

SIRACH 50:25 – 51:30

^{50:25}**My whole being loathes two nations, the third is not even a people: ²⁶Those who live in Seir and Philistia, and the foolish people that live in Shechem.**

²⁷**Training in wise conduct, and nicely balanced proverbs I have written in this book of Yeshua ben Eleazar ben Sira, who poured them out from his understanding heart.**

²⁸**Happy are those who concern themselves with these things, and those who lay them to heart will become wise.**

²⁹**For if they put them into practice, they will be equal to anything, for the fear of YHWH is profound.**

Jewish hatred for the Edomites ('those who live in Seir') has a long history (see Psalm 137:7; Ezekiel 25:12-14; 35:1-15; Obadiah 1:10-14; Malachi 1:2-5; Lamentations 4:21; Judith 7:8-18). When the Edomites took advantage of Judah's defeat by the Babylonians, and occupied the southern part of Judah, this antipathy reached a new depth.

Philistia no longer existed at the time of Ben Sira. He is speaking here of those of his own day who live in Judah, but have abandoned Judaism in favour of Greek culture. They are the inheritors of the traditions of the Philistines.

His deepest contempt is for the Samaritans. The Jews (wrongly) saw them as the heretical descendants of the mixed population of the north, even though the vast majority were descended from the Yahwists of the northern kingdom.

In his postscript (verses 27-29) Ben Sira follows Greek practice by signing his name as the author. He speaks of himself in the third person, modelling himself on Proverbs 1:1-3 and Ecclesiastes 12:9-10.

Verse 28 copies the opening words of the Book of Psalms:

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

– Psalm 1:1-2

'Fear of YHWH' has been a key theme of the book (see 1:11-21; 34:14-21 and 40:26-27).

The Hebrew text of chapter 51 has been recovered. It consists of two appendices. The first (verses 1-2) is a prayer. This is one of only three times in the Older Testament, when God is spoken of as 'my Father':

The Psalmist has God say, speaking of David:

He shall cry to me, 'You are my Father, my God, and the Rock of my salvation!'

– Psalm 89:26

Jeremiah has God say to the people:

I thought you would call me, My Father, and would not turn from following me.

– Jeremiah 3:19

'Mercy'(verse 3) translates the Hebrew *hesed*. Ben Sira bases his trust on God's fidelity to the commitment God has made to him.

Ben Sira does not specify the difficulties from which God has delivered him. He is content to heap up metaphors from the tradition.

¹I give you thanks, my God and Saviour, and praise you, O God my Father. I proclaim your name, ²for you have been my protector and helper and have delivered me from death, held back my body from the Pit, and freed my foot from the clutches of Sheol.

You have delivered me from the slanderous tongue, from lips that fabricate lies. In the face of my adversaries you have been my helper ³and delivered me, in the greatness of your mercy, from grinding teeth about to devour me, from the hand of those seeking my life.

From many troubles you have saved me: ⁴from choking fire on every side, and from the midst of fire leaving me untouched, ⁵from the deep belly of the nether world, from an unclean tongue and lying words – ⁶the slander of treacherous tongues.

My soul drew near to death, and my life was on the brink of Sheol.

⁷They surrounded me on every side, and there was no one to help me; I looked for human assistance, and there was none. ⁸Then I remembered YHWH's mercy, , and his kindness from of old, how he rescues those who wait for him and saves them from every kind of evil.

Ben Sira's prayer

**⁹I sent up my prayer from the dust,
my plea from the gates of Sheol.**

**¹⁰I cried out to YHWH, "You are my
Father; my mighty Saviour, only
you! Do not forsake me in the days
of trouble, the days of ruin and
desolation. ¹¹I will praise your name
continually, singing to you with my
prayer!"**

**YHWH heard my voice, he listened
to my plea! ¹²He redeemed me from
destruction and rescued me in time
of trouble. For this reason I thank
you and praise you, and I bless the
name of YHWH.**

For the second time, Ben Sira uses the expression: 'You are my Father' (see verse 1).

In the sixth and final stanza of his hymn of thanks and praise, Ben Sira calls God YHWH.

This litany is not found in any of the ancient versions. It is likely that it does not belong to Ben Sira's text, but has been added later. It is found in the Hebrew manuscript of Sirach, and must have been composed before the Hasmonaeans took over the high priesthood in 152BC, as it includes a prayer for thanks to God for choosing as priests 'the sons of Zadok'.

The psalm is patterned after Psalm 136.

For the title 'Shield of Abraham' see Genesis 15:1; for 'Rock of Isaac' and 'Mighty One of Jacob' see Genesis 49:24.

To understand the mention here of 'Zion' we need to recall that there was a rival temple at Shechem till it was destroyed in 128BC.

Give thanks to YHWH, for he is good, for his mercy endures forever. Give thanks to the God of praises, for his mercy endures forever. Give thanks to the Guardian of Israel, for his mercy endures forever. Give thanks to him who formed all things, for his mercy endures forever. Give thanks to the Redeemer of Israel, for his mercy endures forever. Give thanks to him who gathers the dispersed of Israel, for his mercy endures forever. Give thanks to him who rebuilt his city and his sanctuary, for his mercy endures forever. Give thanks to him who makes a horn to sprout for the house of David, for his mercy endures forever. Give thanks to him who has chosen the sons of Zadok to be priests, for his mercy endures forever. Give thanks to the Shield of Abraham, for his mercy endures forever. Give thanks to the Rock of Isaac, for his mercy endures forever. Give thanks to the Mighty One of Jacob, for his mercy endures forever. Give thanks to him who has chosen Zion, for his mercy endures forever. Give thanks to the King of the kings of kings, for his mercy endures forever.

He has raised up a horn for his people, praise for all his loyal ones. For the children of Israel, the people close to him. Praise YHWH!

[א] [ʾālep]

13While I was still young and innocent, I kept seeking wisdom.

[ב] [bēṭ]

14She came to me in her beauty, and I will continue to cultivate her to the end.

[ג] [gîmel]

15From the first blossom to the ripening grape my heart delighted in her;

[ד] [dālet]

my feet walked on the straight path; for from my youth I followed her steps.

[ה] [hē]

16In the short time of my heeding her, I encountered much instruction.

[ו] [waw]

17Since I have profited in this way, I will give grateful praise to my Teacher.

[ז] [zayin]

18I resolved to live according to wisdom, I was zealous for the good, and I will not turn back.

[ח] [ḥet]

19I burned with desire for her, and never let up.

[ט] [tet]

I became preoccupied with her, never weary of extolling her.

[י] [yōd]

I spread out my hand on high, never weary of extolling her.

[כ] [kap]

20For her I lived a pure life; in cleanliness I attained her.

The translation and organisation of this final poem is based on the manuscript of Sirach found among the Dead Sea Scrolls at Qumran. It was made available in 1961. It shows that Ben Sira concluded with an acrostic poem. Each of the twenty-two lines begins with a letter of the Hebrew alphabet beginning with א [ʾālep] and ending with ת [taw]. Ben Sira is modelling his conclusion on the conclusion to the Book of Proverbs (chapter 31), also an alphabetic acrostic.

Ben Sira is speaking about his own experience. He began seeking wisdom as a boy (verse 13) – something he has already advised his young students to do (see 6:18). Wisdom is a gift from God, but we must still work hard for it, and we must strive to live a pure life in accordance with wisdom (verse 20).

[לָ] [lāmed]

20At first acquaintance with her, I gained understanding, such that I will never forsake her.

[מֵ] [mēm]

‘My whole being’ translates the Hebrew *mē* ‘ay [מַעֵי] – literally ‘my internal organs’. The longing for wisdom is more than intellectual. It comes from a passionate longing.

21My whole being was stirred to seek her; therefore I have made her my prize possession.

[נִ] [nîn]

God gave Ben Sira the gift of teaching (verse 22).

22The Lord gave me my tongue as a reward, and I will praise him with it.

[סָ] [sāmek]

The final unit (verses 23-30) is based on Proverbs 9:1-6, 11, 16.

23Draw near to me, you who are uneducated, and lodge in the house of instruction.

[עַ] [‘ayin]

24How long will you stay deprived of wisdom’s food? How long will you put up with such bitter thirst?

[פֵּ] [pēh]

Acquiring wisdom ‘without money’ (verse 25) echoes the call in Isaiah 55:1-3.

25I open my mouth and speak of her: acquire wisdom for yourselves without money.

[שָׁ] [šādēh]

Verse 26 calls to mind the call of Jesus:

Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me; for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls.

– Matthew 11:28-29

26Submit your neck to her yoke, and let your souls receive instruction;

[קָ] [kōp]

She is close to those who seek her, and the one who is in earnest finds her.

[רֵ] [rēš]

27See for yourselves! I have laboured but little and have found much.

[שִׁ] [šin]

28Hear but a little of my instruction, and through it you will acquire silver and gold.

[ת] [taw]

²⁹Let your whole being rejoice in the mercy of God, and be not ashamed to give him praise.

[פ] [pēh]

³⁰Work at your tasks in due season, and in his own time God will give you your reward.

Ben Sira concludes with a line beginning with a פ [pēh]. If we take the first letter of the Hebrew alphabet [’ālep] and the middle letter [lāmed], and conclude with a [pēh] we form the word ’ālep (= א), taking us back to the beginning. In this way Ben Sira stresses the all-embracing and ongoing nature of the praise that is God’s due. When ’ālep, is used as a verb it means ‘to teach’. In this way he summarises the intent of his book.