

# PREFACE

The ‘Wisdom of Ben Sira’ and the ‘Wisdom of Solomon’ both draw on the traditional Jewish Wisdom Literature as found especially in the Book of Proverbs and in some of the Psalms. They do so in very different ways.

As well as such inspiring passages as Chapter 24 (a hymn to Wisdom), Chapter 34:14-20 (on divine providence), Chapter 39:12-35 (in praise of the Creator), and the concluding hymn (51:13-30), we can find many gems of wisdom from Ben Sira, a remarkable teacher whose career in Jerusalem spanned the final decades of the third century BC and continued into the early years of the second century. There are times (but very few) where Christians reading this text can imagine Jesus saying: ‘It was said to you of old, but I say’. One obvious example is Chapter 12:1-7, where the author assumes that God hates sinners, and encourages his students to do the same. He speaks quite beautifully about forgiveness, but it does not extend to one’s enemies. He displays a special antipathy to the Samaritans. He encourages a caring attitude to those in need, but his attitude to women witnesses to the prevailing assumption of his day that they are inferior to men.

The author of the Wisdom of Solomon composed his work two centuries later, in Alexandria, during the Roman period. He draws on the same tradition, but he also draws on current Hellenistic philosophy with which he was very familiar. He writes in Greek, and when he covers themes found also in Sirach he uses the language, not of the Septuagint, but of the Hellenist schools. He wants his students to engage with Hellenism, but to value the special wisdom that is their patrimony as Jews.

These Introductory Commentaries are a fruit of an extended period of research in the Pontifical Biblical Institute, Rome, granted to me by the Provincial Council of the Missionaries of the Sacred Heart (MSC) in 2007.

For suggestions as to further reading I cannot do better than recommend a website which offers extensive and up-to-date references to significant scholarly writings on all books of the Bible. [http://www.biblico.it/doc-vari/ska\\_bibl.html](http://www.biblico.it/doc-vari/ska_bibl.html). will take you to a bibliography prepared by Father Jean Louis Ska SJ, who is currently professor of Old Testament Studies at the Pontifical Biblical Institute, in Rome. To find the Wisdom of Ben Sira go to Section XI (Deuterocanonical Books) and click on ‘Sir’. To find the Wisdom of Solomon go to the same section and click on Sap/Wis. I would add *Hellenistic Influence on the Book of Wisdom and its consequences* by James Reese (Biblical Institute Press, Rome 1970).

I thank Father Warrick Tonkin for the time and care he put into reading the manuscript and granting it the ‘Nihil Obstat’, and Monsignor John Woods, Archdiocesan Administrator of Canberra & Goulburn for permission to publish. My prayer is that this Introductory Commentary will enrich your appreciation of these ancient books of Jewish wisdom.

– Feast of Saint Augustine, 2012



# **INTRODUCTION**

## Introduction

Yeshua, son of Eleazar, and grandson of Sira (henceforth 'Ben Sira'), was a Jewish teacher, living and working in Jerusalem (see Sirach 50:27). He studied the Torah, the Prophets and the other Writings that were the sacred heritage of his people, and he spent his life communicating the fruits of his study to his Jewish students. At a time when Greek culture (Hellenism) was influencing the whole region, including Judea, he wanted his students to appreciate the wisdom of their own traditions. In his teaching he drew on these traditions, especially on the wisdom contained in the Book of Proverbs, and applied it to the changed circumstances of the late third and early second centuries BC.

### Judea and the all-pervasive Hellenisation of the region

In the decade following 334BC Alexander the Great of Macedonia overran the Persian Empire. After his death in 323BC his generals fought for control of his empire. In 304 Ptolemy I Soter gained control of Egypt. Asia Minor, Syria, Babylonia, Media and Persia were ruled by another of Alexander's generals, Seleucus I Nicator.

### Judea ruled from Egypt (third century BC)

In 301BC Ptolemy I defeated Seleucus I in the battle of Ipsos in central Asia Minor (see map page 7), with the result that throughout the third century Judea was ruled from Egypt. Alexandria joined Babylon as a growing centre for Judaism outside Judea.

Greek influence in Judea was much more aggressive than had been the case with Persia. There is evidence of Greek trade in the area as early as the seventh century. However, once Judea became part of the Greek Kingdom of Egypt ('Judea' is a Greek adaptation of 'Judah'), the Jews found themselves struggling to remain faithful to the Torah while being attracted to take advantage of the benefits that flowed from being part of the all pervasive Greek (Hellenist) culture. Though the Egyptian overlords appear not to have interfered in the internal running of Judea, which meant that the Jews were free to practise their Jewish faith, Hellenization brought new wealth to those who took advantage of it, and with wealth came a level of secularism, with the temptation to disregard the Torah.

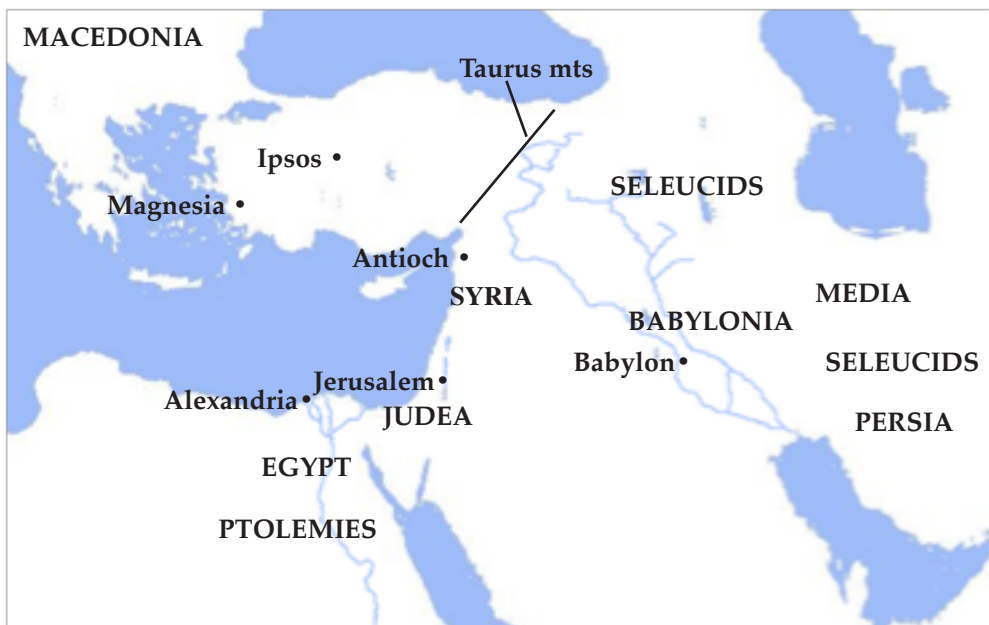
Ben Sira grew up in the last decades of the third century BC, when Judea was still controlled from Egypt. Many Jews were impressed by the Greek understanding of what it means to be human, and by Greek ideas about how to live so as to experience a fulfilled life and contribute to the building of a better world. Ben Sira appears to have travelled widely (see Sirach 34:12-13; 8:15-16), and was not blind to the merits of the dominant culture. As we will see he makes direct use of material from the sixth century BC Greek poet, Theognis. He is also acquainted with the Egyptian Instruction of Phibis, which is preserved in Papyrus Insinger. We will note parallels in the commentary. However, he was convinced that true wisdom (that is to say, insight into the art of living) was found in Jerusalem, not in Egypt or Athens. He remained faithful to the conviction that his people were specially chosen by God, the Lord of creation and history, who had revealed to them the way of true wisdom. Ben Sira knew Simeon II (high priest from 219 to 196), and gives him high praise in his book (see Sirach 50:1-21). He was determined to ensure that the young men were well schooled in their traditions, and so able to choose wisely against the pressures of Hellenism when it went against their ancient customs.

There was no love lost between the Ptolemies in Egypt and the Seleucids in Syria. The third century was a period of considerable unrest in Judea. The rivalry between Egypt and Syria made Palestine a constant military corridor, there being no fewer than five drawn-out wars during the century (274-272; 260-252; 246-241; 221-217 and 201-198; see Cate, R. *A History of the Bible lands in the Interbiblical period* (Nashville: Broadman, 1989).

#### Judea ruled from Syria (second century BC)

In 198 Antiochus III of Syria (223-187) defeated Ptolemy V of Egypt (203-180) at Panias, the northernmost point of Palestine, and established the province of Coele-syria (the name given to the region of Syria which included Palestine). Initially the people of Judea welcomed what appeared to be liberation from heavy Egyptian taxation. However in 190 Antiochus III was defeated by the new power, Rome, at the battle of Magnesia, and his son (later to be Antiochus IV) was taken as a hostage to Rome. The Taurus mountains became the new western boundary of the Seleucid empire, and Rome imposed upon Syria a huge tribute. This created the need for heavy taxation, including taxation of Judea.

In 187 Antiochus III was succeeded by his son, Seleucus IV. He was assassinated in 175 and was succeeded by his younger brother, Antiochus IV Epiphanes, who ruled Syria from 175 to 164. Things deteriorated in Judea after 175. There are no signs of this in Sirach, so it appears that Ben Sira published his book (which gives the impression of being based on his class notes) some time after the death of the high priest Simeon II in 196, and before the assassination of Seleucus IV in 175. His book, in other words, pre-dates the disturbances of the Maccabean period reflected in the Book of Daniel.



A book of ‘wisdom’

Sirach is a book of ‘wisdom’, a word that can mean practical skill in some field, including the tact and diplomacy required in social relations. It is used also for a share in the very Wisdom of God – something made possible by God in revealing the Torah to Moses. Ben Sira received all this from the tradition, notably from the Book of Proverbs. To this Wisdom tradition he added a deep appreciation of the beauty of the temple cult, and the role of the priesthood in the worshipping community.

In extolling and expounding the benefits of wisdom, Ben Sira covers many topics. We will deal with them as they occur in the text. The Index at the end of this volume is intended to make it easy for the reader to find where the various themes are to be found. Here I wish to note two key limitations that Ben Sira inherited from the tradition, and to note two areas where his thought falls short of the kind of Wisdom we have learned to expect thanks to Jesus.

The first key limitation is that he assumed that physical death was the end of life, the end of communion with God. Twenty or so years after he published his work the people of Judea suffered intense persecution from Antiochus IV. It was this persecution that gave birth to the insight that divine justice requires that there be more to human life than what we experience this side of the grave. Communion with God must exist beyond death. Not all embraced this idea, but at least the idea had struck root. It did not occur to Ben Sira.

The second key limitation is that Ben Sira, along with all the writers of the Older Testament, never questions the assumption that whatever happens is willed by God. If it is a pleasant happening, God is rewarding a person for his goodness. If it is an unpleasant experience God is punishing him (correcting him) for his sin.

In the light of Jesus’ revelation of God, we need to question the idea that God controls everything that happens. Jesus reveals God as love. When, as adults, we experience someone attempting to control us, we do not experience this as love. While love is demanding, and is willing to challenge and correct, it does not control. Love respects others as sacred and respects their freedom. The idea of God controlling, however, is so embedded in our psyche that we have to be determined if we are to listen attentively to Jesus, and watch him reveal God as precisely not controlling. Jesus wept with disappointment over Jerusalem; he did not reorganize it. He could see what would happen to the city if people did not change, but he didn’t punish it. Jesus pleaded with Judas; he did not take control.

Jesus’ contemporaries assumed that a person was blind because he was being punished for sin (see John 9:2). They assumed Jesus was being punished by God when they saw him being crucified. They were wrong.

In saying that God does not control the world we are not saying that God is doing nothing. God loves. This is the love of which Paul speaks: ‘Love has space enough to hold and to bear everything and everyone. Love believes all things, hopes all things, and endures whatever comes. Love does not come to an end’ (1Corinthians 13:7-8).

We have come to see that creation is free to evolve according to the natural interaction of its energies. God does not intervene to cut across this. God is constantly acting in creation, by *loving*. When creation is open to God's action, beautiful, 'miraculous' things happen. This is the way God has chosen creation to be: an explosion of love, and so an explosion of being that is essentially free and not determined. We experience this. When we open ourselves to welcome God's providence, divine love bears fruit in our lives. Closing ourselves to God's gracious will is what we call sin. God respects our freedom even when our choices hurt us and hurt others. But God continues to offer healing, forgiving, creating love.

There are two other areas where Ben Sira's thought falls short of the kind of Wisdom we have learned to expect thanks to Jesus. He speaks of the importance of forgiveness (see 28:2-7) but he does not extend this forgiveness to one's enemies, and he remains locked in the prejudices of his contemporaries, especially in relation to the Samaritans (see 50:26). He also assumes that males are superior. There are no women mentioned in his long list the illustrious ancestors of his people (chapters 44-49), and his teaching on marriage is only from the male perspective. The fact that he is teaching young males may go part of the way to explain this, but some of his remarks in regard to women are stunningly biased (see, for example, 25:19).

#### Sirach: the text

Ben Sira composed his work in Hebrew. For convenience from now on we will call the book 'Sirach' (an abbreviation of its full title 'The Wisdom of Ben Sira'). Sirach did not become part of the canon of inspired books, which is to say that it was not accepted by the Jewish authorities among the books judged to be inspired by God and presented to the community authoritatively as part of their essential heritage (see Rabbi Akiba in *J.Sanhedrin* 28a). A significant result of this exclusion was that the impulse to make Hebrew copies largely disappeared. Formal, authoritative statements explicitly listing certain books as canonical typically arise out of a specific situation in which the community feels threatened by those who challenge its existence or its writings. It appears that it was the Assembly of Rabbis at Jamnia (Javneh) towards the end of the first century AD that responded to the challenge of Christianity and the Roman destruction of Jerusalem and the temple, by, among other things, defining the canon. Their main criterion seems to have been the age of the scrolls. The only second century book that found its way into the canon was the Book of Daniel, and that seems to be because it does contain some ancient material, and because of its prophetic style.

This does not mean that books which were not in the official canon were not read. Sirach is quoted with approval in the Talmud and other rabbinical writings, and, as we note shortly, there is evidence that at least in Egypt copies were still being made as late as the twelfth century. Sirach was composed early in the second century BC. Other writings (for example, Tobit, Judith, the Wisdom of Solomon, the Books of the Maccabees, and some additions to other books), were composed in the second or first century BC. They were not sufficiently ancient to be included in the Palestinian canon, but they were translated into Greek and were included in the Greek Version of the Jewish Scriptures (the Septuagint).

## The text

The version of Sirach included in the Septuagint is the Greek translation made by Ben Sira's grandson, who migrated to Egypt in 132BC and published his Greek Version, along with an introductory prologue, some time after 117BC. Since it was part of the Septuagint, it (along with the other Writings mentioned above) was inherited by the early Christian communities. In fact Sirach was so popular among the Christians that it was given the Latin title 'Ecclesiasticus' (the Book of the Church).

Because the Jews did not include it in their Bible, for years all trace of the Hebrew text was lost. We were dependent on the Septuagint, the Old Latin (from the fourth century AD), and the Syriac (also from the fourth century). The Old Latin Version of Sirach was included in the Vulgate. This was because Jerome, influenced by the absence of Sirach from the Palestinian canon, did not make a fresh translation. However, in 1896 sections of the Hebrew text of Sirach were discovered in the storeroom for worn manuscripts in the Cairo synagogue. These were manuscripts from the tenth to the twelfth centuries, so, obviously, Jews in Egypt continued to treasure and copy it. Fragments of manuscripts from the first century BC were later discovered in Masada and also in Qumran, with the result that we now have a Hebrew text for about 70% of the book.

There are so many scribal errors in the extant Septuagint versions that scholars are agreed that no text from the Older Testament is more difficult to work with than Sirach. Furthermore, the Greek text that came down through the tradition included a number of later insertions. When verse numbering was introduced in the 16th century AD these additions were included in the numbering. Modern translations, including the present one, work from the Hebrew where it is available, and try to exclude these additions. This accounts for the gaps that occur every now and then in verse numbering.