

SIRACH 24:1 – 33:18

¹Wisdom sings her own praises, tells of her glory in the midst of her own people. ²In the assembly of the Most High she opens her mouth, and in the presence of his hosts she tells of her glory:

³I came forth from the mouth of the Most High, and covered the earth like a mist.

⁴I dwelt in the highest heavens, and my throne was on a pillar of cloud. ⁵Alone I compassed the vault of heaven and traversed the depths of the abyss. ⁶Over waves of the sea, over all the land, over every people and nation I held sway.

⁷Among all these I sought a resting place: in whose territory should I abide?

⁸Then the Creator of all things gave me a command, and he who formed me chose the place for my tent. He said, 'Make your dwelling in Jacob, in Israel your inheritance.'

Ben Sira began his book with a hymn praising Wisdom (see 1:11-30). He does the same here at the beginning of the second major division of his work (24-50). Scholars admire his poetic skill, shown here more than in any other part of the book. In personifying Wisdom he is imitating Proverbs 1:20-33; 8:4-36 and 9:1-6, 11.

'Her own people' (verse 1) is Israel. 'His hosts' (verse 2) are the angelic attendants at God's throne. In the presence of her heavenly companions, Wisdom addresses God's chosen people.

Genesis speaks of God's spirit hovering over the waters of chaos when from the mouth of God comes the command 'Let there be ...' (Genesis 1:2-3). The spirit, which is the breath of God, is here identified with Wisdom, and compared to a 'mist covering the earth' (verse 3). All creation manifests God's spirit, God's Wisdom, and therefore proclaims God's glory.

That Wisdom dwells with God is reinforced in verses 4-6. The 'pillar of cloud' refers to the mysterious manifestation of God leading his people from Egypt to the Promised Land (see Exodus 13:21-22; 40:38). Already Ben Sira is preparing us for the special connection between Wisdom and Israel. Verse 6 pictures divine Wisdom as being present and active throughout history.

We can find manifestations of divine Wisdom everywhere, but if we want to know where Wisdom dwells permanently we must look to Israel, where Wisdom is at home.

The Prologue to the fourth Gospel speaks of God's Word, but the imagery of Wisdom is present throughout. Like Wisdom the Word is present in the beginning with God and all creation issues from the divine Word and so manifests the glory of God (John 1:1-3). Like Wisdom, the divine Word enlightens all people (John 1:4). Like Wisdom, the divine Word 'came to what was his own' (John 1:11), that is, to Israel.

Verse 9 alludes to Proverbs 8:22-23

YHWH created me at the beginning of his work, the first of his acts of long ago. Ages ago I was set up, at the first, before the beginning of the earth.

In verses 10-12 we move from the Tabernacle of the divine presence during the wanderings through the wilderness to the Temple in Zion. Wisdom is at home in the land and in the city that belongs in a unique way to God.

The beautiful imagery of verses 13-15 engender in the reader a longing for the beauty and fruitfulness of Wisdom. Ben Sira ranges from the extreme north (Hermon) to the oasis of En-gedi on the western shore of the Dead Sea, and Jericho. Olive trees grow especially on the western slopes of the north-south range that divides eastern from western Palestine.

In verse 15 he focuses once again on the Tabernacle, and the exotic perfumes associated with the anointings and incense of divine worship. Wisdom is especially associated with the temple worship.

In verses 16-17 Wisdom is compared to the lofty and deciduous terebinth, and the vine which produces the wine that 'delights gods and men' (Judges 9:13).

⁹Before the ages, in the beginning, he created me, and through all the ages I shall not cease to be.

¹⁰In the holy tent I ministered before him, and then I took up my post in Zion. ¹¹Thus in his city, loved as he loves me, he gave me a resting place: in Jerusalem is my domain. ¹²I struck root among the honoured people, in the portion of YHWH is my inheritance.

¹³"I grew tall like a cedar in Lebanon, like a cypress on the heights of Hermon. ¹⁴I grew tall like a palm tree in En-gedi, like rosebushes in Jericho; like a fair olive tree in the fields, like a plane tree beside water I grew tall.

¹⁵Like cinnamon, like fragrant cane, like precious myrrh, I spread my fragrance; like galbanum, onycha, and mastic, like the odour of incense in the holy Tent.

¹⁶I spread out my branches like a terebinth, and my branches are glorious and graceful.

¹⁷Like the vine I bud forth delights, and my blossoms become fruit fair and rich.

verse 18 is an expansion on the text of Ben Sira.

¹⁹Come to me, you who desire me, and eat your fill of my fruits. ²⁰You will remember me as sweeter than honey, and possessing me as sweeter than the honeycomb. ²¹Those who eat of me will hunger for more, and those who drink of me will thirst for more.

²²Whoever obeys me will not be put to shame, and those who work with me will never fail."

²³All this is true of the book of the covenant of the Most High, the law that Moses enjoined on us as an inheritance for the congregations of Jacob.

verse 24 is an expansion on the text of Ben Sira.

²⁵It overflows, like the Pishon, with wisdom, and like the Tigris at the time of the first fruits. ²⁶It runs over, like the Euphrates, with understanding, like the Jordan at harvest time. ²⁷It pours forth instruction like the Nile, like the Gihon at the time of vintage.

²⁸The first human being did not know wisdom fully, nor will the last one succeed in fathoming her. ²⁹For her thoughts are deeper than the sea, her counsel than the great abyss.

Wisdom is now pictured by Ben Sira as inviting those who desire her to eat of her fruits to their heart's content. We think of Jesus, the perfect human expression of the divine Word, inviting the Samaritan woman to open herself to the life-giving water that he is offering her (see John 4:14). He offers the crowds 'the bread of God which comes down from heaven'(John 6:32). At the Last Supper he prays that all who follow him will enjoy the divine communion that he has with God (John 17:26).

In the Gospel of Matthew we hear Jesus, the incarnation of divine Wisdom (see Matthew 11:19, 25-27) echoing the call of verse 19.

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

In verses 23-29 Ben Sira identifies Wisdom with the Torah, the 'book of the covenant'(see Exodus 24:7). The rest of verse 23 is a quotation from Deuteronomy 33:4.

In verses 25-29 the Torah is described in imagery of abundant, life-giving water. It is in the Torah that we experience the overflowing of divine Wisdom. 'Pishon' is the first river to branch from the river that watered the garden of paradise in Eden (see Genesis 2:11). 'Gihon' also flowed from the river of Eden (see Genesis 2:13).

'The first human being', though in paradise, did not know wisdom fully because the Torah had not yet been revealed. No human being can fathom her, so profound are her depths.

Ben Sira concludes his hymn by referring to his ministry as a Wisdom teacher. The image of abundant, overflowing water continues. He is confident in the life-giving power of his teaching, for his teaching is the Torah, his wisdom is the Wisdom of the Torah.

The description of the Torah as light is traditional.

Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light to my path.

– Psalm 119:105

O house of Jacob, come, let us walk in YHWH's light!

– Isaiah 2:5

It will be picked up later in the Book of Wisdom:

Their enemies deserved to be deprived of light and imprisoned in darkness, those who had kept your children imprisoned, through whom the imperishable light of the law was to be given to the world.

– Wisdom 18:4

Ben Sira is aware that he is teaching under the inspiration of God's Spirit, in a way similar to the prophets. He is also aware that his teaching is to benefit, not only his students, and the readers of his book, but 'generations yet to come'.

³⁰I, like a rivulet from her stream, channelling the waters forth into a garden, ³¹said to myself, "I will water my garden and drench my flower-beds." And lo, my rivulet became a river, this stream of mine, a sea.

³²Again will I send my teachings forth shining like the dawn, to spread their enlightenment far abroad.

³³I will again pour out teaching like prophecy, and bequeath it to generations yet to come.

¹I take pleasure in three things, and they are beautiful in the sight of God and of man: harmony in the family, friendship among neighbours, and the mutual love of wife and husband. ²I hate three kinds of people, and I loathe their manner of life: a proud pauper, a rich person who lies, and an old fool who commits adultery.

³If you gathered nothing in your youth, how can you find anything in your old age? ⁴How attractive is judgment in the gray-haired, and for the aged to possess good counsel! ⁵How attractive is wisdom in the aged, and understanding and counsel in the venerable! ⁶A wealth of experience is the crown of the aged, and their glory is the fear of YHWH.

⁷I can think of nine whom I would call blessed, and a tenth my tongue proclaims: a man who can rejoice in his children; a man who lives to see the downfall of his foes. ⁸Happy the man who lives with a sensible wife, and the one who does not plough with ox and donkey together.

Happy is the one who does not sin with the tongue, and the one who has not served an inferior. ⁹Happy is the one who finds a friend, and the one who speaks to attentive listeners. ¹⁰How great is the one who finds wisdom! But none is superior to the one who fears YHWH. ¹¹Fear of YHWH surpasses everything; to whom can we compare the one who has it?

The final statement in verse 1 prepares us for the theme of the following section (25:13 – 26:18): the blessing of a good marriage. Having listed three ways of relating that give him pleasure (verse 1), Ben Sira lists three that he hates (verse 2). On pride see 10:6-18, page 67. On lying see 7:13, page 57 and 20:24-26, page 96. An old man should have gained some wisdom. For him to commit adultery is stupid.

In verse 3 Ben Sira is telling his students to start working on their character now. Wisdom does not automatically come with the years. He lists qualities that are attractive in the old: ‘judgment’(κρίσις); ‘counsel’(βουλή); ‘wisdom’(σοφία); ‘understanding’(διανόημα); ‘wealth of experience’(πολυπειρία). The ‘glory’ of the aged is ‘fear of YHWH’(see 1:11-21, pages 19-23).

In verses 7-11 Ben Sira lists ten beatitudes. The Hebrew original of verses 7-8 is extant. For the significance of the word ‘happy’(μακάριος) see the commentary on 14:1-2, page 77. Sadly not all children give joy to their parents (verse 7; see 16:1-4). It is a great joy to a husband to have a wife who is ‘sensible’(συνετός; a word that has occurred 12 times already in Sirach). The image of the ox and donkey comes from Deuteronomy 22:10. Here it applies to a marriage where the partners are incompatible.

Ben Sira has had a lot to say about the blessings of friendship (see 6:5-17; 12:8-18; 22:19-27).

In verse 10 he reaches the climax of what we must strive for to live a blessed life: we must work for ‘wisdom’(σοφία). Surpassing all the above is ‘fear of YHWH’(see 1:11-21, pages 19-23).

For most of this section we have the original Hebrew. To put the following in perspective we need to remember that Ben Sira is directing his advice to young men.

It appears that polygamy was still practised in Ben Sira's time. This is behind verses 14-15. If one's wives are fighting among themselves, the husband knows no peace. The point made in verse 16 is made more subtly in Proverbs 21:19 and 25:24.

In verses 19-22 Ben Sira continues to point out to his students the care needed in choosing a wife. They should not be blinded by a woman's physical beauty or wealth. One of the humiliating sorrows suffered by Tobit was that his blindness meant that he had to be supported by his wife (see Tobit 2:11-14).

A wife is defined as 'evil' by her failing to 'make her husband happy' (verse 23).

Verse 24 is an allusion to the sin of Eve (see Genesis 3:6). In the New Testament compare 2Corinthians 11:3; 1Timothy 2:14.

Just as a dam controls the rush of water, so a husband must keep tight control over his wife (verse 25).

Verse 26 advises divorce (see Deuteronomy 24:1).

¹³Any wound, but not a wound of the heart! Any wickedness, but not the wickedness of a woman! ¹⁴Any suffering, but not suffering from those who hate! And any vengeance, but not the vengeance of enemies! ¹⁵There is no venom worse than a snake's venom, and no anger worse than a woman's wrath. ¹⁶I would rather live with a lion and a dragon than live with an evil woman. ¹⁷A woman's wickedness changes her appearance, and makes her sullen as a female bear. ¹⁸Her husband sits among the neighbours, and he cannot help sighing bitterly.

¹⁹Any iniquity is small compared to a woman's iniquity; may a sinner's lot befall her! ²⁰A sandy ascent for the feet of the aged – such is a garrulous wife to a quiet husband. ²¹Do not be ensnared by a woman's beauty, and do not desire a woman for her wealth. ²²Harsh is the slavery, great the shame, when a wife supports her husband.

²³Dejected mind, gloomy face, and wounded heart come from an evil wife. Drooping hands and weak knees come from the wife who does not make her husband happy. ²⁴From a woman sin had its beginning, and because of her we all die. ²⁵Allow water no outlet, and be not indulgent to an erring wife.

²⁶If she does not go as you direct, separate her from yourself.

¹Happy is the husband of a good wife; the number of his days will be doubled. ²A loyal wife brings joy to her husband, and he will complete his years in peace. ³A good wife is a great blessing; she will be granted among the blessings of the man who fears YHWH. ⁴Whether rich or poor, his heart is content, and at all times his face is cheerful.

⁵Of three things my heart is frightened, and of a fourth I am in great fear: slander in the city, the gathering of a mob, and false accusation – all these are worse than death. ⁶But it is heartache and sorrow when a wife is jealous of a rival, and a tongue-lashing makes it known to all.

⁷A bad wife is a chafing yoke; taking hold of her is like grasping a scorpion.

⁸A drunken wife arouses great anger; she cannot hide her shame. ⁹The haughty stare betrays an unchaste wife; her eyelids give her away.

¹⁰Keep strict watch over a headstrong wife, or else, when she finds liberty, she will make use of it. ¹¹Be on guard against her impudent eye, and do not be surprised if she sins against you. ¹²As a thirsty traveller opens his mouth and drinks from any water near him, so she will sit in front of every tent peg and open her quiver to any arrow.

¹³A wife's charm delights her husband, and her skill puts flesh on his bones. ¹⁴A silent wife is a gift from YHWH, and nothing is so precious as her self-discipline.

¹⁵A modest wife adds charm to charm, and no scales can weigh the value of her chastity. ¹⁶Like the sun rising in the heights of YHWH, so is the beauty of a good wife in her well-ordered home. ¹⁷Like the shining lamp on the holy lampstand, so is a beautiful face on a stately figure. ¹⁸Like golden pillars on silver bases, so are shapely limbs and steadfast feet.

Here Ben Sira speaks of a good wife - defined, not by what she is in herself, but by the joy and contentment she gives her husband. She is a blessing given to a man who 'fears YHWH' (verse 3; see 1:11-21, pages 19-23).

In verse 5 we hear of three things that a man can experience that are 'worse than death'. Worse than all three is a wife that is jealous of her rivals (in a polygamous marriage; see 25:14-15), and who vents her ill feelings for everyone to hear.

A bad wife is a constant irritation. This is especially so when she drinks too much and is unchaste. Her look and her makeup give her away and she 'arouses great anger' in her husband.

Ben Sira's warning about the pain brought upon a man by a 'headstrong wife' continue in verses 10-12. Note the powerful and suggestive imagery in verse 12. She doesn't mind who she has sex with (opening her quiver to anyone's arrow!)

By contrast, verses 13-18 speak of a gracious wife. Her silence is in contrast to the 'garrulous wife' of verses 20 and 27. Note the focus on 'discipline' (see 6:18-22), and 'chastity'. Ben Sira compares her shapely figure to the splendour one finds in the temple liturgy, and the temple columns.

Verses 19-27 are not found in the Septuagint. They are, however, found in the Syriac Version and in some Greek manuscripts. The Latin Vulgate has these verses in 52:4-12. They appear to belong to Ben Sira's book, though the original Hebrew has not been discovered.

In verses 19-21 Ben Sira instructs his students to remain chaste till they give themselves to a woman who will bear children to them who will bring them honour.

Verses 22-27 contrasts two kinds of wives: the shameless ones and the devout. Men have no respect for a prostitute. Ben Sira warns his students that there is more danger in having an affair with a married woman (verse 22).

God will see to it that an irreligious woman will be given to a man who has no regard for the Torah. A man who 'fears YHWH' (see 1:11-21) will be given a 'pious wife' (verse 23).

A shameless woman is past being embarrassed. A modest woman remains modest even with her husband (verse 24).

The contrast continues in verses 25-27.

¹⁹My son, keep sound the bloom of your youth, and do not give your strength to strangers. ²⁰Seek a fertile field within the whole plain, and sow it with your own seed, trusting in your fine stock. ²¹So your offspring will prosper, and, having confidence in their good descent, will grow great.

²²A prostitute is regarded as spittle, a married woman as a deadly snare to her lovers.

²³A godless wife is given as a portion to a lawless man, but a pious wife is given to the man who fears YHWH.

²⁴A shameless woman constantly acts disgracefully, but a modest daughter will even be embarrassed before her husband.

²⁵A headstrong wife is regarded as a bitch, but one who has a sense of shame will fear YHWH. ²⁶A wife honouring her husband will seem wise to all, but if she dishonours him in her pride she will be known to all as ungodly. Happy is the husband of a good wife; for the number of his years will be doubled. ²⁷A loud-voiced and garrulous wife is like a trumpet sounding the charge, and every person like this lives in the anarchy of war.

Dangers in commerce and conversation

^{26:28}At two things my heart is grieved, and because of a third anger comes over me: a wealthy person in want through poverty, intelligent men who are treated contemptuously, and a man who turns from righteousness to sin – YHWH is preparing him for the sword!

²⁹A merchant can hardly keep from wrongdoing, or a shopkeeper free from sin. ^{27:1}Many have committed sin for gain, and those who seek to get rich will avert their eyes. ²As a stake is driven firmly into a fissure between stones, so sin is wedged in between selling and buying. ³If a person is not steadfast in the fear of YHWH, his house will be quickly overthrown.

⁴When a sieve is shaken, the refuse appears; so do a person's faults when he speaks. ⁵The kiln tests the potter's vessels; so the test of a person is in his conversation.

⁶Its fruit discloses the cultivation of a tree; so a person's speech discloses the cultivation of his mind. ⁷Do not praise anyone before he speaks, for this is the way people are tested.

In verse 28 Ben Sira speaks of three situations that cause him grief. The worst is when a man stops living a virtuous life and turns to sin (ἀμαρτία; see 2:11, pages 28-29, and 21, page 97).

In 26:29 – 27:3 he speaks of the moral dangers in a life of commerce. Faced with making money from a fraudulent exchange, there is a danger that we will pretend not to see and hoodwink ourselves into behaving unjustly. Those involved in commerce will have to be especially mindful of YHWH or they will fall into unjust behaviour.

Just as what is left over after the use of the sieve are the inedible husks, and they are obvious to the eye, so when a person speaks his faults are revealed for what they are (verse 4). Verse 5 makes the same point using the imagery of the kiln.

Verse 6 recalls the words of Jesus: 'You will know them by their fruits' (Matthew 7:16).

Ben Sira instructs his students that righteousness (that is, rightwiseness: being wise as to what is right) does not come automatically. We must pursue it (verse 8).

The proverb in verse 9 is like the English 'Birds of a feather flock together'. On 'truth' (ἀλήθεια) see 4:25, 28. In verses 9-10 truth and sin are personified.

Verses 11-15 take up the theme of verses 5-7. We are being advised to steer clear of fools and of the haughty.

In verses 16-21 Ben Sira stresses the importance of not betraying a friend by sharing with others what your friend has confided to you. Friendship is built on trust. If you break that trust you have lost a friend, and others will keep their distance.

⁸If you pursue righteousness, you will attain it and wear it like a glorious robe. ⁹Birds roost with their own kind, so truth comes home to those who practise it. ¹⁰A lion lies in wait for prey; so does sin for evildoers.

¹¹The conversation of the godly is always wise, but the fool changes like the moon. ¹²Among stupid people limit your time, but among thoughtful people linger on. ¹³The talk of fools is offensive, and their laughter is wantonly sinful. ¹⁴Their cursing and swearing make one's hair stand on end, and their quarrels make others stop their ears. ¹⁵The strife of the proud leads to bloodshed, and their abuse is grievous to hear.

¹⁶Whoever betrays secrets destroys confidence, and will never find a close friend. ¹⁷Love your friend and keep faith with him; but if you betray his secrets, do not follow after him. ¹⁸For as a person destroys his enemy, so you have destroyed the friendship of your neighbour. ¹⁹And as you allow a bird to escape from your hand, so you have let your neighbour go, and will not catch him again. ²⁰Do not go after him, for he is too far off, and has escaped like a gazelle from a snare. ²¹For a wound may be bandaged, and there is reconciliation after abuse, but whoever has betrayed secrets is without hope.

A warning to mischief makers

^{27:22}If a person has shifty eyes you can be sure he is plotting mischief, and those who know him will keep their distance. ²³In your presence his mouth is all sweetness, and he admires your words; but later he will twist his speech and with your own words he will trip you up. ²⁴I have hated many things, but him above all; even YHWH hates him.

²⁵Whoever throws a stone straight up throws it on his own head, and a treacherous blow would more than the one who receives it. ²⁶Whoever digs a pit will fall into it, and whoever sets a snare will be caught in it. ²⁷If a person does evil, it will recoil back upon him, and he will not know where it came from.

²⁸Mockery and abuse issue from the proud, but vengeance lies in wait for them like a lion. ²⁹Those who rejoice in the fall of the godly will be caught in a snare, and pain will consume them before their death. ³⁰Anger and wrath, these also are abominations, yet a sinner holds on to them.

^{28:1}The vengeful will face YHWH's vengeance, for he keeps a strict account of their sins.

Ben Sira is warning his students to give a wide berth to people you can't trust.

There is no need to be afraid that such people will get away with what they are doing. YHWH will see to it that they suffer the consequences of their hypocrisy.

It is the same with mockery and abuse. Those who behave in this way will not get away with it. Haman in the Book of Esther is a case in point.

Similarly with those who do not control their temper.

YHWH will see that justice is done.

In verses 2-7 Ben Sira teaches the importance of forgiving others and not holding grudges. The sentiments in verses 2-4 are echoed by Jesus. The Lord's prayer includes the following:

Forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors.

– Matthew 6:12

Jesus adds:

If you forgive others their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you; but if you do not forgive others, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses.

– Matthew 6:14-15 (compare 18:32-35)

This is not a statement about the limits of God's willingness to forgive. Rather, it is a warning that if we harden our hearts against a neighbour, we will be unable to accept the forgiveness that God is offering us.

The Greek verb in verse 5 is ἐξιλάσκομαι, an allusion to the atoning sacrifice of Yom Kippur (see 3:3, page 32).

Verse 7 gives a negative statement of the positive command: 'You shall love your neighbour as yourself' (Leviticus 19:18).

We are to avoid strife (verses 8-11). Once again, we find echoes of this in the words of Jesus:

You have heard that it was said to those of ancient times, 'You shall not murder'; and 'whoever murders shall be liable to judgment.' But I say to you that if you are angry with a brother or sister, you will be liable to judgment; and if you insult a brother or sister, you will be liable to the council; and if you say, 'You fool,' you will be liable to the hell of fire.

– Matthew 5:21-22

²Forgive your neighbour the wrong he has done, and then your sins will be pardoned when you pray. ³Should a person harbour anger against another, and expect healing from YHWH? ⁴Should a person have no mercy toward another like himself, and then seek pardon for his own sins?

⁵If a mere mortal harbours wrath, who will make an atoning sacrifice for his sins?

⁶Remember the end of your life, and set enmity aside; remember death and decay, and cease sinning. ⁷Remember the commandments, and do not hate your neighbour; remember the covenant of the Most High, and overlook faults.

⁸Refrain from strife, and your sins will be fewer; for the hot-tempered kindle strife, ⁹and the sinner disrupts friendships and sows discord among those who are at peace.

¹⁰In proportion to the fuel, so will the fire burn, and in proportion to the obstinacy, so will strife increase; in proportion to a person's strength will be his anger, and in proportion to his wealth he will increase his wrath. ¹¹A hasty quarrel kindles a fire, and a hasty dispute sheds blood.

¹²If you blow on a spark, it will glow; if you spit on it, it will be put out; yet both come out of your mouth.

¹³Cursed be the gossips and the double-tongued, for they destroy the peace of many. ¹⁴An interfering tongue has shaken many, and scattered them from nation to nation; it has destroyed strong cities, and overturned the houses of the great. ¹⁵An interfering tongue has driven virtuous women from their homes, and deprived them of the fruit of their toil. ¹⁶Those who pay heed to slander will not find rest, nor will they settle down in peace.

¹⁷The blow of a whip raises a welt, but a blow of the tongue crushes the bones. ¹⁸Many have fallen by the edge of the sword, but not as many as have fallen because of the tongue.

¹⁹Happy is the one who is protected from it, who has not been exposed to its fire, who has not borne its yoke, and has not been bound with its fetters. ²⁰For its yoke is a yoke of iron, and its fetters are fetters of bronze; ²¹its death is an evil death, even Hades is preferable to it.

²²It has no power over the godly; they will not be burned in its flame.

²³Those who forsake YHWH will fall into its power; it will burn among them and will not be put out. It will be sent out against them like a lion; like a leopard it will mangle them.

²⁴As you fence in your property with thorns, as you lock up your silver and gold, ²⁵so make balances and scales for your words, so make a door and a bolt for your mouth. ²⁶Take care not to err with your tongue, and fall victim to one lying in wait.

Ben Sira speaks now of the evils that come from the way people use words. He speaks of the evil of gossip, and of using words to hide one's true intention: saying one thing and meaning another. He goes on to speak of the evil of interfering in matters that are not our concern, and the injustice that is caused by slander.

He speaks of the effect of such misuse of speech on the one who is its object. He compares it to a yoke and to fetters, for it can be a burden too heavy to bear, and we can be trapped by slander, unable to escape its effects in our lives.

If we are innocent and living in communion with God we can escape the worst effects. If we abandon God there is no hope for us.

He concludes by warning his students to watch their tongues, and be careful how they use words. They can cause untold harm to others. They can also hurt themselves irreparably.

The following are example of the commandment referred to in verse 1:

If any of your kin fall into difficulty and become dependent on you, you shall support them.

– Leviticus 25:35

If there is among you anyone in need, a member of your community in any of your towns within the land that the YHWH your God is giving you, do not be hard-hearted or tight-fisted toward your needy neighbour. You should rather open your hand, willingly lending enough to meet the need, whatever it may be.

– Deuteronomy 15:7-8

Having spoken of the need to be generous, Ben Sira goes on in verses 2-4 to underline the obligation on the person who has received the loan to be prompt in paying it back. Lending can prove a burden to the lender.

In verses 5-6 he warns that not all is plain sailing between a lender and a borrower. Not all borrowers are to be trusted..

It is this dishonesty on the part of borrowers that discourages lending.

¹They do a kindness who lend to their neighbours; by holding out a helping hand they keep the commandments. ²Lend to your neighbour in his time of need;

repay your neighbour when a loan falls due. ³Keep your promise and be honest with him, and you will always find what you need. ⁴Many who ask for a loan add to the burden of those who help them.

⁵The borrower kisses the lender's hands until he gets a loan, and is deferential in speaking of his neighbour's money; but at the time for repayment he delays, pays back with empty promises, and finds fault with the time. ⁶If he can pay, his creditor will hardly get back half, and will regard that as a windfall. If he cannot pay, the borrower has robbed the other of his money, and he has needlessly made him an enemy; he will repay him with curses and reproaches, and instead of glory will repay him with dishonour.

⁷Many refuse to lend, not because of meanness, but from fear of being defrauded needlessly.

⁸Nevertheless, be patient with someone in humble circumstances, and do not keep him waiting for your alms. ⁹Help the poor because of the commandment, and in their need do not send them away empty-handed. ¹⁰Let your money go for the sake of a brother or a friend, and do not leave it under a stone to rot. ¹¹Lay up your treasure according to the commandments of the Most High, and it will profit you more than gold. ¹²Store up almsgiving in your treasury, and it will rescue you from every disaster; ¹³better than a stout shield and a sturdy spear, it will fight for you against the enemy.

¹⁴A good person will go guarantor for his neighbour, but the one who has lost all sense of shame will fail him.

¹⁵Do not forget the kindness of your guarantor, for he has given his life for you. ¹⁶A sinner wastes the property of his guarantor, ¹⁷and the ungrateful person abandons his rescuer. ¹⁸Being surety has ruined many who were prosperous, and has tossed them about like waves of the sea; it has driven the influential into exile, and they have wandered among foreign nations. ¹⁹The sinner comes to grief through surety; his pursuit of gain involves him in lawsuits.

²⁰Assist your neighbour to the best of your ability, but be careful not to fall yourself.

Whereas it is understandable for a lender to be hesitant because of the lack of confidence that he will be repaid, this is not to be used as an excuse for failing to care for those who are really needy (verses 8-13; see 3:30 – 4:6). A good example of ‘the commandment’ is Deuteronomy 15:7-8 (quoted on the previous page). Jesus echoes some of the imagery used here:

Give alms. Make purses for yourselves that do not wear out, an unfailing treasure in heaven, where no thief comes near and no moth destroys

– Luke 12:33

In verses 14-20 Ben Sira warns of the problems that can occur in going guarantor for another’s loan. He reminds his students that there are untrustworthy people around who could bring you down if you fail to be vigilant. There are borrowers who are careless about repaying, and there are those who will lend, knowing that the debt will not be repaid, and they can then take the guarantor to court to get what they are owed.

Verse 20 sums up the essence of Ben Sira’s advice on the matter.

The advice here is to be content with what we have, however basic it might be. It is better to keep one's independence than to live above one's means by depending on others. This opens a person to the accusation that he is living off others (a 'parasite').

If you live off others, you can't be yourself, and you will lose all respect, as well as opening yourself to being humiliated. You are in danger of being treated as a servant in another's house, and will get no thanks for your service

²¹The necessities of life are water, bread, and clothing, and a house for decent privacy. ²²Better is the life of the poor under their own crude roof than sumptuous food in the house of others. ²³Be content with little or much, and you will hear no reproach for being a parasite.

²⁴It is a miserable life to go from house to house. As a guest you dare not open your mouth; ²⁵As a visitor you will get no thanks for pouring the wine, and besides this you will hear rude words like these: ²⁶"Come here, stranger, prepare the table; let me eat what you have there." ²⁷"Be off, stranger, for an honoured guest is here; my brother has come for a visit, and I need the guest-room."

²⁸It is hard for a sensitive person to bear rebuke about lodging and insults from those who are supporting him.

Disciplining one's sons

¹He who loves his son will chastise him often, so that he may rejoice at the way he turns out. ²He who disciplines his son will profit by him, and will boast of him among his acquaintances. ³He who teaches his son will make his enemies envious, and will glory in him among his friends. ⁴When the father dies he will not seem to be dead, for he has left behind him one like himself. ⁵In life he looked upon such a son with joy, and at death, without grief. ⁶He has left behind him an avenger against his enemies, and one to repay the kindness of his friends.

⁷Whoever spoils his son will have wounds to bandage, and will suffer heartache at every cry. ⁸An unbroken horse turns out stubborn, and an unchecked son turns out headstrong. ⁹Pamper a child, and he will terrorize you; indulge him, and he will bring you grief. ¹⁰Do not share his frivolity, or you will share his sorrow, and in the end you will gnash your teeth. ¹¹Do not give him his own way in his youth, and do not close your eyes to his follies. ¹²Bow down his neck in his youth, and beat him while he is young, or else he will become stubborn and disobey you, and you will have sorrow of soul from him. ¹³Discipline your son and make his yoke heavy, so that you may not be cast down by his shamelessness.

The original Hebrew of 30:11-25 has been recovered. Apart from a smattering of verses most of the Hebrew text of chapters 17 to 29 has been lost.

Physical punishment of a child was taken for granted in the society of the time. Verses 1-6 speak of the benefits that accrue to a father who has disciplined his son.

Verses 7-12 point out the problems a father will have if he fails to discipline his son. The son will be getting into trouble or causing trouble to others (verse 7). If you leave a son to do what he wants he will be wild and unruly like a horse that has not been broken in (verse 8).

In the Torah there are penalties for a son who is unruly and disobedient:

If someone has a stubborn and rebellious son who will not obey his father and mother, who does not heed them when they discipline him, then his father and his mother shall take hold of him and bring him out to the elders of his town at the gate of that place. They shall say to the elders of his town, "This son of ours is stubborn and rebellious. He will not obey us. He is a glutton and a drunkard." Then all the men of the town shall stone him to death. So you shall purge the evil from your midst; and all Israel will hear, and be afraid.

– Deuteronomy 21:18-21

In verses 14-20 Ben Sira speaks of the blessing that is good health. It is hard to enjoy anything if one is chronically ill.

¹⁴Better off poor, healthy, and fit than rich and afflicted in body. ¹⁵Health and fitness are better than any gold, and a robust body than countless riches. ¹⁶There is no wealth better than health of body, and no gladness above joy of heart. ¹⁷Death is better than a life of misery, and eternal sleep than chronic sickness. ¹⁸Delicacies set before one who cannot eat are like offerings of food placed before a tomb. ¹⁹Of what use to an idol is a sacrifice? For it can neither eat nor smell. So is the one punished by YHWH; ²⁰he sees with his eyes and groans as a eunuch groans when embracing a girl.

In verses 21-25 he speaks of the benefits of being cheerful. Verse 21 is echoed by Jesus who recommends that we live in the present moment and not let our fears about what will happen tomorrow distract us from living now.

Do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will bring worries of its own.
Today's trouble is enough for today.

– Matthew 6:24

²¹Do not give yourself over to grief, and do not brood over sorrows. ²²A joyful heart is life itself, and rejoicing lengthens one's life span. ²³Indulge yourself and take comfort, and remove sorrow far from you, for sorrow has destroyed many, and no advantage ever comes from it. ²⁴Envy and anger shorten life, and anxiety brings on premature old age. ²⁵Those who are cheerful and merry at table will benefit from their food.

The anxieties of striving for wealth, and wealth as a blessing

¹Wakefulness over wealth wastes away one's flesh, and anxiety about it drives away sleep. ²Wakeful anxiety prevents slumber. It prevents sleep like a severe illness.

³The rich person toils to amass a fortune, and when he rests he fills himself with his dainties. ⁴The poor person toils to make a meager living, and if ever he rests he finds himself in need.

⁵One who loves gold will not be free from sin; one who pursues money will be led astray by it. ⁶Many have come to ruin because of gold, and their destruction has met them head on. ⁷It is a stumbling block to those who are avid for it, and every fool will be taken captive by it.

⁸Blessed is the rich person who is found blameless, and who does not stray after mammon. ⁹Who is he, that we may praise him? For he has done wonders among his people.

¹⁰Who has been tested by it and been found perfect? Let it be for him a ground for boasting. Who has had the power to transgress and did not transgress, and to do evil and did not do it? ¹¹His prosperity will be established, and the assembly will proclaim his praises.

We have the full Hebrew text for chapter 31.

To be fixated on acquiring wealth is like a serious illness. It banishes sleep and brings no peace (verses 1-2).

In verses 3-4 the lot of the rich and the poor are contrasted. The poor cannot rest either, for they have to work constantly to survive.

In verses 5-7 Ben Sira reflects on how the pursuit of riches can be a trap. We can be possessed by the wealth we possess.

It is still true, however, that wealth can be a blessing, so long as in our pursuit of it we are not led into sin, or stray from the path of life. 'Mammon' in verse 8 translates the Hebrew *māmôn* [מָמוֹן]. This word occurs here for the first time in biblical Hebrew. The Greek equivalent [μαμωνᾶ] is not found here, but is found in Matthew 6:24 and Luke 16:9, 11, 13.

The fact that verse 9 is a question (as is verse 10) is indicative of the fact that being rich and remaining free of sin was as rare in Ben Sira's day as it was at the time of Jesus (see Mark 10:23-25). However, it is possible to be rich and righteous, and when we see this we know that it is indeed a blessing, and merits praise.

Verses 12-21 need no comment. The advice given here by Ben Sira is a matter of good manners and courtesy when sharing a meal with others. It is as relevant today as it was then.

¹²**Are you seated at the table of the great? Do not be greedy at it, and do not say, "How much food there is here!"**

¹³**Remember that gluttony is a bad thing. God hates a greedy eye. Is any created thing greedier? It keeps shifting with everything it sees, and sends tears streaming down the face.**

¹⁴**Do not reach out your hand for everything you see, and do not crowd your neighbour at the dish.**

¹⁵**Judge your neighbour's feelings by your own, and in every matter be thoughtful.**

¹⁶**Eat what is set before you like a well brought-up person, and do not chew greedily, or you will give offense. ¹⁷Be the first to stop, as befits good manners, and do not gorge yourself, or people will look down on you.**

¹⁸**If there are many seated with you, do not help yourself before they do.**

¹⁹**How ample a little is for a well-bred person! He does not breathe heavily when in bed. ²⁰Healthy sleep depends on moderate eating; he rises early, and feels fit. The distress of sleeplessness and of nausea and colic are with the glutton.**

²¹**If you are overstuffed with food, you will have to get up to vomit, in order to have relief.**

The blessings of wine and its abuse

²²Listen to me, my son, and do not disregard me. Later on you will appreciate my words. In everything you do be moderate, and no addiction will afflict you.

²³People bless the one who is liberal with food, and their testimony to his generosity is lasting. ²⁴The city complains of the one who is stingy with food, and their testimony to his stinginess is lasting.

²⁵Do not try to prove your strength by wine-drinking, for wine has destroyed many. ²⁶As the furnace tests the work of the smith, so wine tests hearts of the insolent.

²⁷Wine is very life to human beings if taken in moderation. What is life to one who is without wine? It has been created to make people happy.

²⁸Wine drunk at the proper time and in moderation is for the rejoicing of heart and the gladness of the soul.

²⁹Wine drunk amid anger and strife leads to a heavy head, bitterness and disgrace. ³⁰Drunkenness increases the anger of a fool to his own hurt, reducing his strength and multiplying his wounds.

³¹Do not reprove your neighbour at a banquet of wine, and do not despise him in his merrymaking; speak no word of reproach to him, and do not distress him in the presence of others.

Moderation in eating and drinking is presented here by Ben Sira to his students as a matter of enlightened self-interest.

If one is a host, he must be generous not stingy.

Ben Sira warns of the perils of over-indulgence at a banquet. Drinking to excess opens the way to argument and insolent speech.

Verse 27 is clear on the goodness of wine and the joy it brings and is meant to bring. God created it for that purpose. The Psalmist praises God who made

wine to gladden the human heart,
oil to make the face shine, and
bread to strengthen the human heart.

– Psalm 104:15

In verses 28-30 Ben Sira points out the evil effects of over-consumption of wine.

Wine was created for shared happiness, not to provide an occasion for an ugly exchange.

The Hebrew of chapter 32 has been found in more than one manuscript. Ben Sira speaks first to the banquet master (verses 1-2). It was his responsibility to arrange the seating, prepare the menu, select the wines, and see that all the guests are looked after.

He then addresses the older guests (verses 3-6). They have been invited because of their assumed wisdom. They must know when to talk and when to be silent. Especially they must be quiet when the singers are performing.

In verses 7-10 he has some advice for the younger guests. A younger guest should speak only when it is obvious, from their insistence, that the other guests want to hear what he has to say.

Finally he offers some general advice to all who are guests at a banquet (verses 11-13). They must not overstay their welcome. While they are at the banquet they are to enjoy themselves as much as they can, and not to forget to thank God for his wonderful gifts.

¹If they make you master of the feast, do not exalt yourself; be among the guests as one of their number. Take care of them first and then sit down. ²When you have fulfilled all your duties, take your place, so that you may be merry along with them and receive a wreath for your excellent leadership.

³Speak, you who are older, for it is your right, but with accurate knowledge, and do not interrupt the singing. ⁴Where there is entertainment, do not pour out talk; do not display your cleverness at the wrong time. ⁵A ruby seal in a setting of gold is a concert of music at a banquet of wine. ⁶A seal of emerald in a rich setting of gold is the melody of music with good wine.

⁷Speak, you who are young, if you are obliged by people asking you more than once. ⁸Be brief; say much in few words; be as one who knows and can still hold his tongue. ⁹Among the great do not act as their equal; and when another is speaking do not babble. ¹⁰Lightning travels ahead of the thunder, and approval goes before one who is modest.

¹¹Leave in good time and do not be the last to leave; go home quickly and do not linger. ¹²Amuse yourself there to your heart's content, but do not sin through proud speech. ¹³But above all bless your Maker, who fills you with his good gifts.

Follow the path laid out in the Torah

¹⁴Whoever seeks to learn from God will obtain guidance; whoever looks to God will receive a response. ¹⁵The one who studies the law will master it, but the reckless will stumble at it. ¹⁶Those who fear YHWH will form true judgments, and they will kindle righteous deeds like a light. ¹⁷The sinner will shun reproof; he will make decisions to suit himself.

¹⁸A sensible person will not overlook a thoughtful suggestion; an insolent and proud person will let nothing get in his way. ¹⁹Do nothing without deliberation, and when you have acted, do not regret it. ²⁰Do not go on a path full of hazards, and do not repeat your mistakes.

²¹Do not be overconfident on a smooth road; ²²be careful of the path you take. ²³Whatever you do, be on your guard; in this way you will keep the commandments. ²⁴The one who keeps the law preserves himself, and the one who trusts YHWH will not suffer loss.

Ben Sira is contrasting the person who wants to know God's will, with the person who does not. 'Guidance' in verse 14 translates the Hebrew *mûsar* [מוֹסֵר; often translated 'discipline']. This is a key theme in Sirach. Divine guidance comes through the Torah (verse 15). To 'seek to learn from God' is to 'fear YHWH' (verse 16; see 1:11-21, pages 19-23). Sinners are concerned only to suit themselves. They will suffer the consequences outlined in the Law.

It is wise to be ready to learn from others (verse 18). We should think carefully before we act. We cannot do better than to make decisions based on the available evidence. If that is what we have done we should not waste energy regretting it (verse 19). If, however, we end up making a mistake, we should be careful to learn from it and not repeat it (verse 20).

Life is 'full of hazards' (verse 20). The path may appear 'smooth' (verse 21), but we must be constantly on our guard. In this way we will be keeping God's command:

Take care and watch yourselves closely, so as neither to forget the things that your eyes have seen nor to let them slip from your mind all the days of your life.

– Deuteronomy 4:9

As with chapter 32 so with chapter 33 we have more than one manuscript of the Hebrew text, 'Fearing YHWH' (verse 1; see 1:11-21, pages 19-23) is equated with 'keeping the Law' and 'trusting YHWH' (32:24).

The '*word* of YHWH' (verse 3) is a translation from the Hebrew text (the Septuagint reads 'law'). 'A clear response to a question asked' translates the Greek ἐρώτημα δήλων. The Hebrew for this verse is not extant.

A person who lacks wisdom is all over the place, responding and acting impulsively (verses 5-6).

The differences between the wise and the foolish are part of the divine ordering of the universe. Some days are special (for example the sabbath, Genesis 2:3), but only because God has designed things in this way (verses 7-9).

It is the same with human beings. All come from the dust of the ground, but God has blessed some (for example Abraham, Genesis 12:2) and not others. For the underlying assumption that everything that happens is controlled by God see pages 8-9 and 20-21.

¹No evil will befall the one who fears YHWH; in trials such a one will be rescued again and again. ²Whoever hates the Law is without wisdom; he is tossed about like a boat in a storm. ³The sensible person will trust in the word of YHWH; for such a one the law is dependable, like a clear response to a question asked.

⁴Prepare what to say, and then you will be listened to; draw upon your training, and then give your answer. ⁵The heart of a fool is like a cart wheel, and his thoughts like a turning axle. ⁶A mocking friend is like a stallion that neighs no matter who the rider is.

⁷Why is one day more important than another, when all the daylight in the year is from the sun? ⁸By YHWH's wisdom they were distinguished, and he appointed the different seasons and festivals. ⁹Some days he exalted and hallowed, and some he made ordinary days. ¹⁰All human beings come from the ground, and humankind was created out of the dust. ¹¹In the fullness of his knowledge YHWH distinguished them one from another, and appointed their different ways. ¹²Some he blessed and exalted, and some he made holy and brought near to himself; but some he cursed and brought low, and turned them out of their place. ¹³Like clay in the hand of the potter, to be moulded as he pleases, so all are in the hand of their Maker, to be given whatever he decides. ¹⁴Good is the opposite of evil, and life the opposite of death; so the sinner is the opposite of the godly. ¹⁵Look at all the works of the Most High; they come in pairs, one the opposite of the other.

A biographical note

**¹⁶I was the last to keep vigil;
I was like a gleaner following the
grape-pickers; ¹⁷by the blessing of
God I arrived first, and like a grape-
picker I filled my wine press.**

**¹⁸Consider that I have not laboured
for myself alone, but for all who
seek instruction.**

Ben Sira speaks about his teaching. What he has to say he has gleaned from the wisdom teachers who have gone before. God has blessed him such that his vat is filled with the wine that is the wisdom of his tradition. This abundant harvest, gleaned from his study of the sacred texts and of the tradition, is not for himself alone, but to be handed on to others. He is doing this through his teaching.