

# Sirach

A SHORT GUIDE BY JERRY L. SUMNEY

## THE CONTEXT

---

The book called *The Wisdom of Jesus Son of Sirach* is usually called simply *Sirach* (from its Greek title) or *Ecclesiasticus* (from its Latin title). In his preface to the work, the grandson of the ancient author says that he translated it from Hebrew into Greek to help Jews living outside Palestine live for God. Most of our copies of the work come to us in Greek (though there are also ancient translations into Latin and Syriac), but in the late nineteenth century, copies of the Hebrew text from the eleventh and twelfth centuries were discovered.

We can be fairly precise about when the original Hebrew was written. The text mentions the high priest Simon (Simeon) II as someone who had recently died. Since this priest died in about 196 BCE, the book was not completed before that date. On the other hand, the book does not reflect the events that led up to the Maccabean Revolt. So it must have been written between 195 and 175 BCE. The author was a teacher in Jerusalem. His students seem to have been the sons of the wealthy who would take their places as scholars, priests, and civic leaders. The author's grandson moved to Egypt in 132 BCE (according to his preface) and had lived there a few years before finishing this translation. So the likely date for our Greek translation is between 120 and 100 BCE.

*Sirach* is a sort of handbook for how to live for God. It does not have a single narrative or running story. It is a collection of poems about finding and living in accord with wisdom in various aspects of life. In addition, it includes the prologue to the Greek translation and some concluding remarks, prayers, and exhortations. This material melds together Torah observance and Wisdom traditions, both Hebrew wisdom and Hellenistic (along with other international) wisdom. Ben Sira (the designation often given to the author) uses the phrase “the fear of the Lord” to designate the outlook and manner of life that he recommends. He does not mean that people should constantly be afraid of God. Rather, he has adopted a phrase from the wisdom tradition that calls people to live with a constant

awareness of God's presence and so to live in awe of God's power and glory. Living in that way will include remembering God's judgment but also God's blessings and care.

## SUMMARY

---

Following the Prologue, 1:1-2:18 is a poem about personified Wisdom. She is the first of God's creatures and is the way knowledge of God comes to humanity. She is available to those who keep the commandments. Testing will come to those who seek her, but the faithful can hope in the mercy of God. The poems that follow in 2:19—4:10 make care of parents and almsgiving part of the wise person's way of life. So wisdom includes how one lives in relationship to God, family, and society.

The next section (4:11—6:17) deals with how wisdom is to be seen in daily life. There are instructions about how to speak appropriately, about the importance of faithfulness, and about how to choose friends. Then Ben Sira turns his attention to social responsibility (6:18—14:19). The mixture of advice in various poems ranges from exhortations to seek wisdom to one's responsibility to the temple and the poor and to choosing friends carefully. The next section (14:20—23:27) also begins with an exhortation to seek wisdom and then notes that humans have free will and are accountable to God. He asserts that God created all things for a purpose and that one purpose of humans is to praise God. He further says that real wisdom will include observing the commands of the Torah.

As happens regularly at the beginning of a new section (24:1—32:13), we find praise of Wisdom (24:1-34). Here we are told that in the beginning, she had a place over all things and then was sent to live among the Israelites and so becomes known through the Law. What follows are instructions about how to live within one's social circle and within the family. The beginning of chapter 25 in a general sense prepares for the treatment of these issues. Ben Sira again notes that the most important thing one can do is to "fear the Lord" (25:10-11). The next series of poems (32:14—39:11) begins with praise of God's providence and then offers guidance about how to deal with property, worship, and illness and death, including how to observe proper rituals for the dead. It also offers advice about how to choose friends and a wife. This collection concludes with discussion of professions. Ben Sira has a higher view of some

forms of manual labor than of others in his world. He thinks that skilled laborers are necessary for the life of the city. Yet, being a scribe is much better.

Praise of God as creator begins the next collection (39:12—43:33). Ben Sira then turns to warnings about the difficulties and joys of life. He gives special attention to how fathers should control their daughters. He concludes this section by returning to praise of God's work of creation.

The final group of poems is more coherent than the collections in the rest of the book. All of 44:1—50:24 is a celebration of how Israel's ancestors acquired wisdom and, so, glory. Ben Sira begins with ancestors in Genesis (such as Enoch, Noah, and Abraham) and moves through Moses and the Judges, then to the kings and the prophets of Israel's past. He concludes this account with the high priest who had only recently died, Simon (Simeon) II.

The epilogue of the book identifies its author and offers his prayer of praise to God. The author then writes of how he sought wisdom and exhorts readers to do the same.

What this work may lack by not having a running narrative (in fact, it seems a little random at times), it makes up for by addressing as many areas of life as possible. It wants to set out a comprehensive way of life that follows the edicts of wisdom. Ben Sira says that the ways of wisdom are seen in the Law because it gives the will of God. So, pursuing wisdom and living in the "fear of the Lord" are necessarily related.