

SIRACH 14:20 – 23:27

²⁰Happy is the person who meditates on wisdom and reasons intelligently, ²¹who reflects in his heart on her ways and ponders her secrets

²²pursuing her like a hunter, and lying in wait on her paths;

²³who peers through her windows and listens at her doors;

²⁴who camps near her house and fastens his tent peg next to her walls;

²⁵who pitches his tent near her, and lives as her welcome neighbour;

²⁶who builds his nest in her leafy branches, and lodges in her boughs;

²⁷who takes refuge from the heat in her shade, and dwells in her home.

On happiness [makarios; μακάριος] see 14:1-2, page 77. Ben Sira speaks of ‘meditating’ [meletaō; μελετάω] only here and in 6:37. It is common in the psalms. In Psalm 1 it is also part of a beatitude:

Happy are those whose delight is in the law of YHWH, and who meditate on his law day and night.

– Psalm 1:1-2

This is the only time Ben Sira speaks of reasoning [Greek: dialegomai; διαλέγομαι]. ‘Intelligence’ [Greek: sunesis; σύνεσις] is one of his favourite words. He uses it 30 times.

Happy are those who find wisdom, and those who get understanding.

– Proverbs 3:13

The word ‘reflect’ [Greek: dianoeomai; διανοέομαι] occurs 17 times. ‘Ponder’ [ennoeō; έννοέω] occurs only here.

In verses 22-27 Ben Sira uses a number of graphic images to speak of the keen searching for wisdom that he wishes to instil into his students.

You, YHWH, have been a refuge to the poor, a refuge to the needy in their distress, a shelter from the rainstorm and a shade from the heat.

– Isaiah 25:4

Ben Sira goes on to extoll the blessings that Wisdom gives to those who seek her diligently. On fear of YHWH see 1:11-21, pages 19-23; also 6:32-37. In verse 1 Ben Sira is speaking especially of the scribe [sôpēr; סופֵר].

In verse 2 he sees Wisdom as a caring mother; and as a young bride eager to embrace her lover. In verse 3 he is drawing on Proverbs 9, which includes the following invitation uttered by Wisdom:

Come, eat of my bread.

– Proverbs 9:5

See also Isaiah:

Everyone who thirsts, come to the waters.

– Isaiah 55:1

We might think of Jesus' words in John 4:10-15.

In verses 4-6 Ben Sira continues to speak of the benefits that Wisdom brings.

In verses 7-9 he speaks of those whose behaviour blocks them from receiving Wisdom. In Proverbs we read:

A scoffer seeks wisdom in vain,
but knowledge is easy for one
who understands.

– Proverbs 14:6

Those described in these verses cannot receive Wisdom:

Because you hate discipline, and you
cast my words behind you.

– Psalm 50:17

By contrast, as the Psalmist says:

Praise befits the upright.

– Psalm 33:1

Ben Sira ends with a plug for his own profession.

¹Whoever fears YHWH will do this, and whoever is practised in the law will obtain wisdom.

²She will come to meet him like a mother, and like a young bride she will embrace him.

³She will feed him with the bread of learning, and give him the water of insight to drink.

⁴He will lean on her and not stumble; he will rely on her and not be put to shame.

⁵She will exalt him above his neighbours, and will give him eloquence in the midst of the assembly.

⁶He will find gladness and a crown of rejoicing, and she will endow him with an everlasting name.

⁷The foolish will not obtain her, and the haughty will not see her.

⁸She is far from the impious; she is not to be spoken of by liars.

⁹Praise is unseemly on the lips of a sinner, for it has not been allotted to him by God.

¹⁰Praise is to be uttered by the tongue of the wise, and its rightful master teaches it.

¹¹Do not say, "It was God's doing that I fell away"; for he does not do what he hates. ¹²Do not say, "It was he who led me astray"; for he has no need of the violent. ¹³The Lord hates all abominations; he does not let them befall those who fear him.

¹⁴It was he who created humankind in the beginning, and he left them in the power of their own free choice. ¹⁵If you choose, you can keep the commandments; fidelity consists in doing his will. ¹⁶He has placed before you fire and water; stretch out your hand for whichever you choose. ¹⁷Before each person are life and death, and whichever one he chooses will be given to him.

¹⁸For great is the wisdom of YHWH; he is mighty in power and sees everything. ¹⁹The eyes of God are on those who are his handiwork; he knows every human action.

²⁰He has not commanded anyone to be wicked, and he will not be lenient with those who do not live by the truth.

In this passage we see Ben Sira struggling with the assumption that he and his contemporaries shared: the assumption that everything that happens is determined by God (see pages 8-9 and 20-21). It would appear to be a logical step from that to claim that we don't really have a choice, and that God is the one responsible for our bad behaviour: 'it was God's doing that I fell away'(verse 11); 'it was he who led me astray'(verse 22). Ben Sira challenges this by asserting that God does not will sin. We are not hapless victims of fate. At the same time God is in control because, though sinful things happen, God doesn't allow such behaviour to 'befall those who fear him'(verse 13).

In verses 14-17 he goes on to assert that God made us free to choose good or to choose evil, and that we must take responsibility for our choice (compare Deuteronomy 30:19)

He makes no attempt to explain how this fact of human freedom fits with his basic assumption. However his assertion on human choice does warn us not to be too simplistic in our understanding of his teaching of the relationship between divine will and human freedom.

In examining this matter earlier, I suggested that it was the basic assumption that was wrong. God loves. God has chosen not to control. We cannot argue from the fact that something happens to the assertion that it is God's will. God takes human freedom seriously, and does not control our lives.

Ben Sira asserts God's control and human freedom. He doesn't try to see how one fits with the other. Rather he humbly speaks of God's wisdom (verse 18). While acknowledging God's 'power'(verse 18), and knowledge (verses 18-19), he opposes any effort to avoid responsibility for the choices we make.

If we are 'wicked' it is because we chose to be wicked, and God 'will not be lenient with those who do not live by the truth'(verse 20); that is, those who choose badly and fail to take responsibility for their bad choices.

Children are a blessing from God, but only when they ‘fear YHWH’ (verses 1-4). Having one child who does the will of God is better than having a thousand who don’t (verse 3).

Verse 4 appears to be an allusion, first to Abraham who through one son (Isaac) filled the land, and secondly to the fate of Sodom (Genesis 18:16-32).

Ben Sira has seen for himself, but has also learned from the tradition, that wickedness does not go unpunished. The ‘sinful band’ (verses 6) appears to be a reference to Korah, Dathan and Abiram and their followers (Numbers 16:1-35). On the disobedient nation see Numbers 11:1-13. Verse 7 appears to refer to the giants of Genesis 6:1-4, but also to the princes of foreign nations punished by God (see Isaiah 14:4-21 re the king of Babylon). Verse 8 speaks again of the destruction of Sodom.

In verse 9 Ben Sira reflects on the fate of the Canaanites, and in verse 10 on the fate of the arrogant and stiff-necked Israelites who set out with Moses but could not enter the Promised Land.

God is ‘merciful’ (see 2:7, 9, 18; 5:6; Hebrew *rahā mīm*; רַחֲמִים) and ‘mighty to forgive’ (see 2:22; 5:5-6; Hebrew *sālāḥ*; סָלַח), but ‘he also pours out wrath’ (verse 11). On the anger of God see 1:11-21, pages 19-22; and 5:6, page 50. What we do matters, and we are judged according to our deeds (see 3:14-16, 30-31).

The point of verses 13-14 is repeated shortly in 17:22-24.

¹Do not want worthless children; do not rejoice in ungodly offspring.

²Many though they be do not rejoice in them if the fear of YHWH is not in them. ³Do not count on the length of their lives; do not put your hope in their future; for one can be better than a thousand, and to die childless is better than to have ungodly children. ⁴For through one wise person a city can be filled with people, but through a clan of rebels it becomes desolate.

⁵Many such things my eye has seen, and my ear has heard things more striking than these. ⁶Against a sinful band a fire is kindled, and in a disobedient nation wrath blazes up.

⁷He did not forgive the princes of old, who revolted in their might.

⁸He did not spare the neighbours of Lot, abominable in their arrogance.

⁹He showed no pity on the doomed people who were dispossessed because of their sins; ¹⁰nor on the six hundred thousand foot soldiers who went to their graves for the arrogance of their hearts.

¹¹Even if there were only one stiff-necked person, it would be a wonder if he remained unpunished. For mercy and wrath are with him who is mighty to forgive – but he also pours out wrath. ¹²Great as is his mercy, so also is his chastisement; he judges people, each according to their deeds. ¹³The sinner will not escape with plunder, and God will not leave unfulfilled the patient endurance of the just. ¹⁴He makes room for every act of mercy; everyone receives in accordance with their deeds.

Verses 15-16 appear to be later additions to the text of Ben Sira

Why would God notice me?

¹⁷Do not say, “I am hidden from God; in heaven who has me in mind? Among so many people I pass unnoticed; what am I in a boundless creation?

¹⁸Lo, heaven and the highest heaven, the abyss and the earth, tremble at his visitation!

¹⁹The very mountains and the foundations of the earth quiver and quake when he looks upon them.

²⁰Of me, therefore, he will take no thought; who will concern himself with what I do? ²¹If I sin, no eye will see me. If I am unfaithful in secret, who is to know? ²²Who tells him of just deeds; what expectation is there, since the end is far off?”

²³Such are the thoughts of one devoid of understanding; a senseless and misguided person thinks foolishly.

To think that I can get away with bad behaviour because God does not notice is to think in a senseless and misguided way.

Ben Sira would be at home with the beautiful sentiments of Psalm 139. Mysterious though it is, the transcendent God is intimately present to each of us.

Where can I go from your spirit?
Where can I flee from your presence?
If I ascend to heaven, you are there;
if I make my bed in Sheol, you are there.
If I take the wings of the morning
and settle at the farthest limits of the sea,
even there your hand shall lead me,
and your right hand shall hold me fast.
If I say, “Surely the darkness shall cover me,
and the light around me become night,”
even the darkness is not dark to you;
the night is as bright as the day,
for darkness is as light to you.

For it was you who formed my inward parts;
you knit me together in my mother’s womb.
I praise you,
for I am fearfully and wonderfully made.
Wonderful are your works;
that I know very well.
My frame was not hidden from you,
when I was being made in secret,
intricately woven in the depths of the earth.
Your eyes beheld my unformed substance.
In your book were written
all the days that were formed for me,
when none of them as yet existed.
How weighty to me are your thoughts,
O God! How vast is the sum of them!
I try to count them –
they are more than the sand;
I come to the end—I am still with you.

Ben Sira now focuses (16:24 – 18:14) on the dignity of human beings, fashioned by God in his likeness.

In verses 24-30 he extols the wisdom of God as seen in the order and beauty of creation, and in God's providential care of what he has created. In verse 25, having challenged his students to pay extra careful attention, he borrows an expression used in Proverbs of personified Wisdom:

I will pour out my thoughts to you;
I will make my words known to you.

– Proverbs 1:23

Ben Sira is drawing on the creation account found in Genesis chapter 1. The Greek for 'he arranged in order' (verse 27) is *kosmeō* [κοσμέω], from which derives our word 'cosmos'. We recall the words of Isaiah:

Lift up your eyes on high and see:
Who created these?
He who brings out their host
and numbers them,
calling them all by name;
because he is great in strength,
mighty in power,
not one is missing.

– Isaiah 40:26

You have made the moon to mark the
seasons; the sun knows its time for set-
ting.

– Psalm 104:19

Let them praise the name of YHWH,
for he commanded and they were
created. He established them forever
and ever; he fixed their bounds, which
cannot be passed.

– Psalm 148:5-6

Having created the earth, YHWH chose to 'fill it with his good things' (see Genesis 1:20-31; Psalm 104:24, 28). All life, however, must finally return to the earth.

²⁴Listen to me, my son, take my advice, and pay close attention to my words. ²⁵I will pour out the spirit that I have in a measured way, and impart knowledge carefully.

²⁶When God created the first of his works, and, in making them, determined their tasks, ²⁷he arranged his works in an eternal order, and their domains for all generations. They were not to hunger or grow weary, and they were not to abandon their tasks. ²⁸They were not to crowd one another, and they should never disobey his word.

²⁹Then YHWH looked upon the earth, and filled it with his good things. ³⁰With all kinds of living beings he covered its surface, and into it they must return.

¹YHWH created human beings out of earth, and makes them return to it again. ²He gives them a fixed number of days, but grants them authority over everything on the earth. ³He endows them with the power they need. He makes them in his own image. ⁴He puts the fear of them in all living beings, and gives them dominion over beasts and birds.

Verse 5 appears to be a later addition to the text of Ben Sira

⁶He gives them discretion, a tongue, eyes, ears and an understanding heart. ⁷He fills them with wisdom and knowledge, and shows them good and evil. ⁸He puts the fear of him into their hearts, showing them the majesty of his works. ⁹that they may glory in his wonderful deeds ¹⁰and praise his holy name.

¹¹He has set before them knowledge, a law pledging life as their inheritance.

¹²He has established with them an eternal covenant, and revealed to them his decrees.

For chapter 17 we do not have the Hebrew text, only the Greek Version and the versions that dependent upon it. Verse 1 draws on Genesis 2:7 and 3:19 (see also Psalm 146:4). The fact that we are formed from the dust of the earth accounts for our frailty and inconstancy, but it is to human beings that God has entrusted the task of continuing to bring order out of chaos (see Genesis 1:28; 9:2; Psalm 8:6-9).

We are able to carry out the mission given us by God because, besides giving us the responsibility, God gives us the power to do it. For he has made us in his own image (verse 3; see Genesis 1:26-27).

In verses 6-10 Ben Sira lists the wonderful gifts that God has bestowed upon mankind.

On fear of YHWH see the commentary on 1:11-21, pages 19-23.

Verse 11 is a particularly beautiful statement concerning the purpose of the Torah: it is a pledge of life, given by God as an inheritance to his chosen people. In the words of the Deuteronomist:

I call heaven and earth to witness against you today that I have set before you life and death, blessings and curses. Choose life so that you and your descendants may live, loving YHWH your God, obeying him, and holding fast to him; for that means life to you and length of days, so that you may live in the land that YHWH swore to give to your ancestors, to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob.

– Deuteronomy 30:19-20

For the first time (though see 11:20) Ben Sira speaks of the ‘covenant’ (Greek: *diathēkē*; *διαθήκη*: it appears 22 times in his book).

Verse 13 draws on the revelation at Sinai (see Exodus 19:16-19). Verse 14 draws on the commandment to ‘love your neighbour as yourself’ (Leviticus 19:18).

The Psalmist states:

You have set our iniquities before you,
our secret sins in the light of your countenance.

– Psalm 90:8

Verse 17 may be speaking of the angel (earlier thought of as a god) who rules each nation, or it may reflect the common belief that all rulers were raised up by God for his mysterious purposes. In either case, Israel is special, being YHWH’s own personal domain (see Deuteronomy 32:9), his *segullâ* [שְׁגֻלָּה]; see Exodus 19:5; Deuteronomy 7:6; 14:2; 26:18; Psalm 135:4; Malachi 3:17]. God sees everything his people do. Nothing can be hidden from him.

This is true of every act of mercy, every kindness, carried out by his especially chosen people (verse 22).

In verse 24 Ben Sira asserts that it is possible for those who do evil to ‘repent’ (Greek: *metanoëō*; μετανοέω; only here and in 48:15). Jeremiah, too, assures us:

If you turn back, I will take you back.

– Jeremiah 15:19

‘Encourage’ translates the Greek *parakaleō* [παρακαλέω - used here by Ben Sira for the first time] – to exhort, to comfort, to come in response to a call. When things get hard and we find it difficult to endure, God comes to our aid (see 16:13).

¹³Their eyes saw his glorious majesty, and their ears heard his glorious voice. ¹⁴He says to them, “Beware of all evil.” And he gives commandments to each of them concerning their neighbours.

¹⁵Their ways are always known to him; they cannot be hidden from his eyes.

Verse 16 appears to be a later addition to the text of Ben Sira

¹⁷He appoints a ruler for every nation, but Israel is YHWH’s own portion.

Verse 18 appears to be a later addition to the text of Ben Sira

¹⁹All their actions are as clear to him as the sun, his eyes are ever upon their ways. ²⁰Their iniquities cannot be hidden from him, all their sins are known to YHWH.

Verse 21 appears to be a later addition to the text of Ben Sira

²²One’s almsgiving is like a signet ring with YHWH, a kindness is like the apple of his eye.

²³Afterward he will rise up and repay them, and he will recompense each one of them as they deserve.

²⁴Yet to those who repent he grants a return, and he encourages those who are in danger of losing patience.

²⁵Turn back to YHWH and forsake your sins; pray in his presence and lessen your offence. ²⁶Return to the Most High and turn away from iniquity, and hate intensely what he abhors.

²⁷Who will sing praises to the Most High in Hades in place of the living who give thanks? ²⁸From the dead, as from one who has never existed, thanksgiving has ceased; those who are alive and well sing YHWH's praises.

²⁹How great are YHWH's acts of kindness, and his restoring to communion those who return to him!

³⁰This is beyond human capability, since human beings are not immortal.

³¹What is brighter than the sun? Yet it can be eclipsed. How obscure then are the thought of flesh and blood.

³²God marshals the host of the height of heaven; but all human beings are dust and ashes.

Verses 25-32 develop the call to repentance (see verse 24). For repentance to be true we must stop sinning, turn to God in prayer and commit ourselves to lessening our offences. Ben Sira knows that our frailty is such that we cannot eliminate sin altogether.

In verses 27-28 Ben Sira gives expression to the traditional view that life (communion with God) ends with physical death (see 14:13-19, page 78). Only the living can praise God – which is an encouragement to repent, since God may respond by keeping us alive in order to receive our praise!

Verse 29 extols YHWH's acts of kindness (Greek: *eleēmosunē*; ἐλεημοσύνη), and his restoring to communion (Greek: *exilasmos*; ἐξίλασμός; see 5:5; 16:11), those who turn away from sin and turn back to him.

We cannot grasp the extent of God's love, because we are incapable of loving as God loves.

Even the sun, wonderful as it is, can be eclipsed. How much more can we humans fail to enlighten, fail to love. Not so God.

The hosts of heaven are accountable to God. How much more we weak human beings. However, we are but 'dust and ashes' (verse 32; see 10:9), so Ben Sira will go on to speak of God's judgment as accommodating to our inherent weakness.

The only Hebrew text we have of chapter 18 is verses 32-33. Ben Sira concludes this section in a hymn of praise of our righteous and merciful judge. He wants to instil in his students faith in the transcendent and mysterious God who loves us and who is concerned for us. We are mortal. Our God 'lives forever' (verse 1), and his judgments are always 'just' (verse 2).

Try as we might, it is impossible for us to grasp the glory of God and the extent of God's mercy as revealed in his creation (verses 4-7).

In verse 8 Ben Sira is echoing the Psalmist:

What are human beings that you are
mindful of them, mortals that you care
for them?

– Psalm 8:4 (see Psalm 144:3; Job 7:17)

'Large-hearted' (verse 11) translates the Greek *makrothumēō* [μακροθυμέω]. This is sometimes translated 'patient'. It is not the patience of putting up with difficulty. Rather, it is the patience of continuing to pour out love ('mercy', Greek *eleos*; ἔλεος).

'Restoration of communion' (verse 12), as in 17:29, translates the Greek *exilasmōs*.

Verse 13 stresses the universality of God's compassion (Greek *eleos*; ἔλεος). He does for his creatures all that a shepherd (the only time Ben Sira uses this image) does for the flock in his care (compare Psalm 23; Isaiah 40:6; Ezekiel 34:11-16). God's compassion is for every living thing. It is those who 'accept his discipline and are eager to carry out his precepts' who receive and welcome God's gift.

¹He who lives forever judges the whole universe; ²YHWH alone is just.

Verse 3 appears to be a later addition to the text of Ben Sira

⁴To none has he given power to bring about his works; and who can probe his mighty deeds? ⁵Who can measure his majestic power? And who can fully recount his mercies?

⁶It is not possible to diminish or increase them, nor is it possible to fathom the wonders of the Lord.

⁷When human beings have finished, they are just beginning, and when they stop, they are still perplexed.

⁸What are human beings, and of what use are they? What is good in them, and what is evil? ⁹The number of days in their life is great if they reach one hundred years. ¹⁰Like a drop of water from the sea and a grain of sand, so are these few years among the days of eternity.

¹¹That is why YHWH is large-hearted with them and pours out his mercy upon them.

¹²He sees and recognises that their end is miserable; therefore he grants them a restoration of communion all the more.

¹³The compassion of human beings is for their neighbours, but the compassion of the Lord is for every living thing, rebuking, disciplining, teaching, and directing them, as a shepherd his flock. ¹⁴He has compassion on those who accept his discipline and who are eager to carry out his precepts.

Gift giving, preparedness, and vows

¹⁵My son, do not mix reproach with your good deeds, or spoil your gift by harsh words. ¹⁶Does not the dew give relief from the scorching heat? So a word transforms a gift. ¹⁷Sometimes the word means more than the gift? Both are offered by a gracious person. ¹⁸Only a fool is ungracious in giving: a gift of a grudging giver casts a shadow over the expectant eyes.

¹⁹Before you speak, get the facts; and before you fall ill, take care of your health. ²⁰Before judgment comes, examine yourself; and at the time of scrutiny you will find forgiveness.

²¹Before you fall, humble yourself; and when you have sinned, manifest your repentance. Do not delay in forsaking sins, do not put off repenting till you are in distress. Do not set a time for abandoning sin; remember that death will not delay.

²²Let nothing hinder you from carrying out your vows promptly, and do not wait until you are dying to fulfil them. ²³Before making a vow, make sure you can carry it out; do not be like one who puts YHWH to the test. ²⁴Think of his wrath on the day of death, and of the moment of punishment when he turns away his face. ²⁵In the time of plenty remember the time of hunger; in days of wealth think of poverty and need. ²⁶From morning to evening conditions change; all things move swiftly before YHWH.

God's kindness (18:1-14) inspires us to model ourselves on him in the courtesy we show each other. The manner in which we offer a gift makes all the difference to the offering. A gift is only truly a gift when we give ourselves in love.

Just as we should get the facts before we speak, and just as we should not wait to be sick to take care of our health, so we should examine the way we are living and not wait for divine judgment. Then God's judgment will not be punishment but 'forgiveness' (verse 20; Greek: *exilamos*; ἐξίλασμός; see 5:5; 16:11; 18:20)

On the importance of 'humility' (verse 21) see 3:18-24, pages 36-39). This is the first time Ben Sira has used the noun 'repentance' (Greek: *epistrophē*; ἐπιστροφή; though see the verb *metanoō*; μετανοῶ 17:24). We should not put off repentance since sin brings on an untimely death (see Deuteronomy 28:15-20).

Ben Sira turns his attention to the taking of vows, and warns his students to be circumspect (verses 22-23). In verse 24 he reminds them of God's 'wrath' (see 1:11-21, pages 19-22, and 5:6, page 50). The thought of death reminds us of the passing nature of life. It matters what we do and we will be judged accordingly, so we should be very careful before we make solemn promises to God. If we fail to carry them out we will be punished.

A wise person heeds the instructions just given in 18:15-26. The wise do not fit in with the crowd or let their behaviour be determined by their peer group.

Furthermore, we should extol the virtues of wisdom and share the wisdom we have with others.

In 18:30 – 19:4 Ben Sira warns his students against following their inordinate desires. The freedom that wisdom gives enables us not to be driven by desire, the plaything of our compulsions and addictions. If we fail to exercise control over our passions, we will end up a laughing stock, and we will also bring on financial ruin, poor health and an untimely death.

Verses 32-33 are the only verses in chapter 18 of which we have the Hebrew original. Likewise verses 1-2 are the only verses in chapter 19.

To sin in this way is to harm one's self (psychē; see 6:2-4, page 50, and 14:2, page 75). We recall Jesus' words:

What will it profit you if you gain
the whole world but forfeit your life
(psychē)? What can you give in return
for your life?

– Matthew 16:26

²⁷One who is wise is circumspect in everything; when sin is all around, he guards against wrongdoing.

²⁸Every intelligent person knows wisdom, and the one who attains to her should praise her. ²⁹Those who are skilled in her words become wise themselves, and pour forth apt proverbs.

³⁰Do not follow your base desires, but restrain your appetites. ³¹If you allow your soul to take pleasure in base desire, it will make you the laughingstock of your enemies. ³²Do not revel in the pleasures of a moment, they bring on a double measure of poverty.

³³Do not become a beggar by feasting with borrowed money when you have nothing in your purse. ^{19:1}The one who does this will not become rich. If you waste the little you have you will end up with nothing.

²Wine and women lead intelligent men astray, and the man who consorts with prostitutes is reckless.

³Decay and worms will take possession of him, and the reckless person will be snatched away.

⁴One who trusts others too quickly has a shallow mind, and one who sins does wrong to himself.

How to deal with gossip

⁵One who rejoices in wickedness will be condemned; ⁶one who repeats an evil report has no sense. ⁷Never repeat gossip and you will not be reviled. ⁸With friend or foe do not report it; and unless withholding it would be a sin for you, do not reveal it; ⁹for the person who hears it will hold it against you, and in time become your enemy. ¹⁰Have you heard something? Let it die with you. Be assured it will not make you burst! ¹¹When a fool hears something, he suffers birth pangs like a woman in labour with a child. ¹²Like an arrow lodged in a person's thigh, so is gossip inside a fool. ¹³Check with a friend; perhaps he did not do it; or if he did, that he may not do it again. ¹⁴Check with a neighbour; perhaps he did not say it; or if he said it, that he may not repeat it. ¹⁵Check with a friend, for often it is slander; do not believe everything you hear. ¹⁶A person may make a slip without intending it. Who has not sinned with his tongue? ¹⁷Check with your neighbour before you threaten him; and let the law of the Most High take its course.

Verses 18-19 are an expansion of Ben Sira's text.

Verses 5-12 speak of the evils of gossip. Having spoken of the dangers of inordinate desire, he turns to the evils of the tongue.

Verse 8 makes the point that there are times when we have to witness to the wrong done by another. An example would be when one has sworn to tell the truth in a court of law.

Otherwise, Ben Sira astutely shows up the evil of spreading gossip.

In verses 13-17, he tells his students to check the facts before they jump to conclusions when they hear bad things about a neighbour or a friend.

Ben Sira's final remark draws on the following:

You shall reprove your neighbour, or you will incur guilt yourself. You shall not take vengeance or bear a grudge against any of your people, but you shall love your neighbour as yourself.

– Leviticus 19:17-18

Ben Sira equates wisdom (see pages 16-18) with 'fear of YHWH' (see 1:11-21, pages 19-23), and 'fulfilment of the Law' (the Torah).

One can know a lot, but lack wisdom. One can offer plenty of advice, but lack prudence (verse 22)

One can be clever in many ways but still be abominable to God because one fancies oneself as self-sufficient. Such people might look down on you as being a fool, but if you are free from sin you are truly wise.

Crafty people know how to manipulate in order to get the verdict they want. They are clever, but it is worthless for they lack justice.

Don't get sucked in by their outward show, for they are hypocrites. They pretend to be taking no notice, but they are waiting for the opportunity to strike. He may even appear virtuous, but it is only because he is waiting for the chance to get the upper hand.

Ben Sira's students need to discern character. You can work out a lot about people from the way they present themselves.

²⁰The whole of wisdom is fear of YHWH; the fulness of wisdom is the fulfilment of the law.

Verse 21 is an expansion of Ben Sira's text.

²²Knowledge of wickedness is not wisdom, nor is there prudence in the counsel of sinners.

²³There is a cleverness that is detestable, and you can be considered a fool, but be free from sin.

²⁴Better are the God-fearing who lack understanding than the highly intelligent who transgress the law.

²⁵There is a cleverness that is exact but unjust; there are people who practise duplicity to gain a verdict.

²⁶There is the villain who outwardly is bowed down in grief, but inwardly he is full of deceit.

²⁷He hides his face and pretends not to hear, but when no one notices, he will take advantage of you.

²⁸Even if lack of strength keeps him from sinning, he will nevertheless do evil when he finds the opportunity.

²⁹A person is known by his appearance, and a sensible person is known when first met, face to face.

³⁰A person's attire and hearty laughter, and the way he walks, show him for what he is.

Speech and silence

¹There is a rebuke that is untimely, and there is the person who is wise enough to keep silent.

²How much better it is to rebuke than to fume!

³And the one who admits his fault will be kept from failure.

⁴Like a eunuch lusting to violate a girl is the person who does right under compulsion.

⁵Some people keep silent and are thought to be wise, while others are detested for being talkative.

⁶Some people keep silent because they have nothing to say, while others keep silent because they know when to speak.

⁷The wise remain silent until the right moment, but a boasting fool misses the right moment.

⁸Whoever talks too much is detested, and whoever pretends to authority is hated.

In 19:13-17 Ben Sira warned against acting on hearsay without checking the facts. Here he offers sage advice: it is sometimes wise to remain silent. Then again, it is better to say something than to refrain from speaking while fuming inside. Speaking out can clear the air. It can also give the accused person a chance to explain and perhaps diffuse the situation. If he is guilty it gives him the opportunity to apologise, which might settle things down. The courage to speak is better than storing up ill feeling and spreading gossip by speaking to others, when we lack the courage to be direct with the person with whom we are angry.

Doing the right thing must come from a person's free decision. You can't force a person to be upright (verse 4).

Verses 5-8 continue the theme of wisdom in regard to when to speak and when to be silent. Verses 5-7 are the only verses in chapter 20, apart from verse 13, for which we have the Hebrew original.

The underlying theme of the maxims contained in verses 9-17 seems to be to remain true whatever happens. Appearances can deceive, and we never know how things might turn out. We may suffer misfortune only to find that things work out well in the end. We may receive a gift only to find that it costs us. We may be humiliated, but the humiliation may work to our good and we may end up winning the admiration of others. The moral appears to be that we should not seek success; rather, seek what is true, whatever the cost.

What matters is that we be wise (verse 13).

Be careful who you accept gifts from.

People see through a person who is ostentatious in generosity but only in order to acquire a good name. It doesn't work (verses 16-17).

Verses 18-20 contain advice about avoiding inappropriate speech.

⁹Some misfortunes bring success; a windfall may result in a loss.

¹⁰There is the gift that profits you nothing, and some must be paid back double.

¹¹Humiliation can follow fame, while from obscurity a person can lift up his head.

¹²Some buy much for little, but pay for it seven times over.

¹³The wise make themselves beloved by only few words, but the pleasures of fools are wasted.

¹⁴A gift from a rogue will profit you nothing, for he looks for recompense sevenfold. ¹⁵He gives little and upbraids much; he raises his voice like a town crier. Today he lends and tomorrow he asks it back; hateful indeed is such a one.

¹⁶The fool says, "I have no friends, and I get no thanks for my good deeds. Those who eat my bread are evil-tongued." ¹⁷How many will ridicule him, and how often!

¹⁸A slip on the pavement is better than a slip of the tongue; the downfall of the wicked will occur just as speedily.

¹⁹A delicacy badly served is a tale untimely told. The ignorant are always ready to offer it

²⁰A proverb from a fool's lips will be rejected; he does not tell it at the proper time.

Various maxims

²¹A person may be prevented from sinning by poverty; when he rests he need feel no remorse.

²²One may lose one's life through shame, and bring on one's own ruin by foolish behaviour. ²³Another out of shame makes promises to a friend, and so makes an enemy for nothing.

²⁴A lie is an ugly blot on a person; it is continually on the lips of the ignorant. ²⁵A thief is preferable to a habitual liar, but the lot of both is ruin. ²⁶A liar's way leads to disgrace, and his shame is ever with him.

²⁷The wise person advances himself by his words, and one who is prudent pleases the great.

²⁸Those who cultivate the soil heap up their harvest, and those who please the great atone for guilt. ²⁹Favours and gifts blind the eyes; like a muzzle on the mouth they stop reproof.

³⁰Hidden wisdom and unseen treasure, of what value is either? ³¹Better are those who hide their folly than those who hide their wisdom.

Poverty is not all bad. It may protect you from sin, and mean finding repose with a clear conscience (verse 21).

We must not let shame determine our behaviour. Doing what is right, and doing it in love, is all that matters.

Verses 24-26 deal with the evils of lying (see 7:13, page 57).

The final verses of chapter 20 offer various maxims contrasting wisdom and folly. 'The great' appears to refer to the Gentile rulers in Judea. It is by behaving according to wisdom that the Jewish subjects will please their rulers. Ben Sira is probably reflecting on Joseph in the court of the Pharaoh, Mordecai in the Book of Esther, Ahiqar in the court of Esarhaddon, and Daniel in the Babylonian court.

The rulers may not approve of certain Jewish practices. The best way to get them to overlook their disapproval is to cultivate their respect through behaving wisely. This is the best gift to offer. It has the effect of turning the attention of the rulers away from their disapproval.

Wisdom is not something to be hidden (verses 30-31).

From 21:1 to 25:6 we have only the Septuagint to rely on. Nothing of the Hebrew text has as yet been recovered.

Ben Sira focuses here on sin (Greek verb: hamartanō; ἁμαρτανω; see 2:11, pages 28-29). Verse 2 alludes to the story of the snake that tempted Eve in the garden (see Genesis 3:1-5). In the Newer Testament 1Peter 5:8 compares the devil to a lion.

The desperation of the proud to find security in wealth ultimately leads to their destruction. It is the poor, those who know that their need can be met only by God and who cry out to him – it is the poor whose cry is heard.

Verse 6 is a warning to those who reject discipline and correction. The path on which they walk leads away from communion with God. By contrast, those who live their lives in humble deference to the presence and action of God (those who ‘fear YHWH’, see 1:11-21, pages 19-23), acknowledge their sin, turn towards God and enjoy communion (verse 7).

The first part of verse 7 is ironic. Those who big note themselves are widely known (so widely known that everyone except themselves can see their faults!). By contrast the wise person sees his faults and does something about them.

Those who acquire wealth at other people’s expense are building their own grave. They will be punished by a premature death. Fire takes readily to the short coarse fibres of flax. So will their lives be consumed and they will end their existence ‘in the pit of Hades’(verse 10).

¹Have you sinned, my son? Do so no more, and ask forgiveness for your past sins. ²Flee from sin as from a snake; for if you approach sin, it will bite you. Its teeth are lion’s teeth, and can destroy human lives. ³All lawlessness is like a two-edged sword; there is no healing for the wound it inflicts.

⁴Panic and insolence will waste away riches; thus the house of the proud will be laid waste. ⁵The prayer of the poor goes from their lips to the ears of God, and his judgment comes speedily.

⁶Those who hate reproof walk in the sinner’s steps, but those who fear YHWH repent in their heart.

⁷The mighty in speech are widely known; the wise person knows when he slips.

⁸Whoever builds his house with other people’s money is gathering stones for his burial mound. ⁹An assembly of the wicked is like a bundle of tow, and their end is a blazing fire. ¹⁰The way of sinners is paved with smooth stones, but at its end is the pit of Hades.

¹¹Whoever keeps the law controls his impulses; and whoever is perfect in the fear of YHWH has wisdom.

¹²The one who is not shrewd cannot be taught, but there is a shrewdness that increases bitterness.

¹³The knowledge of the wise will increase like a flood, and their counsel like a life-giving spring. ¹⁴The mind of a fool is like a broken cistern; it can hold no knowledge.

¹⁵When an intelligent person hears a wise saying, he praises it and adds to it; when a fool hears it, he laughs at it and casts it behind his back.

¹⁶A fool's chatter is like a burden on a journey, but delight is found in the speech of the intelligent.

¹⁷The utterance of a sensible person is sought in the assembly, and they ponder his words in their hearts.

¹⁸Like a house in ruins is wisdom to a fool, and to the ignorant, knowledge is talk that has no meaning.

¹⁹To a senseless person education is like fetters on his feet, like manacles on his right hand.

²⁰A fool raises his voice when he laughs, but the wise smile quietly.

²¹To the sensible person education is like a golden ornament, and like a bracelet on the right arm.

It is wisdom to 'fear YHWH'(see 1:11-21, pages 19-23), that is, to 'keep the law'. This involves disciplining the impulses that tempt us to walk a path other than that directed by God.

We need to keep our wits about us if we are to learn, but we can be too smart for our own good, and there is no joy in that (verse 12).

The imagery of verses 13-14 draws on Jeremiah 2:23

My people have committed two evils: they have forsaken me, the fountain of living water, and dug out cisterns for themselves, cracked cisterns that can hold no water.

In verse 15 Ben Sira continues the contrast between the wise and the fool, as also in verses 16-17.

Foolish people consider wisdom a restriction on their free-wheeling life (verse 19). They can't live with it. They can't make sense of it (verse 18).

Verse 20 exemplifies the lack of constraint in the life of a person who lacks wisdom. Education is felt by fools as a constriction. For the wise it is worn with pride (verse 21).

Ben Sira continues to point out the contrast between the behaviour of the wise and the behaviour of those who cast off the discipline of education.

²²A rude person steps straight into a house, an well-bred person waits respectfully outside.

²³A boor peers into the house from the door, but a cultivated person lowers his eyes.

²⁴It is ill-mannered for a person to listen at a door; the cultivated person would be grieved by the disgrace.

²⁵The lips of babblers speak of what is not their concern, but the words of the prudent are weighed in the balance.

²⁶The mind of fools is in their mouth, the words of the wise come from their heart.

Verses 27-28 deal with cursing and slander. ‘Adversary’ (verse 27) translates the Greek *satanas* (σατανᾶς), which occurs only here in the Septuagint Greek Bible. It occurs 36 times in the Newer Testament. The Hebrew behind it would have been *šāṭān* (שָׂטָן), whence the English ‘satan’, which came to be applied to the devil.

²⁷When an ungodly person curses an adversary, he curses himself.

When a person with no respect for God curses someone, his curse recoils on his own head. As God said to Abraham:

I will bless those who bless you, and
the one who curses you I will curse.

– Genesis 12:3

One who uses untruths to blacken the name of another end up putting himself down, and losing the respect of his neighbours.

²⁸A slanderer degrades himself and is hated in his neighbourhood.

The idler and the fool

¹The idler is like a filthy stone, and everyone hisses at his disgrace. ²The idler is like the filth of dunghills; anyone that picks it up will shake it off his hand.

³It is a disgrace to be the father of an undisciplined son, if it be a daughter his reputation is lost.

⁴A sensible daughter is a treasure to her husband; one who acts shamefully is a grief to her father. ⁵An impudent daughter disgraces father and husband, and is despised by both.

⁶Like music in time of mourning is ill-timed talk, but a thrashing and discipline are at all times wisdom.

Verses 7-8 appear to be a later addition to the text of Ben Sira

⁹Whoever teaches a fool is like one who glues potsherds together, or who rouses a sleeper from deep slumber. ¹⁰Whoever tells a story to a fool tells it to a drowsy man; and at the end he will say, "What was that?"

¹¹Weep for the dead, for he has left the light behind; and weep for the fool, for he has left intelligence behind. Weep less bitterly for the dead, for he is at rest; but the life of the fool is worse than death.

¹²Mourning for the dead lasts seven days, but for the foolish or the ungodly it lasts all the days of their lives.

To get the impact of the imagery in verse 1 we need to know that stones were used for wiping oneself after a bowel movement.

Derision and contempt were expressed by hissing. Verse 2 continues the strong language to state the disgust felt against an idler.

The first part of verse 3 needs no explaining. The second half witnesses to the anti-female bias of the day. Every father wanted sons, not daughters.

However, if one has a daughter she should be sensible. Her value will then derive from the benefit she will bring to her husband! If she is not sensible she will bring shame on the men in her life!

Discipline needs more than talk (verse 6).

Gluing bits of broken pottery together will produce a badly functioning pot. You can't expect people to be alert immediately after you rouse them from a deep sleep. It is equally foolish to think you can teach wisdom to someone who has no interest in it.

It is appropriate to weep for the dead. The light of life has gone out and there is no life beyond the grave. One should also weep more for the fool, for he lacks the light of intelligence, and so, from the human perspective, is as good as dead.

It was the custom to mourn the dead for seven days. Mourning for one who lacks wisdom has no end. It lasts throughout the whole of his 'life'!

Ben Sira advises his students to avoid the company of foolish people. In verse 13 we have the image of a pig spattering mud around when it shakes itself after wallowing in the mire.

A fool and his talk weigh down upon others heavier than does lead (verse 14). He is more of a burden than 'sand, salt and a lump of iron' (verse 15).

By contrast, the wise who determine on an action after careful deliberation, are like a solidly constructed building. They are not easily shaken even by an earthquake (verse 16). They are as enduring as the stucco decorations that embellish the walls of a palace.

The fool's resolve is compared to the loose stones placed on top of the walls surrounding habitations, vineyards and orchards. When a feral animal jumped the fence it dislodged these stones thus alerting the owner. Being exposed and loose the stones were easily swept aside. So is the fickle heart of a fool.

¹³Do not talk much with a senseless person or keep company with an uncultured person. Stay clear of him, or you may have trouble, and be spattered when he shakes himself. Avoid him and you will find rest, and you will never be wearied by his lack of sense.

¹⁴What is heavier than lead? And what is its name except "Fool"?

¹⁵Sand, salt, and a lump of iron are easier to bear than a stupid person.

¹⁶A wooden beam firmly bonded into a building is not loosened by an earthquake; so the heart firmly resolved after due reflection will not be afraid in a crisis. ¹⁷A mind settled on an intelligent thought is like stucco decoration that makes a wall smooth.

¹⁸Small stones set on a high place will not stand firm against the wind; so a timid mind with a fool's resolve will not stand firm against any fear.

Friendship

¹⁹One who pricks the eye brings tears, and one who pricks the heart lays bare its feelings. ²⁰One who throws a stone at birds scares them away, and one who insults a friend destroys a friendship.

²¹Even if you draw your sword against a friend, do not despair, for there is a way back. ²²If you speak sharply to a friend, do not worry, for reconciliation is possible.

But as for reviling, arrogance, disclosure of secrets, or a treacherous blow – these will drive any friend away.

²³Gain the trust of your neighbour in his poverty, so that you may rejoice with him in his prosperity. Stand by him in time of distress, so that you may share with him in his inheritance.

²⁴The vapour and smoke of the furnace precede the fire; so insults precede bloodshed.

²⁵From a friend in need of support do not hide in shame. ²⁶If harm should come to him because of you, whoever hears of it will beware of you.

²⁷Who will set a guard over my mouth, and an effective seal upon my lips, so that I may not fall because of them, and my tongue may not destroy me?

Ben Sira now counsels his students on how friendship can be destroyed, on how to avoid hurting a friend, and on the obligations that friendship brings. We are careful how we protect our eyes. The heart, too, needs to be treated delicately.

We can make mistakes in friendship, even serious ones, but we shouldn't despair. Reconciliation is possible (verses 21-22).

There is no way back from the behaviour described in the second part of verse 22. It fractures friendship and irreparably destroys it.

There is a special quality about friendship with a poor person: the friendship is clearly with the person and not because of his wealth. If he ever becomes rich you, as a friend, will share in it. Similarly when a friend falls on bad times. Remain faithful and you will be part of the blessing when his situation improves (verse 23).

Where there's smoke there's fire (verse 24). Just as surely insults are a symptom of a relationship that will soon descend into bloodshed.

No one respects a person who fails to stand by a friend in time of need (verses 25-26).

Ben Sira concludes his words on friendship with a prayer that he will be protected from the destruction that comes from the failure to watch one's tongue.

In verse 1 Ben Sira expresses God's relationship to him in an unusually intimate way, when he speaks of YHWH as 'Father of my life'.

In verses 2-6 Ben Sira asks God to protect him (and all who read his text) against pride, greed, lust, and other unruly passions. He knows the necessity of discipline if he is to avoid these pitfalls.

In verses 7-11 Ben Sira picks up on the prayer of 22:27. He dwells on sins of speech, with verses 9-11 focusing on words which call on God to witness the truth of what one is saying.

A person who is in the habit of swearing is failing to respect God's holy name (the subject of the second commandment of the decalogue; see Deuteronomy 5:11).

Furthermore, if a person does take an oath, and fails to speak the truth or carry out what he has sworn he will do, 'he sins doubly' (verse 11). He is guilty of failing to respect God (fear YHWH). He is guilty also of using God to support a falsehood.

¹YHWH, Father and Master of my life, do not abandon me to their designs, and do not let me fall because of them!

²Who will set whips to my thoughts, and the discipline of wisdom over my mind, so as not to spare me in my errors, and not overlook my sins? ³Otherwise my mistakes may be multiplied, and my sins may abound, and I may fall before my adversaries, and my enemy may rejoice over me. ⁴YHWH, Father and God of my life, do not give me haughty eyes, ⁵and remove evil desire from me. ⁶Let neither gluttony nor lust overcome me, and do not give me over to shameless passion.

⁷Listen, my children, to the instruction from my mouth; the one who observes it will never be caught.

⁸Sinners are overtaken through their lips; by them the reviler and the arrogant are tripped up.

⁹Do not accustom your mouth to oaths, nor habitually utter the name of the Holy One; ¹⁰for as a servant who is constantly under scrutiny will not lack welts, so also the person who always swears and utters the Name will not remain free from sin. ¹¹The one who swears many oaths is full of iniquity, and the scourge will not leave his house. If he swears in error, his sin remains on him, and if he disregards his obligation, he sins doubly; if he swears a false oath, he will not be justified, for his house will be filled with calamities.

¹²There is a manner of speaking which merits death; may it never be found in the inheritance of Jacob! Such conduct will be far from the godly, who do not wallow in sins.

¹³Do not accustom your mouth to coarse, foul language, for it involves sinful speech. ¹⁴Remember your father and mother when you sit among the great, or you may forget yourself in their presence, and behave like a fool and disgrace your upbringing; then you will wish that you had never been born, and you will curse the day of your birth. ¹⁵Those who are accustomed to using abusive talk will never become disciplined as long as they live.

¹⁶Two kinds of individuals multiply sins, and a third incurs wrath. Hot passion that blazes like a fire will not be quenched until it burns itself out; one who commits fornication with his near of kin will never cease until the fire burns him up. ¹⁷To a fornicator all bread is sweet; he will never weary until he dies.

¹⁸The one who sins against his marriage bed says to himself, "Who can see me? Darkness surrounds me, the walls hide me, and no one sees me. Why should I worry?" He is not mindful of the Most High.

¹⁹His fear is confined to human eyes and he does not realize that the eyes of YHWH are ten thousand times brighter than the sun; they look upon every aspect of human behavior and see into hidden corners. ²⁰Before the universe was created, it was known to him, and so it is since its completion.

²¹This man will be denounced in the streets of the city, and where he least suspects it, he will be seized.

In verses 12-15 Ben Sira continues to speak against sins of the tongue: blasphemy ('speaking which merits death', verse 12), coarse language (verse 13), which brings shame on your parents, and abusive talk (verse 15).

In verse 16 Ben Sira returns to the topic of unruly passion, introduced in verses 2-6.

In verses 18-21 he speaks of the way an adulterer fools himself in his thinking. At the heart of his self-deception is the fact that he fails to remember or fear God. His only concern is not to be found out by other humans. Can't he see that nothing is hidden from God? God will see that he is found out and he will suffer the punishment required by the Law.

Ben Sira now speaks of the woman who commits adultery. She commits a threefold offence. First and foremost she is breaking God's Law (see Deuteronomy 5:18). She is also offending against the rights of her husband. Thirdly she is running the risk of having a child by a man other than her husband.

Such was the mores of the day that Ben Sira did not think of making parallel accusations against the male involved who sins against his wife's rights, and may have a child by a woman other than his wife!

Her punishment will extend to children born outside marriage. Such children were considered as not belonging to the congregation of Israel.

Verse 27 neatly sums up the main theme of the first four sections of the book (from 1:1 to 23:26). The fear of YHWH essentially means heeding his commands.

²²So it is with a woman who is unfaithful to her husband and presents him with an heir by another man.

²³For first of all, she has disobeyed the law of the Most High; second, she has committed an offence against her husband; and third, through her fornication she has committed adultery and brought forth children by another man.

²⁴She herself will be brought before the assembly, and her punishment will extend to her children. ²⁵Her children will not take root, and her branches will not bear fruit. ²⁶She will leave behind an accursed memory and her disgrace will never be blotted out.

²⁷Those who survive her will recognise that nothing is better than the fear of YHWH, and nothing sweeter than to heed his commandments.

