

SIRACH 33:19 – 38:23

¹⁹Hear me, you who are leaders among the people, and you who are in charge of the congregation, pay heed!

²⁰To son or wife, to brother or friend, do not give power over yourself, as long as you live; and do not give your property to another, lest you have to plead for support yourself.

²¹While you are still alive and have breath in you, do not let anyone take your place. ²²For it is better that your children should ask from you than that you should depend on their generosity. ²³Keep control over all your affairs; bring no stain upon your honour. ²⁴At the time when you end the days of your life, in the hour of death, distribute your inheritance.

²⁵Fodder and a stick and burdens for a donkey; bread and discipline and work for a slave. ²⁶Set your slave to work, and he will seek rest; leave his hands idle, and he will seek to be free. ²⁷Yoke and thong will bow the neck, and for a wicked slave punishment in the stocks. ²⁸Put him to work, in order that he may not be idle, ²⁹for idleness teaches much evil.

³⁰Set him to work, as is fitting for him, and if he does not obey, make his fetters heavy. However, do not be overbearing toward anyone, and do nothing unjust.

³¹If you have but one slave, treat him like yourself; your life's blood went into his purchase. If you have but one slave, treat him like a brother, for you will need him as you need your life. ³²If you ill-treat him, and he leaves you and runs away, ³³which way will you go to seek him?

The Hebrew for this text has been recovered.

Ben Sira is instructing his students not to put themselves under the power of significant family members. If they do they will live to regret it. It is right that these people should depend upon the man of the family, not the other way around.

They should wait till they are dying before distributing their property and wealth.

Slavery was an unquestioned part of the system. Ben Sira advocates firmness and even severity for lazy or refractory slaves (verses 27-30).

it is important, however, to take care to ensure that slaves are treated justly (verse 30). The Torah has injunctions that are meant to protect slaves from injustice (see Deuteronomy 15:12-18).

In verses 31-33, Ben Sira offers advice to a man who has only one slave. He will be wise to treat the slave well, since he depends on him.

Apart from a few words in verse 1, none of the Hebrew of chapter 34 has been recovered.

In verses 1-8 Ben Sira speaks out against relying on dreams, divination and omens. Dreams, according to him, merely reflect the expectations and fears of the dreamer. He can interpret them in any way he wants. We should not be guided by them.

Divinations and omens were traditionally forbidden (see Leviticus 19:26; Deuteronomy 18:10-14). We would not lump dreams in with such practices, nor does the Jewish tradition. In line with this tradition Ben Sira admits that God can use dreams to reveal his will (verse 6). There are many examples of this in the Bible, both Old and New Testaments.

However, God has given us the Law. The safest way to do God's will is to do what the Law requires (verse 8). 'Dreams have deceived many' (verse 7).

¹The senseless have vain and false hopes, and dreams give wings to fools. ²As one who catches at a shadow and pursues the wind, so is anyone who puts his trust in dreams. ³What is seen in dreams is but a reflection, the likeness of a face looking at itself.

⁴Can an unclean thing produce what is clean? Can a liar speak what is true?

⁵Divinations and omens and dreams are unreal; the mind has fantasies according to what you are expecting.

⁶Unless they are sent by intervention from the Most High, pay no attention to them. ⁷Dreams have deceived many, and those who put their hope in them have perished.

⁸Without such deceptions the law will be fulfilled, and wisdom is complete in the mouth of the faithful.

Truly blessed are those who ‘fear YHWH’

⁹An educated person knows many things; one with much experience knows what he is talking about. ¹⁰An inexperienced person knows little; ¹¹he that has travelled learns to be resourceful.

¹²I have seen many things in my travels, and I have learned more than I can express. ¹³I have often been in danger of death, but have escaped because of what I have learned from these experiences.

¹⁴The spirit of those who fear YHWH will live, ¹⁵for their hope is in him who saves them. ¹⁶Those who fear YHWH will not be timid, or play the coward, for he is their hope. ¹⁷Happy is the soul that fears YHWH!

¹⁸To whom does he look? And who is his support? ¹⁹The eyes of YHWH are on those who love him,

a mighty shield and strong support, a shelter from scorching wind and a shade from noonday sun, a guard against stumbling and a help against falling.

²⁰He lifts up the soul and makes the eyes sparkle; he gives health and life and blessing.

In verses 9-11 Ben Sira speaks of the value of a wide experience, and sees travel as important in gaining this.

He says that he has learned much from his travels (verses 12-13).

Verses 14-20 are a beautiful reflection on the communion with God and the blessings that are experienced by those who ‘fear YHWH’ (verse 14; see 1:11-21, pages 19-23), and whose hope is in the One who saves them’ (verse 15). On hope (ἐλπίς) see 2:6-9, page 26 and 14:2, page 77. There is a special happiness (verse 17). On happiness see 14:1-2, page 77, and 25:7-11, page 112.

Verse 19 repeats the words of the Psalmist:

Truly the eye of YHWH is on those who fear him, on those who hope in his steadfast love.

– Psalm 33:18

The images of verse 19 are traditional.

The Psalmist writes:

The precepts of YHWH are right, rejoicing the heart; the commandment of YHWH is clear, enlightening the eyes.

– Psalm 19:8

As background to verses 21-27 we go back to the earliest of the prophetic writings:

I hate, I despise your festivals, and I take no delight in your solemn assemblies. Even though you offer me your burnt offerings and grain offerings, I will not accept them; and the offerings of well-being of your fatted animals I will not look upon. Take away from me the noise of your songs; I will not listen to the melody of your harps. But let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever flowing stream.

– Amos 5:21-24

When what is offered to God has been acquired without regard to justice, it is ‘not acceptable’ (verse 22). ‘Forgive’ (verse 23) is ἐξιλάσκομαι (atone; see 3:3, page 32 and 28:5 page 119). Offering sacrifice might appear to be a religious act, but when what is offered has been unjustly acquired it is the act of an ‘ungodly’ (verse 23), irreligious, person.

God is ‘the father of orphans and defender of widows’ (Psalm 68:5). Far from exploiting the poor, we are obliged to support them (verses 24-27).

The unjustly rich think they are praying when they offer sacrifices. The deprived poor curse. But we know who YHWH listens to (verse 29).

Verse 31 makes the point that there is no benefit in doing penance for sin if we have no intention of putting a stop to the sinful behaviour (see Isaiah 58:3-7).

²¹If one sacrifices ill-gotten goods, the offering is blemished; ²²the gifts of the lawless are not acceptable.

²³The Most High is not pleased with the offerings of the ungodly, nor for a multitude of sacrifices does he forgive sins.

²⁴Like one who kills a son before his father’s eyes is the person who offers a sacrifice from the property of the poor.

²⁵Bread given to the needy means life for the poor; whoever deprives them of it is a murderer. ²⁶To take away a neighbour’s living is to commit murder; ²⁷to deprive an employee of wages is to shed blood.

²⁸When one builds and another tears down, what do they gain but hard work? ²⁹When one prays and another curses, to whose voice will YHWH listen? ³⁰If one washes after touching a corpse, and touches it again, what has been gained by washing? ³¹So if one fasts for his sins, and goes again and does the same things, who will listen to his prayer? And what has he gained by humbling himself?

Offering sacrifices

¹The one who keeps the law makes a great offering; ²the one who heeds the commandments makes a communion offering. ³The one who returns a kindness offers choice flour, ⁴and the one who gives alms sacrifices a thanksgiving offering. ⁵To keep from wickedness is pleasing to YHWH, and to forsake unrighteousness is atonement.

⁶Do not appear before YHWH empty-handed, ⁷for all that you offer is in fulfillment of the commandment.

⁸The offering of the righteous enriches the altar, and its pleasing odour rises before the Most High. ⁹The sacrifice of the righteous is acceptable, and it will never be forgotten.

¹⁰Be generous when you worship YHWH, and do not stint the first fruits of your hands. ¹¹With every gift show a cheerful face, and dedicate your tithe with gladness. ¹²Give to the Most High as he has given to you, and as generously as you can afford. ¹³For God is the one who repays, and he will repay you sevenfold.

We have recovered the Hebrew of this passage only for verses 11-13.

In verses 1-5 Ben Sira is in line with tradition in making the point that the sacrifice that God wants is to live according to the Torah. We recall Hosea (6:6):

I desire steadfast love and not sacrifice,
the knowledge of God rather than burnt offerings.

On communion sacrifice see Leviticus 3. On atonement see Sirach 3:3, page 32 and 28:5, page 119.

In verses 6-13 the focus is on the interior dispositions that should go with cult offerings. Living a life in accordance with the Torah is what ultimately matters, and this includes the obligation to offer sacrifices at the temple (verse 6).

The sacrifice referred to in verse 9 is the cereal offering (see Leviticus 2:1-16 and 6:14-23). Verse 8 refers to that portion of the cereal offering that was burnt on the altar.

Verses 10-13 encourage generosity, while recognising that one can offer only 'as you can afford' (verse 12). In the Newer Testament we hear Paul say:

God loves a cheerful giver.

– 2Corinthians 9:7

The Hebrew for most of this passage has been recovered. Ben Sira is warning his students not to exploit the powerless for whom YHWH has a special regard. If they are not living justly, they must not think they can bribe God as they might be able to use their wealth to get their way with an unjust judge. Typically, Ben Sira focuses on the orphan and the widow (verse 17).

YHWH your God is God of gods and Lord of lords, the great God, mighty and awesome, who is not partial and takes no bribe, who executes justice for the orphan and the widow, and who loves the strangers, providing them food and clothing.

– Deuteronomy 20:17-18

In verses 22-26, Ben Sira moves from a consideration of individual victims of oppression to focus on the nation which had been living under foreign rule for four hundred years. He is confident that God will ‘wreak vengeance on the nations’, ‘break the sceptres of the unrighteous’. and ‘judge the cause of his people’.

¹⁴Do not offer him a bribe, for he will not accept it; ¹⁵and do not rely on a dishonest sacrifice; for YHWH is the judge, and with him there is no partiality. ¹⁶He will not take sides against the poor; he will listen to the prayer of one who is wronged.

¹⁷He will not ignore the supplication of the orphan, or the widow when she pours out her complaint. ¹⁸Do not the tears of the widow running down her cheek ¹⁹cry out against the one who causes them to fall?

²⁰The one whose service is pleasing to YHWH will be accepted, and his prayer will reach to the clouds.

²¹The prayer of the humble pierces the clouds, and it will not rest until it reaches its goal; it will not desist until the Most High responds ²²and does justice for the righteous, and executes judgment.

Indeed, God will not delay, and like a warrior will not be patient until he breaks the backs of the merciless ²³and wreaks vengeance on the nations; till he destroys the multitude of the insolent, and breaks the sceptres of the unrighteous; ²⁴until he repays mankind according to their deeds, and the works of all according to their designs; ²⁵until he judges the cause of his people and makes them rejoice in his mercy.

²⁶His mercy is as welcome in time of distress as clouds of rain in time of drought.

Prayer for deliverance

**¹Save us, O God of the universe,
²and put all the nations in dread of
you.**

**³Lift up your hand against foreign
nations and let them see your might.
⁴As you have used us to show your
holiness to them, so use them to
show your glory to us. ⁵Then they
will know, as we have known, that
there is no God but you.**

**⁶Give new signs, and work new
wonders; ⁷make your right hand
and your arm glorious. ⁸Rouse your
anger, pour out your wrath; ⁹destroy
the adversary and wipe out the
enemy.**

**¹⁰Hasten the day, and remember the
appointed time; let people recount
your mighty deeds. ¹¹Let survivors
be consumed in the fiery wrath, and
may those who harm your people
meet destruction. ¹²Crush the heads
of hostile rulers who say, "There is
no one but ourselves."**

Following on from 35:22-26, Ben Sira breaks into a lament. The Hebrew for the whole of chapter 36 has been recovered. He begins with an acknowledgment of the universal nature of God's dominion. He is addressing his prayer to God, not as Israel's God, but as the God of the universe.

Ben Sira lived through the change of control of Palestine from Egypt to Syria, with the Seleucid victory in 198BC at Panias. Just as God has shown his holiness in using foreign nations to punish Judah for her sins, Ben Sira wants God to reveal his glory by punishing the foreign nations for oppressing Judah. In this way all nations will know, as Judah knows, that 'there is no God but you' (verse 5).

He wants God to repeat in his day the liberation that he effected through Moses, when he released Israel from slavery in Egypt. The language is traditional.

He speaks of the arrogance of the foreign oppressors, and presumably has especially in mind Antiochus III, who ruled Syria from 223-187. The foreign rulers think they are accountable only to themselves ('there is no one but ourselves', verse 12). Ben Sira wants God to show them that 'there is no one' but God (verse 5).

Not all the Israelites returned from their exile in Assyria, Babylon or Egypt. Ben Sira prays that everyone will come home to the land promised them by God.

For Israel as YHWH's firstborn:

You shall say to Pharaoh, 'Thus says YHWH: Israel is my firstborn son'.

– Exodus 4:22

With consolations I will lead them back, I will let them walk by brooks of water, in a straight path in which they shall not stumble; for I have become a father to Israel, and Ephraim is my firstborn son

– Jeremiah 31:9.

Jerusalem is the holy city because the Holy One has chosen to dwell there in the Temple sanctuary.

The Bible is full of the wonderful deeds God has done for his people. Ben Sira prays that God will act again in his own day. The prophets, too, have foretold God's saving action. Let their words come true in his day.

¹³Gather all the tribes of Jacob.

14 and 15 are missing from the numbering of the verses, though no material has been omitted. Verse 16 (as numbered) runs straight on from verse 13.

¹⁶Give them their inheritance, as at the beginning. ¹⁷Have compassion on the people called by your name, on Israel, whom you have named your firstborn.

¹⁸Take pity on the city of your sanctuary, Jerusalem, the place of your dwelling. ¹⁹Fill Zion with your majesty, and your temple with your glory.

²⁰Give evidence of your deeds of old; fulfill the prophecies spoken in your name. ²¹Reward those who wait for you and let your prophets be proved true.

²²Hear the prayers of your servants, according to your goodwill toward your people, and all who are on the earth will know that you are the God of the ages.

Choosing a wife, and a friend

²³The stomach will take any food, yet some foods are more agreeable than others. ²⁴The palate is the judge of delicacies that are being offered. Just so, the discriminating mind is to judge what is being offered in a deceitful way. ²⁵A perverse character causes grief; a person with experience will counter well.

²⁶A woman will accept any man as a husband, but some women make better wives than others. ²⁷A woman's beauty lights up a man's face; there is nothing that charms the eye more. ²⁸If kindness and humility mark her speech, her husband is more fortunate than other men.

²⁹He who acquires a wife gets his best possession, a helper fit for him and a pillar of support.

³⁰Where there is no fence, the property will be plundered; and where there is no wife, a man will become a fugitive and a wanderer. ³¹For who will trust an elusive robber who skips from city to city? So who will trust a man who has no nest, but lodges wherever night overtakes him?

^{37:1}Every friend says, "I too am a friend"; but some friends are friends only in name. ²Is it not a sorrow like that of death itself when a dear friend turns into an enemy? ³Alas, my friend! What are you made of, to cover the land with deceit? ⁴A harmful friend will look to share your table, but in time of trouble he is against you. ⁵A good friend will fight with you against a foe; in battle he will carry your shield. ⁶Do not forget a friend during the battle, and do not be unmindful of him when you distribute your spoils.

Verses 23-25 introduce the section 36:26 – 37:15 which speaks of the discernment needed to make a wise choice of the people we associate with.

The most important decision a man makes is his choice of a wife. Ben Sira deals with this first (verses 26-31). The opening statement witnesses to the fact that women in Ben Sira's day had no choice.

'A helper fit for him'(verse 29) echoes Genesis 2:18.

A man without a wife and home is restless and unreliable (verse 31).

Having spoken about the importance of choosing a wife, Ben Sira goes on to speak of being discerning about who your real friends are. Almost the whole Hebrew text for chapter 37 has been recovered.

We must be careful too in choosing whose counsel we seek.

A good counsellor needs to be objective and be concerned about your needs, and not his own (37:7-9).

It is especially important that we do not look for counsel from someone who, for whatever reason, is envious of us (verse 10).

Verse 11 appears to have a polygamous situation in mind. Verse 11 lists obvious examples of people we should not look to for counsel. They are sure to have their own interests at heart and not ours.

Verses 12-15 point us to where we should seek counsel. He mentions first a religious person who is concerned with God's Law, and who wants to see us do the right thing.

Verse 13 is of special importance. Ben Sira wants his students to consult their own heart, and to take advice only when it rings true. Of course we can deceive ourselves, and so he goes straight on to verse 15. When we want to know what to do, of first importance is that we pray to God, and that we truly want what God wants. If this is in place, we can then wisely trust our own heart, enlightened by those we trust.

⁷All counsellors praise the counsel they give, but some give counsel in their own interest. ⁸Be wary of a counsellor, and learn first what is his interest, for he will take thought for himself. He may cast the lot against you ⁹and tell you, "Your way is good," and then stand aside to see what happens to you.

¹⁰Do not consult the one who regards you with suspicion; hide your intentions from those who are envious of you.

¹¹Do not consult with a woman about her rival or with a coward about war, with a merchant about business or with a buyer about selling, with a miser about generosity or with the merciless about kindness, with an idler about work or with a seasonal labourer about completing his work, with a lazy servant about a big task – pay no attention to any advice they give.

¹²But associate with a godly person whom you know to be a keeper of the commandments, who is like-minded with yourself, and who will grieve with you if you fail.

¹³Heed the counsel of your own heart, for no one is more faithful to you than it is. ¹⁴For our own mind sometimes keeps us better informed than seven sentinels sitting high on a watchtower.

¹⁵But above all pray to the Most High that he may direct your way in truth.

¹⁶Talk comes before every deed, and thought precedes every undertaking.

¹⁷The mind is the root of all conduct; ¹⁸it sprouts four branches, good and evil, life and death; and it is the tongue that continually rules them.

¹⁹Some people may be clever enough to teach many, and yet appear to themselves as useless. ²⁰Though a person may be wise, if what he says is rejected, he will lack all enjoyment.

verse 21 is an addition to Ben Sira's text.

²²If a person is wise to his people's advantage, the fruits of his good sense will be praiseworthy. ²³If a person is wise to the advantage of his people, the fruits of his good sense will endure. ²⁴A wise person will have praise heaped upon him, and all who see him will call him happy. ²⁵The days of a person's life are numbered, but the days of Israel are without number. ²⁶One who is wise among his people will inherit honour, and his name will live forever.

²⁷My son, test yourself while you live; see what is bad for you and do not give in to it. ²⁸For not everything is good for everyone, and no one enjoys everything. ²⁹Do not be excessive in your enjoyments; do not eat without restraint; ³⁰for overeating brings sickness, and gluttony leads to nausea. ³¹Many have died of gluttony, but the one who guards against it prolongs his life.

In verses 16-20 Ben Sira stresses the importance of mindfulness. When it comes to sharing our wisdom, our words become very important, for it is through our words that we show and share our wisdom.

A person may indeed have a lot of wisdom to share, but if he lacks skill in speech, people won't listen and he won't enjoy the experience (verse 20).

In verses 22-26 Ben Sira speaks of the honour his students will enjoy if they are truly mindful and learn the art of rhetoric, so that they can effectively teach to others what they have learned.

As verse 25 notes, the wise man's life is limited. However, Israel will go on forever and so will the praise given to a wise teacher.

In verses 27-31 the students are told to be temperate. They are to be controlled and restrained in satisfying their appetites.

There is no joy or honour in making oneself sick and nauseous (verse 30).

The Hebrew for this passage has been recovered.

Ben Sira is stressing the special knowledge ('skill') that God has given to physicians. God, who in Exodus 15:26 is called Israel's 'healer' (רֹפֵא), has given doctors a share in this gift. They know how to discern the healing powers that God has made available through the various herbs (verse 4; compare Jeremiah 8:22; 46:11). In verse 5 Ben Sira alludes to the miracle of the sweetening of the water in Exodus 15:23-25.

The 'marvellous works, of verses 6-8 are the healing herbs that God has provided.

In verse 9 Ben Sira emphasises the need for prayer. If a sick person wants to find healing from God he should 'cleanse your heart from all sin' (verse 10). Behind this advice lies the traditional understanding of suffering as a divine punishment for sin (see Deuteronomy 28:21-29). Verse 11 refers to Leviticus 2:1-3.

The sick person can rely on the physician, since it is God who has given him his knowledge, and since the physician is also praying to God for the healing of his patient.

To dismiss the knowledge given by God to the physician is to sin against the Creator (verse 15).

¹Honour physicians for their services, for it is God who has established them in their profession; ²Their gift of healing comes from God, and they are rewarded by the king. ³The skill of physicians makes them distinguished, and in the presence of the great they are admired. ⁴God makes the earth yield healing herbs, and sensible people will not despise them. ⁵Was not water made sweet with a tree in order that its power might be known?

⁶He gave skill to human beings that he might be glorified in his marvellous works. ⁷By them the physician heals and takes away pain; ⁸the pharmacist makes a mixture from them. God's works will never be finished; and from him health spreads over all the earth.

⁹My son, when you are ill, do not delay, but pray to God, for it is he who heals. ¹⁰Give up your faults and direct your hands rightly, and cleanse your heart from all sin. ¹¹Offer a sweet-smelling sacrifice, and a memorial portion of choice flour, and pour oil on your offering, as much as you can afford.

¹²Then let the physician apply his skill, for the Lord created him; do not let him depart, for you need him. ¹³There are times when recovery lies in the hands of physicians, ¹⁴for they too pray to God that he grant them success in diagnosis and that their treatment will bring about a cure. ¹⁵He who sins against his Maker, will be defiant toward the physician.

Mourning the dead

¹⁶My son, let your tears fall for the dead, with wailing and bitter lament. Lay out the body with due ceremony, and do not neglect the burial.

¹⁷Let your weeping be bitter and your wailing fervent; make your mourning worthy of the departed, for one day, or two, to avoid criticism; then be comforted for your grief.

¹⁸For grief may result in death, and a sorrowful heart saps one's strength.

¹⁹When a person is taken away and sorrow persists, the curse that rangles makes for a wretched life. ²⁰Do not give your heart to grief; drive it away, and remember your own end. ²¹Do not keep thinking of him, for there is no coming back; you do the dead no good, and you injure yourself. ²²Remember that his fate will also be yours; yesterday it was his, and today it is yours. ²³When the dead is at rest, let his remembrance rest too; rally your courage when his spirit has departed.

We have an obligation to arrange a proper burial for the dead, and to mourn for them. The way of mourning is traditional. Public wailing appears to have gone on for one or two days. The remainder of the seven day period was more subdued.

As in everything, a wise person does not mourn to excess. Excessive grief from a 'sorrowful heart' can cause harm.

Indulging in excessive mourning won't bring the dead person back. Better to take the opportunity to reflect on the brevity of one's own life, and have the courage to go on living.