaiming

'We may say many things, yet shall we not attain;  
 And the sum of our words is, He is all.'  
 (XLIII, 27)

This passage has been taken by some to be an unbiblical conception of God--  
 perhaps a pantheistic idea. Cheyne<sup>1</sup> points out that this verse has been misap-  
 prehended. He quotes Bereshith Rabba chap. 68: "Why is the Holy One called  
 Makkom (place)? Because he is the place of the world. His            is not his place.

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1. Cheyne - Job & Solomon p. 188



Cheyne continues and states: "This is all Sirah means" The context also clearly indicates the meaning that God is to be discovered in all his works. For Ben Sirah God then is not only a transcendent far removed God, high above man, but God is also interested in the personal administration of this world. God was not separated from the world of man, quite the contrary, "In his hand is the authority of the earth" (X, 4). He overthrows rulers and destroys nations. (X, 14). In XXXIII,<sup>12</sup>~~24~~ God takes an active part in world administration:

'Some of them he blessed and exalted,

And some of them he hallowed and brought nigh to  
Himself:

Some of them he cursed and brought low,

And overthrew them from their place.

As the clay of the potter in his hand,

All his ways are according to his good pleasure;

So men are in the hand of him that made them,

To render unto them according to his judgment.

(XXXIII, 12)

In the hand of the Lord is the prosperity of a man;

And upon the person of the scribe shall he lay his  
honour.

(X, 5)

God dwells on earth. Jerusalem is designated as the place of his rest. (XXXVI, 13). He also dwells in the sanctuary for it was there that wisdom ministered before him. (XXIV, 10). God is a power in the actual life of man; he heareth pray and the "prayer of humble pierceth the clouds (XXXV:14). And "will listen to the prayer of him that is wrought (XXXV.17).

To Ben Sirah then God was afar off and yet he was near to mankind, omniscient and all powerful. He deigns to listen to the pleas of man. Furthermore he is long-suffering and poureth out mercy (XVIII, 11) His mercy is over all flesh. (XVIII, 13)<sup>1</sup>. And yet Ben Sirah is not positive in his teaching

1. See Introduction concerning universality of God.

concerning the doctrine of the mercy and long suffering of God, for He is also  
a God of Vengeance-

'And the Lord will not be slack, neither will he be  
Longsuffering toward them,  
Till he have crushed the loins of the unmerciful;  
And he shall repay vengeance to the heathen;  
Till he have taken away the multitude of the haughty,  
And broken in pieces the sceptres of the unrighteous;  
Till he have rendered to every man according to their devices.

.....'

(XXXV, 18 ff)

And then the following verses are extremely irritating in the light of  
the above:

Till he have judged the cause of his people;

And he shall make them to rejoice in his mercy.

Mercy is seasonable in the time of his afflicting them,

As clouds of rain in the time of drought.

(XXXV, 19-20)

These passages can be traced directly to conceptions in the Old Testament (Compare Deut. XXVIII, 11: Prov. XXIV, 12: Isaiah XXV, 9: - quoted by Oesterly). Ben Sirah was not interested in presenting an original God conception. The irritating inconsistency in XXXV, 18 and XXXV, 20 may well be explained by the thesis submitted in the introduction<sup>1</sup>. All ideas concerning God that Ben Sirah gleans from the Old Testament are included in his aphorisms.

Much more of Ben Sirah's God idea will be reflected in the treatment of kindred problems under this chapter. Suffice it here to say that the God of Ben Sirah is the God of the Old Testament. Inconsistent at times, yet suggesting the salient features of the Jewish God conception, i.e., Unity, Omnipotence, omniscience, God of Justice and God of Mercy.

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1. See page 9

## WISDOM AND MAN.

In God's relation to man wisdom which is given a divine origin (I.9) and is even akin to the Shechinah (XXIV, 1-12) plays an important part. Wisdom is given a divine origin and religious basis. Before the world was created, wisdom existed (I.4). Wisdom is a definite creation of God for the Lord sitting upon his throne:

He created her,  
And saw her; and numbered her,  
And poured her out upon all his works.  
(I.9)

Wisdom to Ben Sirah was of an extremely practical nature. It was a treasure but one that was not to be stored up rather as Ben Sirah succinctly and pithily states

Better is a man that hideth his folly  
Than a man that hideth his wisdom.  
(XX, 31).

Wisdom was not only the peculiar possession of a certain class. In case of a poor man it is the greatest pride and consolation.

The wisdom of the poor man shall lift up his head,  
And make him to sit in the midst of great men.  
(XI, 1)

the Jewish  
Here is reflected aristocracy of intellect. The possessor of wisdom is equal to the princes. What a glorious comfort to the heart of the poor. While physical power and wealth may be <sup>denied him</sup> ~~desired here~~ and there exists yet a greater blessing, a more precious possession, that of wisdom, the holding of which places the poor man in the <sup>seat</sup> ~~select~~ of princes. Wisdom was a princely possession and the possession thereof was not easy.

Bring thy feet into her fetters,  
And thy neck into her chain.  
Put thy shoulder under her and bear her,  
And be not grieved with her bonds.  
(VI, 24-25)

Since Wisdom is so difficult of attainment, leisure ones are fortunate for they have a greater opportunity of becoming wise. And

He that hath little business shall become wise.

How shall he become wise that holdeth the plough,

That glorifieth in the shaft of the goad,

And driveth oxen, and is occupied in their labours,

And whose discourse is of the stock of bulls?

(XXXVIII, 24-5)

Business and trade are handicaps to wisdom. (Compare with Rabbinic conception Oesterly, quoting Pirke Aboth

II, 2<sup>1</sup> states: "Ra. Gamaliel said 'Excellent is the study of the Torah with worldly business for the practice of them both puts iniquity out of remembrance and Torah without work must fail at length'".) Wisdom is not the peculiar possession of any class, the poor, the leisure class, the judge, the ruler, the king must be wise for the masses look to these for advice and as the ruler, so is the people. (X, 2-4).

Although Ben Sirah states that wisdom is possible of attainment through work and self-denial yet he expects but few to attain it.

For wisdom is according to her name; and she is not

manifest unto many.

(VI, 22)

The fortunate possessors and searchers shall

'eat of her fruits right soon' VI, 19.

'How exceeding harsh is she to the unlearned'

(VI, 20)

In much the same way as the author of proverbs, Ben Sirah personifies Wisdom. Wisdom represents itself as accompanying God in works of Creation, (XXIV, 5) and also invites companionship.

Come unto me, ye that are desirous of me,

And be ye filled with my produce.

For my memorial is sweeter than honey,

And mine inheritance than the honeycomb. (XXIV, 19-20)

1. Oesterly - Cambridge Bible.

Ben Sirah not only personifies wisdom but appears to identify it with the law. In Chap. ~~XXIX~~<sup>27</sup>, 23 is described the wanderings of Wisdom. She appeared amongst the various nations but God said: "Let thy dwelling place be in Jacob" Wisdom then tells of her glory and beauty.

And my branches are branches of glory and grace

As the vine I put forth grace;

And my flowers are the fruit of glory and riches. (16.17)

But the most important reference in this passage is found in verse 23

And all these things are the book of the covenant of the Most High God."

Here ~~it~~ is clearly seen the identification of law with wisdom. In 7 identification is also noticed.

'If thou desire wisdom keep the commandments

And the Lord shall give her thee freely,

For the fear of the Lord is wisdom and instruction.

After describing the glory of wisdom and stating all the accruing benefits Ben Sirah adds XV, I

He that feareth the Lord will do this;

And he that hath possession of the Law shall obtain  
her.

Here, fear of the Lord, the law and wisdom are placed in intimate relation. Other references identifying wisdom with fear of God or with righteousness.

The fear of the Lord is frequently correlated with wisdom, being named as the "crown of Wisdom" (I,16), the "fulness of wisdom" (I,20), the "root of wisdom" (I,21), and there also

To fear the Lord is the beginning of wisdom;

And it was created together with the faithful in the womb.

21 Wisdom is more than mere knowledge. "The knowledge of wickedness is not wisdom" (XIX, 22).

All wisdom is the fear of the Lord;

And in all wisdom is the doing of the law. (XIX, 20)

Wisdom is good if it is in harmony with the law; if knowledge leads to wickedness it is an abomination, in fact one of small understanding that fears God is considered better than a man of prudence that violates the law (XIX, 2). The idea that only good knowledge is wisdom seems to be greatly stressed by Ben Sirah, for wisdom will forsake the man that goes astray (IV, 8) and only those that fear God may obtain Wisdom. Sinners and liars are denied wisdom (XV, 17). Such is the conception of the author of Ecclesiasticus with regard to wisdom. There seems to be a tendency to identify law, wisdom and righteousness. Whatever logic led the author to his identification, we find that for the most part wisdom means in reality knowledge. His arbitrary identification seems to be a secondary thought for the concept of wisdom employed is usually the current idea and conception of wisdom.. When Ben Sirah states that he that is hasty in reposing confidence is unwise (XIX, IV) he has no idea of law, or righteousness, he recognizes the wise to be sagacious and shrewd. The reason for Ben Sirah's identification of law, righteousness and wisdom is difficult. Perhaps the saying "The law of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom". Of the Old Testament Proverbs I, 7 and Ps. CXI, 10 is the basis and <sup>then</sup> because of Ben Sirah's insistence upon law and his sublimation of wisdom, the ideas ~~where~~ <sup>combined</sup> ~~conveyed~~ and an identification resulted. The matter though is highly conjectural.

#### REWARD AND PUNISHMENT.

The problem of reward and punishment in Ben Sirah as well as in other Jewish literature is a most pertinent one. There seems to be evidence that the doctrine of divine reward and punishment was questioned by some. The query of "Why do the righteous suffer?" <sup>met by</sup> ~~was not with~~ Ben Sirah. He ~~was~~ was not a poet

nor yet possessed of the glorious spiritual capacity of a Job, consequently his  
~~7~~ to the problem are tradition<sup>al</sup> and conventional. He discusses  
 the objections to the formal doctrine of reward and punishment. One need not  
 be downcast because the righteous are poor for God may suddenly make the rich  
 poor and the poor rich.

Marvel not at the works of a sinner;  
 But trust the Lord, and abide in thy labour;  
 For it is an easy thing in the sight of the Lord swiftly  
 on a sudden to make a poor man rich.  
 The blessing of the Lord is in the reward of the godly;  
 And in an hour that cometh swiftly he maketh his  
 blessing to flourish.

(XI, 21-22)

Thus one may not judge by the status quo. Tomorrow the sinner may become  
 stripped of all his wealth and become poor. There is no doubt but that the  
 blessing of the Lord is on the reward of the godly.

Against those who maintained that their sufficiency of worldly goods protect-  
 ed them against the justice of God, against those that said "I have sufficient,  
 what harm shall happen to me" Ben Sirah suggests that the good things in their  
 life can in no wise make up for the evil that will follow. Their pain will  
 blot out their pleasure. It is true that one forgets evil things in moments of  
 pleasures but the reverse is quite as true. In the day of their visitation  
 their pleasure shall be nought and their sorrow shall be great -

In the day of good things there is a forgetfulness of  
 evil things;

And in the day of evil things a man will not remember  
 things that are good.

For it is an easy thing in the sight of the Lord  
 To reward a man in the day of death according to  
 his ways.

The affliction of an hour causeth forgetfulness of  
 delight. (XI, 24-27)

Ben Sirah warns against superficial judgments.. One cannot easily determine the justice of God's reward or punishment. An evil man may seem to prosper but wait until his end. His latter days are a revelation of his deeds. Again one may seem to prosper but the real indication of his worth will be found in his children. Children are either a blessing or a curse and one may have a pleasant life, riches and health, but his children will constitute the reward or blessing for his acts.


And in the last end of a man is the revelation of his deeds.

Call no man blessed before his death;

And a man shall be known in his children. (XI, 27b - 29)

He also states in a moment when he discusses and recounts the deeds of righteousness of men "With their seed shall remain continually a good inheritance" (XLIV, 11) Perhaps this idea is akin to the later formulation of *מזל נאמן*.

The above verses indicate that the problem troubled Ben Sirah. He searches scripture for an answer. The above conceptions are all of the Old Testament. He believes firmly in individual retributive justice. "Do no evil so shall no evil overtake thee. Depart from wrong and it shall turn aside from thee" (VII,2) Here is no prophetic idea of following the moral <sup>consciousness</sup> ~~conviction~~, the incentive for doing good is not the love of God, punishment is sure for evil--reward is certain for goodness. <sup>If</sup> By perchance the wicked seem to prosper it is possibly because God is long-suffering. "Say not I sinned and what happened unto me for the Lord is long suffering" (VI,4)

R. G. Moulton says: He has reached the very brink of the Rubicon of doubt which nevertheless he has firmly resolved not to cross.<sup>1</sup> Such an inference may well be made.  his attempt to escape doubt Ben Sirah is most emphatic in the

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1. I.J.A. Jan. 1907 p. 14).



in the statement of his belief. Transgressors will be punished XL, 12, all bribery and injustice shall be blotted out, the goods of the unjust shall be dried up like a river, Calamaties are created for the wicked (XL, 16). From history and experience is garnered the fact that punishment is for the wicked and that the wicked both among nations and individuals are requited (XVI, 6-11). At one place Ben Sirah suggests that travail and suffering are due to man's original nature. "It is thus with all flesh from man to beast and upon sevenfold more." (XL, 8). Ben Sirah may have had his doubts but if so he was tried and found wanting. To another was left the task of searching this problem. To Job doubts were not to be covered by tradition and aphorisms. Doubts were the precious stimulants of his soul. The result is expected. The book of Job, original, poetic, great. Ecclesiasticus, a book of collected aphorisms!

#### Conception of Death and After Life.

Charles points out that in the second century C.E. Sheol becomes an intermediate place of moral retribution.<sup>1</sup> Such a conception is found in Daniel XII, 13, and the book of Enoch, and in Apocalypse in Isaiah LXVI. In the book of Ben Sirah, as we shall presently see, we find practically no trace of Sheol as a place of habitation for the soul, in fact Ben Sirah is almost positive in his statements that Sheol is a place of negation--where all that resembles life is forgotten. The reason for the attitude of Ben Sirah concerning death is difficult to determine. A possible reason might be seen in the fact that the author was a strict traditionalist. In all his writings we find no evidence of an unorthodox or untraditional idea. He was steeped in the law and the prophets. To him they were absolute authority. It is quite possible then that even tho the idea of future life had become known in his day he would have given it little credence. If there had been a conflict between the ideas

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1. Charles: Religious Development between the Old and the New Testament p. 53

of his day and tradition, there can be no doubt in the mind of the student of Ben Sirah that his would have been the traditional view. This suggestion is perhaps the most plausible.

At times Ben Sirah seems to be arguing with quite some vigor directly against the view that Sheol was an intermediary place of punishment. In a discussion of death he cries out to his readers:

Fear not the sentence of death;

Remember them that have been before thee, and that  
cometh after;

This is the sentence from the Lord over all flesh.

And why dost thou refuse, when it is the good  
pleasure of the Most High,

Whether it be ten, or a hundred, or a thousand years, *(Most High  
Levi)*

There is no inquisition of life in the grave

(XLI, 3-5)<sup>1</sup>

The latter part of verse four seems to sum up precisely that view that Charles claims was prevalent in the second century. As the verse indicates, Ben Sirah was quite well acquainted with the current idea and rejects it. It is quite possible that the idea was at that time germinating, or better, it had as yet not become a recognized doctrine. The people who had become fearful of the possibility of purgatory. Comforting them, Ben Sirah states that one must not fear death for it is divine will and is the way of all flesh. The ~~horror~~ inquisition in Sheol is unjustified, for there is no ~~lawful~~ inquiry in the grave. This life and the acts and deeds of this life alone are important. Reward and punishment are both obtained on this earth.

The picture painted in XIV 15-18 seems to regard death as the end of life.

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1. Peters Translation brings out even more clearly the meaning. 41<sup>4b</sup> Es gibt keine Tage über des Leben in der Unterwelt. (Peters Jesus Sirah in loco)

There is no pleasure in Sheol. It is the covenant from the beginning. The 1 cycle is easy to understand. One dies and another is born. As the leaf of the tree rotteth away so the human after death need fear or hope for future life.

Shalt thou not leave thy labours unto another?

And thy toils to be divided by lot?

Give, and take, and beguile thy soul;

For there is no seeking of luxury in the grave. *Sheol*

All flesh waxeth old as a garment;

For the covenant from the beginning, is, Thou shalt die the death.

As of the leaves flourishing on a thick tree,

Some it sheddeth, and some it maketh to grow;

So also of the generations of flesh and blood,

One cometh to an end, and another is born.

Every work rotteth and falleth away,

And the worker thereof shall depart with it.

(XIV, 15-19)

Cynicism and pessimism that seems to manifest itself here is not at all in accord with the general tone of Ben Sirah. He is anything but a cynic. Rather let us believe that in his zeal to emphasize the finitude of human life, in his desire to emphasize this life and this life alone he was drawn into an observation <sup>which</sup> ~~that~~ lends a tone of cynicism, that originally was never meant to be such. There can be no mistake about Ben Sirah's attitude toward death. He states in X, 11,

For when a man is dead,

He shall inherit creeping things, and beasts, and worms

All things that are of the earth turn to the earth again:  
And all things that are of the waters return into the  
sea.

Ben Sirah advises the mourner not to put his heart into sorrow and  
Forget it not, for there is no returning again:  
Him thou shalt not profit, and thou wilt hurt thyself.  
(XXXVII, 21).

In Sheol there is no presence of God. And in XLI, 11 the punishment of the sin-  
ners wicked is that his name shall be blotted out. Such is the meaning of the  
verse XLI, 9. If ye die a curse shall be your portion. The only sense in which a  
man may live after death is thru wisdom.

Many shall commend his understanding;  
And so long as the world endureth, it shall not be  
blotted out:  
His memorial shall not depart,  
And his name shall live from generation to generation.

(XXXIX, 9)

Oesterly<sup>1</sup> seems to think that there is evidence that "one may legitimately  
discern the adumbration at any rate of something more than mere existence beyond  
the grave, and therefore the rudiments of a belief in future life."

The assumption is based upon passages such as the following:

Weep more sweetly for the dead, because he hath  
found rest; (XXII, 11

When the dead is at rest, let his remembrance rest;  
(XXXVIII, 23. )

Oesterly cites XXIX, 17 as a verse speaking of "Eternal Rest" The ref-  
erence is probably a misprint as there is no mention of "eternal rest" in the verse  
cited. There are other verses that speak of eternal rest.

XXX.17 speaks of eternal rest. But as Oesterly points out (in loco) the oldest manuscripts omit "and eternalk rest."

In XLVI, 19 there is mentioned "his long sleep". The Greek reads, "his age long sleep". The Hebrew reads "And at the time when he rested upon his bed". (cited by Oesterly in Loco). These same words occur in XL 5c.

The above passages seem to be the only references that could possibly lead to the suggestion that in Ben Sirah is found the beginnings of the doctrine of a future life. The evidence is meager indeed. In each verse where the phrase "Eternal Rest" is found there arises doubt as to the authenticity of the phrase. There remains but the frequent use of the phrase "rest." One must admit that even the meaning of the term "rest" in the above passages is vague. To find rest is probably a poetic phrase meaning death. One may be sure that in no case is the assumption of Oesterly warranted. The evidence is not clear and is meager. The deduction seems to be a bias.

The doctrine of ressurrection is altogether absent in Ben Sirah. Several verses seem to indicate a reference to the doctrine but the indication is misunderstood. There is a passage which is rendered by the English, "May their memorial be blessed. May their bones flourish again out of their place. And may the name of them that have been honoured be renewed upon their children." (XLVI, 12). From the context it is evident that a ressurection is not meant. The text is speaking of the righteous and those who turned not away from the Lord; their memory should be blessed and that their memory be renewed upon their children. "May their bones flourish again" is merely a metaphorical expression of the same thought. The phrase "bones flourish" is rendered by Smend<sup>1</sup> as "May their bones send out shoots" and the idea is probably akin to that in Ezekiel XXXIII. Most authorities seem to agree that this verse cannot be a reference to ressurection.

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1. Das Buch Jesus Sirah, in loca.

29. Again in XLVIII, 5 there seems to be an idea of resurrection. The

text reads:

How wast thou glorified, O Elijah, in thy wondrous deeds!

And who shal glory like unto thee?

Who did raise up a dead man from death,

And from the place of the dead, by the word of the

Most High:

Little need be said in explanation of these verses. They are a direct reference to the story of Elijah in I Kings, XVII, 17. Ben Sirah would view the incident as an individual miracle, in fact he refers to the act as a wonderful deed. There is no evidence that Ben Sirah believed in resurrection as a doctrine. One may safely say and with the authority of most scholars, that there is no evidence whatever in Ben Sirah of the doctrine of resurrection.

The reason for the omission is almost impossible of determination. We do know that the doctrine was prevalent at the time of Ben Sirah why he avoids it must be highly conjectural for every argument is based upon an argument ex

The kindred idea of the resurrection, the concept of the Messiah is also found wanting in Ben Sirah. Some writers have attempted to read into several passages the idea but there can be no doubt that this is merely an attempt to establish an apriori idea. There is found a hope indeed for a temporal restoration.

O Lord, have mercy upon the people that is called by  
thy name,

And upon Israel, whom thou didst liken unto a first-  
born.

Have compassion upon the city of thy sanctuary,  
Jerusalem, the place of thy rest.

Fill Zion; exalt thine oracles,

And fill thy people with thy glory.

50. Smead<sup>1</sup> in commenting on verse 16 points out it is significant that the Messiah is not here mentioned. All the alleged references to Messianism in Ben Sirah are vague and one reading these without a too vivid imagination will find them utterly lacking in even a reference to a Messiah.<sup>2</sup>

The following passages are said to contain Messianic references.

XIV, 25: IV, 15: X, 13-17: XXXV, 17-19: XXXVI, 1-10: XXXVI, 11-17: XXXVII, 25-26.

He shall pitch his tent nigh at hand to her,  
And shall lodge in a lodging where good things are.  
(XIV, 25)

He that giveth ear unto her shall judge the nations;  
And he that giveth heed unto her shall dwell securely.  
(IV, 15)

For the beginning of pride is sin;  
And he that keepeth it will pour forth abomination.  
For this cause the Lord brought upon them strange  
calamaties,  
And overthrew them utterly.

The Lord cast down the thrones of rulers,  
And set the meek in their stead.  
The Lord plucked up the roots of nations,  
And planted the lowly in their staad.  
The Lord overthrew the lands of nations,  
And destroyed them unto the foundations of the  
earth.  
(X, 13-17)

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1. Smead - Das Buch Jesus Sirah in loco X

2. Cheyne points out that the want of a definite Messianic hope is characteristic of the age. It is no special defect of Sirah.  
(Job & Solomon p. 188)

The prayer of the humble pierceth the clouds;  
 And till it come nigh, he will not be comforted;  
 And he will not depart, till the Most High shall visit;  
 And he shall judge righteously, and execute judgment.

And the Lord will not be slack, neither will he be  
 longsuffering toward them.

Till he have crushed the lions of the unmerciful;  
 And he shall repay vengeance to the heathen;  
 Till he have taken away the multitude of the haughty,  
 And broken in pieces the sceptres of the unrighteous;

(XXXV, 17-18)

Have mercy upon us, O Lord, the God of all, and  
 behold;

And send thy fear upon all the nations.

(XXXVI, 1)

Gather all the tribes of Jacob together,  
 And take them for thine inheritance, as from the  
 beginning.

(XXXVI, 11)

The life of man is numbered by days;  
 And the days of Israel are innumerable.

(XXXVII, 25)



## CHAPTER II

## MAN'S RELATION TO GOD

If there be one underlying idea in Ben Sirah, if he possesses one definite idea, it is that of the sanctity of the law. Man's relation to God is a definite one. The law is everlasting and man must always adhere and obey. The transgressors of the law are sure to suffer.

Woe unto you, ungodly men,

Which have forsaken the law of the Most High God! (XLI, 8)

The kings of Israel learned to their sorrow that the law of the Most High could not be broken.

"Except David, Hezekiah and Josiah all committed trespass, for they forsook the law of the Most High." The observance of the law is paramount.

Let thy converse be with men of understanding;

And let thy discourse be in the law of the Most

High. (IX, 15).

Dishonor is the inheritance of the offspring of those that violate the law.

What manner of seed hath no honour? they that trans-

gress the commandments. (X, 19b)

One will find that he cannot successfully simulate an interest in the law for while "He that seeketh the law shall be filled therewith, but the hypocrite shall stumble thereat" (XXXII, 15).

In mentioning a number of things for which man is not to be ashamed is mentioned the law of the Most High. (XLII, 2)<sup>1</sup> Those that forsake the law shall suffer.

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1. In commenting on this verse Smend seems to think that there is implied a warning against forsaking Judaism for the Greek religion. (Das Buch Jesus Sirah in loco)

Such an inference seems to be unwarranted. A list of vices as enumerated for which man should be ashamed, What more natural that prominent among them should be the great vice of forsaking the law. To indicate that there were many Jews leaving the ranks of Judaism for Greek Gods and that this passage refers directly to the great religious exodus from Judaism is unwarranted.

33.  
If ye be born, ye shall be born to a curse;

If ye die, a curse shall be your portion.

All things that are of the earth shall go back to the  
earth;

So the ungodly shall go from a curse unto perdition. (XLI, 9-10)

Wisdom and law are made almost synonymous.<sup>1</sup> The one that studies the  
law shall have wisdom.

He that feareth the Lord will do this;

And he that hath possession of the law shall obtain

her (i.e. wisdom) XV, 1)

In many ways the parallel

is striking:

Without lying shall the law be accomplished;

And wisdom is perfection to a faithful mouth.  
(XXXIV, 8)

He that keepeth the law becometh master of the intent  
thereof;

And the end of the fear of the lord is wisdom. (XXI, 11)

And an even more illuminating passage beaming on the identity of the  
law and wisdom is the following

All wisdom is the fear of the Lord;

And in all wisdom is the doing of the Law. (XIX, 20)

As Oesterly points out<sup>2</sup> Ben Sirah differs vastly from proverbs in  
the matter of law. Proverbs apotheosises wisdom and Ben Sirah identifies law  
with wisdom. If we may be sure of a complete identification of law and wisdom in  
the mind of Ben Sirah some very interesting assertions might be made concerning  
Ben Sirah's conception of law. We could then state emphatically that the pre-  
existence of character of the law as conceived by the later rabbis found root in  
Ben Sirah, for wisdom is thus conceived. "Wisdom hath been created before all  
things" (I, 4)

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1. See Chap. 1 p. 18 on Wisdom

2. Cambridge Bible Int. liii

As has been stated before the matter is at best highly conjectural. In (chapter I on wisdom) the identification of law and wisdom is hinted at. There exists a bit of confusion as to the precise meaning of wisdom, likewise as to the exact meaning of law.

Bearing in mind that Ben Sirah was most likely a scribe and was reared and educated in a priestly environment his insistence upon law is readily understood. And yet one wonders what really constituted law for Ben Sirah. Strangely enough his views on ritual and sacrifice are surprisingly liberal for one that exalts the priesthood in the manner of Ben Sirah. As has been mentioned before, many inconsistencies are to be found in Ben Sirah. A glaring one is discovered when analyzing his view of sacrifice. On the one hand the author believes firmly in the efficacy of the law in all its phases and applying to all and yet we find such passages as "He that keepeth the law multiplieth offerings. He that taketh heed to the commandments sacrificeth a peace offering. He that requiteth a good turn offereth fine flour; . And he that giveth alms sacrificeth a thank offering. (XXXI, 1 and 2).

Such an aphorism would seem to express a reaction to the older conception of sacrifices. There seems to be implied the suggestion that mere sacrifice for the sake of sacrifice is not efficacious. The law here does not apply as rigorously as it does in other aspects. Perhaps "law to Ben Sirah meant not a single code, or better not specific codes. Isaiah as well as Ezekiel was part of the law." For him one part of scriptures held as much authority as another. What is more natural than to find proverbs and aphorisms representative of all views and conceptions of the Old Testament. To Ben Sirah law had not become synonymous with a particular or specific law code. Hence within his writings are contained the inconsistencies and contradictions of the Old Testament. Law to Ben Sirah was comprehended the whole of scriptures with the possible exception of the very late books. It is interesting to note that Ben Sirah probably possessed the same conception of the Torah as did the later Jews.

He probably considered all of the law revealed. If he did not possess this view the inconsistencies of his emphasis on scripture as law fails of explanation.

### SACRIFICES AND RITUAL

As was suggested in the discussion of law, one finds a conflicting conception of sacrifice and ritual in Ben Sirah. He glorifies the priesthood demanding reverence for the priest and insists that all the sacrifices and offerings be brought.

Fear the Lord with all thy soul;

And reverence his priests.

With all thy strength love him that made thee;

And forsake not his ministers.

Fear the Lord and glorify the priest;

And give him his portion, even as it is commanded  
thee;

The firstfruits, and the trespass offering, and the gift  
of the shoulders,

And the sacrifice of sanctification, and the firstfruits of  
holy things. (VII, 29-32)

A more definite statement of Ben Sirah's belief in sacrifices could not be found and yet there are other passages that are difficult to harmonize with this view. We find passages that seem to minimize the ritual and sacrifice and greatly emphasize rather the moral aspect of the law.

He that sacrificeth of a thing wrongfully gotten, his  
offering is made in mockery (XXXIV, 18)

Oesterly seems to think that the law is not observed by bringing sacrifice, rather the spiritual observances of the law, benevolence, moral rectitude and charity are placed in the forefront. He also states that the silence of the book (with but few exceptions) as to the atoning efficacy of sacrifice is significant.<sup>1</sup>

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1. Cambridge Bible p. 222.

Such a view might seem plausible at first glance. We do find a passage that suggests a substitute for sacrifice.

He that keepeth the law multiplieth offerings;

He that taketh heed to the commandments sacrificeth  
a peace offering. (XXXV, 1)

It is quite true that this passage seems to suggest a similar idea as that expressed by Philo "For God delights in fireless altars surrounded by the chorus of virtues not in altars blazing with a great fire that the impious sacrifices of unhallowed men have set aflame."<sup>1</sup> And yet other passages and an analysis of this passage leads to another conclusion.

Ben Sirah in XXXIV, 25-26 states emphatically that ritual and fasting are of no avail if the recalcitrant one proceeds directly to sin again. He does not deny the efficacy of sacrifice rather suggests that by keeping the entire law <sup>constitute</sup> is a true sacrifice to God. Chap. XXXV, 1 seems to exclude sacrifices from the law. It seems to substitute the law, The meaning of which at this point is <sup>obscure.</sup> ~~observed for sacrifices~~ <sup>related</sup> Rather this verse when ~~xxxxxxx~~ to its context indicates that continual sinning and continual sacrifices are of no avail. One must keep the entire law, i.e., the moral as well as the ritual. Ben Sirah opposes the purely ritualistic conception of Judaism, but by no means ~~he~~ can one say that he opposed sacrifices or yet minimized the atoning efficacy of offerings. He opposes the misuse of sacrifices

As he that killeth the son before ~~his~~ his father's eyes

Is he that bringeth a sacrifice from the goods of the  
poor. (XXXIV, 20)

All that we may deduce from this passage is that ungodly sacrifices are not acceptable. Despite this seeming unconcern for sacrifices there is direct evidence that he carried the conviction that sacrifices were part of the law for "The sacrifice of a righteous man is acceptable" (XXXVII) and again he admonishes against niggardliness in giving of tithes and offerings

Glorify the Lord with a good eye,

And Stint not the firstfruits of thine hands. (XXXV, 8)

1. Quoted by G.F. Moore in Encycl. Bibl. Col. 4, 223)

Dedicate thy tithe with gladness

And give unto the Most High according as he hath given;  
(XXXV, 10)

The Lord then does not accept an ungodly sacrifice. Sacrifice in themselves are not sufficient nor yet will the most High be pacified for sins by the multitude of sacrifices. Nevertheless sacrifices are essential. They are commanded. The suggestion of Oesterly that the sacrificial system had lost much of its importance for Ben Sirah is not well taken. At most it is an argument ex silencio. Ben Sirah's view of sacrifice is best formulated on one of his own aphorisms.

Also to the poor man stretch out thy hand,

That thy blessing may be perfected.

(VXX, 32)

This pithy yet meaningful verse follows a group of verses that admonish the punctilious fulfillment of sacrificial obligations and then as a climax Ben Sirah states that the blessing is not perfected unless one stretches out his hand to the poor. Both sacrifice and righteousness are commanded by the law. One without the other is insufficient. A perfect offering must be given from legitimately gained possessions. Sacrifice without kindness are of no avail, but one must bear in mind the contrary righteous acts and just deeds alone are nowhere said to be sufficient. Sacrifice held a legitimate position in the religious life of Ben Sirah.

#### ATONEMENT.

According to Jewish traditions death and suffering are in themselves means of atonement. In Midrash Sifre 73b it is said that man should rejoice more in chastisement than in prosperity, because if he engaged good fortune all his life his sins would not be forgiven him. Also in Midrash Sifre 33a death makes reconciliation.<sup>1</sup> In Bereshith Rabba Ch. LXV Isaac prayed that

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<sup>1</sup>. Cited in Charles (Apocrypha and Pseudepigrapha p. 380)

he might be granted sufferings in order that these might turn him away from judgment in the world to come.<sup>1</sup> Ben Sirah expresses the idea of death as atonement for sins, when he warns that the sin of life should not be more than death would atone for you. It was necessary to strike off as many sins as possible in life.

Wait not until death to be justified  
(XVIII, 22)

Prayer and alms are also means of atonement for sins.

Say not, He will look upon the multitude of my gifts,  
And when I offer to the Most High God, he will  
accept it.

Be not fainthearted in thy prayer;  
And neglect not to give alms. (VII, 9 and 10)

It is interesting to note that sacrifice in themselves seem to be insufficient atonement. Ben Sirah stresses greatly the atoning powers of ethical conduct.

Water will quench a flaming fire  
And almsgiving will make atonement for sins. (III, 30).

" Another form of good deeds which atones for sin is forgiveness. "

For give thy neighbour the hurt that he hath done thee;  
And then thy sins shall be pardoned when thou prayest. (XXXVIII, 2)

Furthermore the honoring of parent will make atonement for sin.

He that honoreth his father shall make atonement for sins;  
And he that giveth glory to his mother is as one that  
layeth up treasure. (III, 3)

Fasting seems to have been another means of atonement for sin:

Even so a man fasting for his sins. (XXXIV, 26)

Finally as has been pointed out in the discussion, sacrifices, offerings of a righteous man to God make atonement for sins.

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1. Cited by Oesterly (Cambridge Bible, Ecclesiasticus p.125)

Quite interesting is the statement of Ben Sirah "From a woman was the beginning of sin and because of her we all die" (XXV, 24)<sup>1</sup> One wonders whether or not Ben Sirah advances here his theory as to the origin of sin. One wonders whether he believed that the Fall was the cause of sin or as Oesterly points out<sup>2</sup> merely the "beginning of the history of sin as far as man is concerned, but does not imply that it entailed any moral consequences upon man". As in the case with other theological conceptions our book is somewhat confused. Various and contrary suggestions are found. We find definitely that God is not the cause of evil.

Say not thou, it is through the Lord that I fell away;

For thou shalt not do the things that he hateth.

For he hath no need of a sinful man,

The Lord hateth every abomination. (XV, 11-20).

Despite this positive statement that God cannot be considered in any sense the source of evil, the following directly contradictory statement is found.

As the clay of the potter in his hand,

All his ways are according to his good pleasure;

So men are in the hand of him that made them,

To render unto them according to his judgment.

Good is set over against evil,

And life over against death:

So is the sinner over against the godly,

And thus look upon all the works of the Most High:

Two and two, ~~xxx~~ one against another. (XXXIII, 13-16)

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1. Later tradition points to Adam as the cause of death entering the world (Benidbar Rabba Chap XIII, quoted by Oesterly)

2. Camb. Bible, IXI



40. These verses seem to be a direct assertion that God is the source of evil. The above verses, it is true, are entirely missing in the Hebrew but the omission can in no wise be taken to be significant. The entire chapter XXXIII with the exception of one portion is also extant. The logic of this apparent contradiction is indeed obscure and yet the obscurity is even deepened if such were possible by an assertion that evil exists because of the original nature of man and cannot be traced to an external cause.

For all things cannot be in men,

Because the son of man is not immortal.

What is brighter than the sun? yet this faileth;

And an evil man will think on flesh and blood.

(XVII, 30-31 X)

The meaning of this verse is quite clear if the sun fails at times to give light how much more will man who is but flesh and blood, sin at times? As there is darkness when the sun fails so there is spiritual darkness when man sins. And yet the sun fails through no fault of its own. It is part of its nature to rise and sink each day. Such is the ~~confusion~~ of one ancient scribe in the matter of sin. He realized tho the terrible implications of man's determination. If God created evil or if evil were a part of man's nature how then could man be accounted responsible for his acts? As we would expect the doctrine of free will is frequently emphasized by Ben Sirah. Chap XXXVII, 14 suggests the thought that the individual is master of his own destiny. Peters translation renders this verse thus:

"Das Herz des Mannes kundet ihn Besser seine stunden als  
sieben sternseher auf der Warte."

Peters translates the Hebrew יָדָעַתְּ as "bessere Berechte". Whether we translate יָדָעַתְּ as time or tidings the meaning of the verse is clear. Man's understanding reveals to him the right time for action. Other instances of verses implying free will might be cited.

He that keepeth the law becometh master of the intent

thereof. (XXI, 11)

Strangely enough as positive as is this intimation of free will and as necessary as the doctrine is to a theology such as Ben Sirah's we yet find contradictions. Verse 13 of chapter XXXIII intimates that man is merely the tool of the Almighty and man is in the hand of his maker as clay is in the hand of the potter.

Interesting is the comparison of this verse with the 6th verse of chapter XVIII of Jeremiah "Behold as the clay in the potter's hand so are ye in my hand, O house of Israel." The contradiction can be understood if we assume that the passages expressing free will really represent the view of Ben Sirah. The above verse appearing only because of the method of the author. He has acquainted himself with the law and the prophets. The verse is practically a repetition of the utterance of the prophet Jeremiah. This alone justifies its presence in the book of Ecclesiasticus.

## CHAPTER III

## Man's Relation to Man

Ben Sirah is very evidently more interested in practical ethics than he is in theology. He was in every sense of the term a practical man. He hoped to furnish the people of his day a code of precepts by which to live, a code truly that was based fundamentally upon canonical law. He was interested not only in religious acts and deeds but also in etiquette and table manners. He reproved in an indirect way those of his day for their vices. Judging by his emphasis upon charity and almsgiving, poverty must have been wide spread. The giving of alms was a supreme virtue. With him (God) the alms of a man is as a signet and he will keep the bounty of a man as the apple of his eye. XVII, 23. One must not deprive the poor of a living but neither must he be quick to give charity. (IV, 1). Always shall one give to the suppliant in need (IV, 4) for if a poor man "curseth thee in the bitterness of his soul

he that made him will hear his supplication. (IV, 6).

A really tender and beautiful note is struck by Ben Sirah in his admonition concerning the mode of alms-giving. One is to

Incline thine ear to a poor man,

And answer him with peacable words in meekness (IV, 8)

Kindness of spirit is essential in the dispensation of charity. Mere giving is not sufficient. One should give but (IV, 10) one should be as "father unto the fatherless". One must "be not fainthearted in giving judgment" (IV, 9) but to humiliate the recipient of charity is a gross cruelty. What tenderness, what broad brotherly sympathy fills this passage.

My son, to thy good deeds add no blemish;

And no grief of words in any of thy giving.

Shall not the dew assuage the scorching heat?

So is the word better than a gift.

43  
Lo<sup>s</sup> is not a word better than a gift?

And both are with a gracious man.

A fool will upbraid ungraciously;

And the gift of an envious man consumeth the eyes. (XVIII, 15-19)

What a fine understanding of human sensibilities. The word without the gift is better than the gift with harsh words. It is the saintly man that gives with kindness and love. Furthermore "He that sheweth mercy will lend unto his neighbour; and he that strengtheneth him with his hand keepeth the commandments." (XXIX, 1). Even helping one's neighbor by a loan is dignified by placing it on the brink of the law.

Nevertheless Ben Sirah could not be said to indulge in a weak sentimentalism. He grows quite stern at times and even harsh. One is to give to the worthy but not to the evil doer. (XII, 5). Even more gross seems to be his attitude toward his enemy for happy is a man that liveth and looketh upon the fall of his enemies (XXV, 7). There is of course, the ever appearing and almost irritating inconsistency "Forgive thy neighbor the injury done to thee and ~~he~~ when thou prayest thy sins will be forgiven." (XXVIII, 1)

The attitude of Ben Sirah toward wealth is quite practical. Riches have their value. When in danger <sup>the wealthy one</sup> ~~he~~ is sure of friends, where a rich man falls there are many helpers, he speaks ungainly things and men justify him; a rich man speaks and all is silence. With the poor man it is quite the opposite. (XIII, 21-24) Riches has its value but only "Riches are good that have no sin" (XIII, 24). Riches in the hand of a niggardly or envious man are of no avail. "Riches are not comely for a niggard and what should an envious man do with money?

He that gathereth by taking from his own soul gathereth  
for others;

And others shall revel in his goods.

He that is evil to himself, to whom will he be good?

And he shall not rejoice in his possessions" (XIV, 3-6)

Riches also has its positive side. It affords leisure and

"The wisdom of the scribe cometh by opportunity of  
leisure

And he that hath little business shall become wise" (XXXVIII, 24)

Wisdom then is the flower of wealth. It is quite easy to see then why Ben Sirah would not oppose wealth as such but he did reprove those who make a God of wealth and pursue it for an end." "He that loveth gold shall not go unpunished 'XXXI, 5). Yet one that legitimately gained wealth is comely in the eyes of our author. "Happy is the rich man that is found blameless and hath not gone astray following mammon" (XXXI, 8). In no sense was Ben Sirah an ascetic. Wealth was meant to be enjoyed. "So is he who possesseth wealth and hath no enjoyment of it. He seeth it with his eyes and sigheth as a Eunuch that embraceth a maiden."

There must have been a sharp distinction between the classes of Ben Sirah's day.

And what peace between the rich man and the poor.

Wild asses are the prey of lions in the wilderness

So poor men are pasture for the rich .

Lowliness is an abomination to a proud man

So a poor man is an abomination to the rich. (X, 19-20)

One is struck with the great force of the figures here, the poor as "pasture for the rich" seems to be original with Ben Sirah. Such a figure suggests a kindly soul of sympathy and understanding. It is even full of meaning to us of this day, how much the more for those days of slavery and bondage?

Ben Sirah recognized certain classes. They were essential to <sup>him</sup> ~~him~~. Laborers are important. "Without these shall not a city be inhabited and men shall not sojourn nor walk up and down therein.

Hate no laborious work;

Neither husbandry, which the M<sup>ost</sup> High hath ordained, (VII, 15)

He also believes that the classes shall remain distinct.

They shall not be sought for in the council of the  
people,

And in the assembly they shall not mount on high (XXXVII, 33) <sup>1</sup>

Business of buying and selling Ben Sirah distrusts for "sin will thrust itself  
in between buying and selling " (XXVII, 2).

A merchant shall hardly keep himself from wrong doing;

And a huckster shall not be acquitted of sin. (XXVI, 29)

Throughout our study of Ben Sirah we have noticed the great emphasis  
he places upon the ethical relation of man to God, and God to man, and of  
man to man. Above all ~~xxxxxxxxxx~~ a man must be honest and sincere. Describing the  
insincere man "one that winketh with the eye contriveth evil things;

And no man will remove him from it.

When thou art present, he will speak sweetly,

And will admire thy words;

But afterward he will writhe his mouth,

And set a trap for thee in thy words. (XXVII, 22-25)

Denouncing such an individual, Ben Sirah in righteous indignation exclaims:

I have hated many things, but nothing like him;

And the Lord will hate him. (XXVII, 24) Furthermore -

One that casteth a stone on high casteth it on his  
own head;

And a deceitful stroke will open wounds.

He that diggeth a pit shall fall into it; (XXVII, 26)

For a wholesome social intercourse there must be honesty and integrity. Ben  
Sirah can in no sense condone falsehood /

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1.. Some think that here are reflected the platonic ideas of unity of  
vocation and philosophy-ruler

A lie is a foul blot in a man;  
It will be continually in the mouth of the ignorant.  
A thief is better than a man that is continually lying;  
But they both shall inherit destruction.  
(XX, 24-27\*)

Laugh not a man to scorn when he is in the bitterness  
of his soul;

For there is one who humbleth and exalteth.

Devise not a lie against thy brother;

Neither do the like to a friend.

Love not to make any manner of lie;

For the custom thereof is not for good.  
(VII, 11-13)

One of the most spiritual and precious outgrowths of human relations is that of friendship. Ben Sirah was an astute student of society. He knew the frailties and weaknesses of human nature. Perhaps the keenest observations of all are those dealing with human nature. He admonishes quite truly against the hasty acquisition of friends, he draws the significant distinction between a table companion and a real friend, the real friend is one who is counsellor and confidante. Sweet words and prosperity will attract a certain type of friend but the real friend is one that remains true through all adversity (VI 5, 14)

The real value of a friend is pointed out by Ben Sirah. It is a real treasure -

A faithful friend is a strong defense;

And he that hath found him hath found a treasure.

There is nothing that can be taken in exchange for  
a faithful friend;

And his excellency is beyond price.

A faithful friend is a medicine of life;

And they that fear the Lord shall find him. (VI, 14-18)

47. Ben Sirah suspected new friends. They were to him as new wine (IX, 6).  
He has the suspicion and distrust of the stranger, perhaps for similar reasons.<sup>1</sup>

Receive a stranger into thine house, and he will dis-  
tract thee with brawls,

And estrange thee from thine own. (XI, 34)

A newly gotten friend is not to be trusted but an old friend is  
sacred.

Change not a friend for a thing indifferent;

Neither a true brother for the gold of Ophir. (VII, 18)

There are certain duties and sacred obligations one <sup>owes to</sup> ~~gives for~~ a friend.  
The secrets of a friend are never to be revealed. It is useless to attempt to  
renew an old friendship after there has been a breach of confidence. "Prove  
a friend and keep faith with him but if thou reveal his secrets, follow not  
after him" (XXVII, 17).

For a wound may be bound up, and after reviling  
there may be a reconciliation;

But he that revealeth secrets hath lost hope. (XXVII, 27)

To a real friend one must abide steadfastly in time of affliction (XXII, 23).  
and it is the duty of a man to bring his friend to task so as to save him from  
future sins. (XIX, 13).

For the institution of marriage Ben Sirah has the greatest reverence.  
The ideal state is the married one.

He that getteth a wife entereth upon a possession;

A help meet for him, and a pillar of rest.

Where no hedge is, the possession will be laid waste;

And he that hath no wife will mourn as he wandereth  
up and down. (XXXVI, 24 and 25)

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1. This is one of the verses cited by R. Abaye as reason for exclusion from  
Canon. (J.E. Vo. XI, p. 390)



48. Schechter points out<sup>1</sup> that the "fraternity of bachelors was not popular with the Jews. This emphasis upon marriage is a motif in Jewish tradition. Ben Sirah never wearies of emphasizing this point. "Forego not a wise and good wife, for her grace is above gold." (VII, 19) "A prudent ~~man~~ wife is a great blessing. (XL, 23). Ever and constant appears this theme in Ben Sirah but quite as persistent is he in his denunciation of the bad or foolish woman. "A wicked woman is abasement of heart" (XXV, 23). Ben Sirah is quite positive and lucid in his opinion of bad women.

"I will rather dwell with a lion and a dragon,

Than keep house with a wicked woman." (XXV, 16)

furthermore, "a wicked woman is <sup>as</sup> a yoke of oxen shaken to and fro. He that taketh hold of her is as one that graspeth a scorpion." (XXVI, 7).

Give me any plague but the plague of the heart;

And any wickedness but the wickedness of a woman; (XXV, 13).

How different is the picture of the one who is happily married.

Happy is the husband of a good wife;

And the number of his days shall be twofold.

A brave woman rejoiceth her husband;

And he shall fulfil his years in peace.

A good wife is a good portion;

Shall be given in the portion of such as fear the  
Lord.

Whether a man be rich or poor,

A good heart maketh at all times a cheerful countenance. (XXVI, 1-5) Furthermore -

The grace of the wife will delight her husband;

And her knowledge will fatten his bones.

A silent woman is a gift of the Lord;

And there is nothing so much worth as a well-instructed  
soul.

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1. Studies in Judaism - Second series p. 95

A shamefast woman is grace upon grace;  
 And there is no price worthy of a continent soul.  
 As the sun when it ariseth in the highest places of  
 the Lord,  
 So is the beauty of a good wife in the ordering of a  
 man's house. (XXVI, 13-17)

A man is not to choose his wife because of beauty alone. A good and wise woman  
 is the desirable one. (XXV, 21).

So that marital bonds might be sacred, Ben Sirah is profuse in his warning  
 against adultery.<sup>1</sup> The husband is instructed not to be jealous and is told to  
 avoid the harlot and the singer. He is warned not to look around the streets  
 of the city and to stay away from the solitary places. (XI, 5-10). If the sin  
 of adultery is indulged both the man and the woman will be visited with pun-  
 ishment. The woman who practices adultery commits three sins. "For first she  
 was disobedient in the law of the Most High,

And secondly, she trespassed against her own husband;

And thirdly, she played the adultress in whoredom,

And brought in children by a stranger." (XXIII, 21-24).

While the punishment of the man is merely alluded to (XXIII-21). The punishment  
 of the woman is carefully outlined.

She shall be brought out into the congregation;

And upon her children shall there be visitation.

Her children shall not spread into roots,

And her branches shall bear no fruit.

She shall leave her memory for a curse;

And her reproach shall not be blotted out. (XXXIII, 21-27)

One cannot help but think that Ben Sirah was particularly bitter with

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It is interesting to note that the reason assigned for the division of the  
 Israelitish kingdom was the laxity of Solomon's morals. In Kings XI, 33  
 the reason assigned was the idolatry of Solomon (XVII, 20 and 21)

60. regard to women. He reverences good and faithful women but his virulent remarks concerning wicked women seem to indicate his general distrust for the feminine. He regards men, of course, as the superior of the sexes.

. How harsh is the suggestion "

Hast thou daughters? give heed to their body,

And make not thy face cheerful toward them.

Give thy daughter in marriage, and thou shalt have

accomplished a great matter: (VII, 24 and 28).

The attitude of our author toward women may well be summarized in the aphorism "From a woman was the beginning of sin" (XXV, 24) and the succinct injunction "Hast thou daughters, guard their bodies", (XII, 24).

Children for the mere fact of having children and fulfilling the injunction of . 1371 179 was not the view of Ben Sirah. Children were of value and importance provided the fear of the Lord was with them. He is most explicit in his opinion. "For one is better than a thousand and to die childless than to have ungodly children." (XVI, 3).

It is useless to bring up a race of wicked and to people the land with ungodly sons for one brings them into the world for their own destruction.

But a race of wicked men shall be made desolate. (XVI, 4)

His attitude toward children may best be understood from the following verses:

Desire not a multitude of unprofitable children,

Neither delight in ungodly sons,

If they multiply, delight not in them,

Except the fear of the Lord be with them.

Trust not thou in their life,

Neither rely on their ~~wisdom~~ condition. (XVI, 1-4)

Since godly children are the only ones desirable Ben Sirah is most careful in his suggestion for the training of children. To the father he suggests

"Hast thou children, correct them." One must be serious and strict with them all.

51. "Bow down their neck from their youth" (VII, 23). Education and training, will be best facilitated by the rod. "Bow down his neck in his youth and be-at him on the sides while he is a child. " (XXX, 12).

Chastise thy son, and take pains with him,

Lest his shameless behaviour be an offence unto thee. (XXX, 13).

To what extent and extreme Ben Sirah emphasises restraint in the education of children may well be seen from the following:

He that maketh too much of his son shall bind up his  
wounds;

And his heart will be troubled at every cry.

An unbroken horse becometh stubborn;

And a son left at large becometh headstrong.

Cooker thy child, and he shall make thee afraid;

Play with him, and he will grieve thee.

Laugh not with him, lest thou have sorrow with him;

And thou shalt gnash thy teeth in the end.

Give him no liberty in his youth,

And wink not at his follies. (XXX - 7-12)

The hopes of such a scheme of education are that a son may continue in the works and deeds of his father. Carry on a tradition. In fact we find the amazing suggestion that the father of such a son really never dies for he has left behind a replica of himself.

His father dieth, and is as though he had not died;

For he hath left one behind him like himself.

(XX X- 4)

A whole chapter might be written on Ben Sirah's practical precepts, but since our chief interest has been that of the theology and religious ideas perhaps an indication of a few of the outstanding aphorisms and their application might well suffice.

Ben Sirah often warns against indulgence. An outstanding example is his attitude toward drunkenness. At no time does he object entirely to the use of wine. "As a signet of carbuncle in a setting of gold,

So is a concert of music in a banquet of wine." (XXXII, 5).

And still he warns against the free use, of course, for it destroys many and increaseth the rage of a fool to his hurt" (XXXI, 30). He utterly abhors drunkenness and places it on a plane with vice.

"Wine and women will make men of understanding fall away" (XIX, 2) His attitude toward wine is characteristic. He warns against indulgence but remarks that "wine is good as life to men if thou drink it in its measure." (XXXI, 27)

Ben Sirah preaches self control, for one who fulfils the desire of his soul really fulfills his enemy's wish. (VIII, 30\*)

At times our author is most practical. His advice seems to have a homely soundness. ~~Discretion~~ he believes is the better part of valor. If one has over you the power to kill it is a safe thing to keep from him.

Keep thee far from the man that hath power to kill,

And thou shalt have no suspicion of the fear of death. (IX, 13)

He ~~warns~~ warns against hasty judgment and as an example cites the beeh which is small but whose fruit is valuable. (XI, 3) And advises that a careful scrutiny be made of facts before one makes judgment (XI, 8). There are in Ben Sirah numerous references to the wisdom of silence (IV, 29) and again silence is not always a virtue, for wisdom will be known in speech (IV, 23). With a double tongue tho, our author has no patience (V 12). In many places Ben Sirah protests against the arrogant and haughty one. (V, 1). An intimation of the salient characteristics of Ben Sirah's practical precepts are the list of those from whom we should not take advice.

33- Take not counsel with a woman about her rival

Neither with a coward about war

Nor with a merchant about change

Nor with a buyer about selling

Nor with an envious man about thankfulness

Nor with an unmerciful man about kindness

Nor with a sluggard about any kind of work

Nor with a hireling in thy house about finishing his work

Nor with an idle servant about much business. (XXXVII, 11 ff cited by Schechter)

Ben Sirah is more than insistant upon man's conduct even at the table. His rules of ettiquette are strikingly modern.

Stretch not thine hand whithersoever it looketh,

And thrust not thyself with it into the dish.

Consider thy neighbour's liking by thine own;

And be discreet in every point.

Eat, as becometh a man, those things which are set

before thee. . . . .

Be not insatiable lest thou offend. (XXXI, 13-17)

And thus the Ben Sirah that conjures up proverbs concerning God and concerning morality, free will and ~~xxxxxxx~~<sup>death</sup>, also is interested in citing to his fellow-Jews aphorisms suggesting meticulously certain practical rules of conduct. It is perhaps in the latter that the most positive of Ben Sirah's views are repeated. As Schechter remarks <sup>1</sup> "What impairs the value of his statements is the consideration that Ben Sirah was rather too much addicted to quoting from canonical writings and giving ample extracts from them. It is therefore, hard to decide whether his words can always be taken as stating a fact to which he was witness, or conveying a sentiment which he felt, or whether they are to be taken as mere repetitions of scriptural phrases intended as ornamental flourishes."

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1. Schechter - Studies in Judaism (Second Series p. 57)