

## Wisdom of Ben Sirach

Sirach (Wisdom of Ben Sirach/Sirach/ Ecclesiasticus) is the longest wisdom book in the Bible having 51 chapters. The book contains not only short sayings like the Book of Proverbs but also long discussions on wisdom. This is a book modeled on the Book of Proverbs with the difference that Proverbs originated from a compilation of materials by different authors spanning several centuries, and the sayings in the book are not arranged according to any order, whereas Ben Sirach is the work of a single Jewish author of the early 2d century B.C.; he also tried to arrange the sayings thematically.

The book contains moral, cultic, and ethical maxims, folk proverbs, psalms of praise and lament, theological and philosophical reflections, homiletic exhortations, and pointed observations about life and customs of the day.<sup>78</sup> Unlike most of the biblical books, this book gives the name of its author in chapter 50:27: "Instruction in understanding and knowledge I have written in this book, Jesus son of Eleazar son of Sirach of Jerusalem, whose mind poured forth wisdom." The book is therefore known as the Wisdom of Ben Sirach; in short it is called Sirach.

The book should have been written in Hebrew between 196-175 B.C. Today we have only the Greek translation of the book which was probably done in 132 B.C. In the foreword to the translation of the book, the grandson of the author states that he arrived in Egypt in the 38th year of the reign of King Euergetes, and that he spent many days and sleepless nights of hard work in preparing his Greek translation for publication. The epithet "Euergetes," ('benefactor') was given to only two Lagid kings: Ptolemy III Euergetes I (246-221 B.C.) and Ptolemy VII Physkon Euergetes II (170-164 and 146-117 B.C.). Since the former reigned only 25 years, the latter must be the Euergetes in question. He began his rule in 170 together with his brother Ptolemy VI (181-146), and died fifty-three years later in 117. Calculating from 170, Ptolemy VII's official accession year, the 38th year (when the grandson migrated to Egypt) would be 132 B.C.<sup>79</sup> The young man who translated the book must have reached in Egypt in 132 B.C. and he must have begun the translation of it without much delay. This also means that Sirach was written after Job and Ecclesiastes and those theologies probably had their influence on the society. Sirach also refers to Simon the High Priest in 51:1-21 (i.e., Simon II, high priest in the period 219-196 B.C.) whom the author might have seen; however, he does not mention about the persecution of Antiochus IV Epiphanes (175-164 B.C.) which means that the book should be written between 196-175 B.C.

The Jews of the first century still considered it as part of the inspired scripture. The rabbis then used to quote from this book. The book was translated into several languages in the first century which shows the respect that the book received from the Jews in Palestine. Jews at Masada had a Hebrew copy of Ben Sirach which was written stichometrically, which was a method reserved for copying only the scriptures.<sup>80</sup> It was also translated into Greek in the second part of the second century itself; the presence of the book in LXX, the Bible of the Diaspora, shows that Jews considered it as part of sacred writings.

The book won great reverence and publicity in the early church. Early Christians loved to read from this book because it exalted all the general moral principles. The Latin name Ecclesiasticus [Liber]s 'Church Book' should have originated from the popularity of the book among the Christians. By the end of the first century A.D. the Pharisees rejected the book by saying that although it was written in Hebrew it did not exist during time of Ezra. The real reason might be the popularity that the book got among the Christians or the similarity of its teachings to that of the Sadducees. The Church Councils of Hippo (393 A.D) and Carthage (397, 419 A.D.) accepted the book (that was part of LXX) as canonical. The Jews of today do not consider Sirach as inspired. Since the Protestants basically accepted the Jewish scriptures, they do not consider Sirach as canonical.

Sirach was a scribe and therefore he was a man of knowledge. After having read the Law, Prophets, and writings of the fathers with attention, he had written this book with the intention of instructing other people who do not know the Law and Prophets: "Many great teachings have been given to us through the Law and the Prophets and the others that followed them, and for these we should praise Israel for instruction and wisdom. Now, those who read the scriptures must not only themselves understand them, but must

also as lovers of learning be able through the spoken and written word to help the outsiders. So my grandfather Jesus, who had devoted himself especially to the reading of the Law and the Prophets and the other books of our ancestors, and had acquired considerable proficiency in them, was himself also led to write something pertaining to instruction and wisdom, so that by becoming familiar also with his book those who love learning might make even greater progress in living according to the law" (Prologue of Sirach). Wisdom writings would be read by all people without any distinction of national or religious boundaries. Accordingly, one could even say that Sirach has employed wisdom tradition as a means to communicate moral and religious message to other nations.

The vision on life of Sirach is elucidated in Sir 39:1-5: "... he who devotes himself to the study Of the law of the Most High Will seek out the wisdom of all the ancients, And will be concerned with prophecies;

2 He will preserve the discourse of notable men And penetrate the subtleties of parables;

3 He will seek out the hidden meanings of proverbs  
And be at home with the obscurities of parables.

4 He will serve among great men and appear before rulers  
He will travel through the lands of foreign nations, For he tests the good and the evil among men.

5 He will set his heart to rise early to seek the Lord Who made him,  
And will make supplication before the Most High;

He will open his mouth in prayer

And make supplication for his sins" (Sir 39:1-5)

A wise should learn all the wisdom of the ancients. He should be concerned with the prophecies and value the sayings of the famous persons; he should know the subtleties of the parables and meanings of proverbs; he should have knowledge about foreign lands and peoples; he should be a man of prayer who seeks his God.

From the book one can conclude that Sirach was a man of prayer who lived in Jerusalem (cf. 50:27), but made several journeys to distant lands (34:12-13; 8:15-16); on his way he analyzed all his experiences in the light of his wisdom, the Law, and the Prophets. He then wrote all this knowledge for the benefit of other people.

In order to have a clear understanding of the Book of Sirach, it is good to have a little knowledge about the socio-political situation in Jerusalem of the time of Sirach. In 539 B.C. Persians conquered Babylon and liberated the Jewish exiles from there. Palestine was thereafter under the control of the Persians till 332 B.C. In that year, Alexander the Great defeated the Persians and Palestine came under the rule of the Greeks. In 323 when Alexander died, his great kingdom was divided into four and these four kingdoms were given to Alexander's four generals. Now one of the four, Ptolemy, got Egypt in the southern part of Palestine, while Seleucus got Syria in the north of Palestine. Afterwards, these two kingdoms often fought against one another for the control of Palestine. In 301 B.C. Ptolemy I, brought Palestine under his control that then lasted for a hundred years. Ptolemies had followed the policy of the Persians and thus the local populations were given a certain amount of freedom with regard to their internal affairs. Accordingly the high priest of the Jews was not only the spiritual leader but also an imperial princess. He was also entrusted with the duty of collecting taxes for the Egyptians. As the result of this arrangement, the Jews could enjoy some of the privileges granted by the emperor, and attain economic growth by means of trade with the Egyptians. It was thus a peaceful period.

In the war of Panion (Caesarea Philippi) of 199-198 the Syrian King Antiochus III (223-187) defeated the Egyptians then ruled by Ptolemy IV (203-181); subsequently, Palestine was brought under the control of the Syrians. According to Josephus, Jewish leadership of this time helped the Syrians against the Egyptians (Ant 12, 3, 3). As a gesture of gratitude, the Syrian emperor granted the necessary wood for the repair of the temple in Jerusalem. He also reduced some other taxes previously charged from the Jews (cf. Sir 50:1-4). Antiochus then declared war against Rome and was subsequently defeated first in the battle of Thermopylae in 192 B.C. and finally in the battle of Magnesia in 190 B.C.; in order to pay the imposed tribute to Rome, he then tried plunder his own temple of Bel; in this attempt, he was assassi-

nated; his successor Seleucus IV was also killed; then his younger brother Antiochus IV Epiphanes (175-164 B.C.) came to power. It was he who tried his best to bring the Jews under the power of Hellenistic culture. Sirach must have written his book around 180 B.C. before the ascension of Antiochus IV Epiphanes the throne.

Alexander had a great dream of creating a unified world. He wished to have a single world with one unique culture, one language for all, and a society of equals. The yearning behind the military activities of Alexander was this great dream. His generals had personalized this splendid idea and after the death of Alexander they tried to implement this notion in their kingdoms: they taught their language and culture in their kingdoms. Many of the Jews were attracted to this idea. Being a constant traveler, Sirach saw the imminent danger of assimilation. He saw that many Jews were no more attracted by the traditional ideas. His book therefore was a reaction to this attitude of the Jewish society. Even then he did not try to play down the greatness of the Hellenistic culture; rather he tried to exalt the greatness of the Jewish culture above the Hellenistic. He taught the Jews that real wisdom was not in the Greek capital of Athens but in Jerusalem; the books of revelation of the Jews, he said, were much greater than the philosophical works of the Greeks:

- 1 Wisdom praises herself,  
And tells of her glory in the midst of her people.
  - 2 In the assembly of the Most High she opens her mouth,  
And in the presence of his hosts she tells of her glory:
  - 3 "I came forth from the mouth of the Most High,  
And covered the earth like a mist.  
I dwelt in the highest heavens,  
And my throne was in a pillar of cloud.
  - 5 Alone I compassed the vault of heaven  
And traversed the depths of the abyss.
  - 6 Over waves of the sea, over all the earth,  
And over every people and nation I have held sway.
  - 7 Among all these I sought a resting place;  
In whose territory should I abide?
  - 8 "Then the Creator of all things gave me a command,  
And my Creator chose the place for my tent.  
He said, 'Make your dwelling in Jacob,  
And in Israel receive your inheritance' (24:1-8).
- The centre of wisdom according to Sirach is Jerusalem.

### **Structure of the Book**

The Book might be divided into five parts:

- A. The prologue of the grandson.
- B. 1:1-23:28 A reflection on Wisdom that comes from God.
- C. 24:1-43:33 A discussion on wisdom in which wisdom is identified with Torah.
- D. 44:1-50:24 A reflection on the patriarchs who were guided by wisdom.
- E. 50:25-51:30 Conclusion and appendix.

### **The Law, Prophets and Writings in Sirach**

One finds the first mention in the Bible of the traditional threefold division of the Holy Scriptures into the Law, Prophets, and writings in the prologue of Sirach. Deviating from the general trend of among the wisdom sages that was prevalent till that time, the Law and Prophets were objects of Sirach's reflections. As evident from the prologue of the book, Sirach tried to interpret the Law, Prophets and writings of the fathers for the Hellenized community. Through this interpretation he communicated his visions and views. For example he interpreted the Deuteronomic Law "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might" (6:5) in the following way linking it with administrators of divine cult:

29 "With all your soul fear the Lord, And revere his priests.  
 30 With all your might love your Maker,  
 And do not neglect his ministers" (Sir 7:29-30).

Exodus 20:12 teaches one to respect his parents: "Honor your father and your mother, so that your days may be long in the land that the Lord your God is giving you" (cf. also Deut 5:16); the basis for the whole teaching in Sirach chapter 3 is this law:

- 1 "Listen to me your father, O children;  
 Act accordingly, that you may be kept in safety.
- 2 For the Lord honors a father above his children,  
 And he confirms a mother's right over her children.
- 3 Those who honor their father atone for sins" (Sir 3:1-16).

Love of God, according to Deuteronomy, consists in the obedience to the law of God (Deut 10:12-13; 30:16). The same idea is taught in Sirach:

- "15 Those who fear the Lord do not disobey his words,  
 And those who love him keep his ways.
- 1 6 Those who fear the Lord seek to please him,  
 And those who love him are filled with his law" (2:15-16).  
 Compare also Deut 24:17-22 and Sir 4:8-10.

Sirach either quotes from or points to the books of Pentateuch, Joshua, Samuel, Kings, Chronicles, Nehemiah, and makes allusions to the Prophets Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, Haggai, and Malachi. Sirach 49:10 remembers the 12 minor prophets; 47:6-11 praises David and holds the traditional view that Psalms were written by him, and Sir 47:14-17 holds the tradition that Proverbs were written by Solomon.

Although the Law and the Prophets were the objects of reflections of Sirach, his basic mode of thinking was that of the wisdom sages. Among the wisdom books, Proverbs was the most important one that seems to have influenced Sirach. For example the personified wisdom says the following in Proverbs:

"The Lord created me at the beginning of his work,  
 The first of his acts of long ago" (8:22).

Sirach presents the same idea in the following way:

"Wisdom was created before all things,  
 And prudent understanding from eternity" (1:4).

According to Proverbs

"The fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge;  
 Fools despise wisdom and instruction" (1:7; and 9:10; 31:30).

The same teaching is repeatedly given by Sirach. From his wide experience he recognized fear of God as true wisdom. Man can acquire wisdom only if he has fear of God:

"The whole of wisdom is fear of the Lord,  
 And in all wisdom there is the fulfillment of the law" (19:20).

This notion is visible in the beginning of the book itself:

- 1 All wisdom is from the Lord,  
 And with him it remains forever.
- 2 The sand of the sea, the drops of rain,  
 And the days of eternity -  
 Who can count them?" (1:1-2);  
 "To fear the Lord is the root of wisdom,  
 And her branches are long life" (1:18).

He calls fear of God as the beginning of wisdom (1:14), as the fullness of wisdom (1:16), as the crown of wisdom (1:18), and as the root of wisdom (1:20):

1 2 To fear the Lord is the beginning of wisdom; She is created with the faithful in the womb.  
 1 3 She made among men an eternal foundation, And among their descendants she will be trusted"  
 (1:12-13).

Only after this basic teaching, that Sirach unfolds his treasure of knowledge before the readers. Man is inefficient to attain wisdom without the help of God, because wisdom is a gift of God. God gives this gift to those who love him (1:10) and those who obey his commandments. So Sirach has the following to say:

"If you desire wisdom, keep the commandments, And the Lord will lavish her upon you" (1:26).  
 2 7 "Those who survive her will recognize That nothing is better than the fear of the Lord,  
 And nothing sweeter than to heed The commandments of the Lord" (23:27).

1 0 "How great is the one who finds wisdom!  
 But none is superior to the one who fears the Lord.  
 1 1 Fear of the Lord surpasses everything;  
 To whom can we compare the one who has it?" (25:10-11).  
 Like Proverbs, Sirach taught that for success in life man has to

acquire wisdom:

1 8 "My child, from your youth choose discipline,  
 And when you have gray hair you will still find wisdom.  
 1 9 Come to her like one who plows and sows,  
 And wait for her good harvest.  
 For when you cultivate her you will toil but little,  
 And soon you will eat of her produce.  
 2 0 She seems very harsh to the undisciplined;  
 Fools cannot remain with her.  
 2 1 She will be like a heavy stone to test them,  
 And they will not delay in casting her aside.  
 2 2 For wisdom is like her name;  
 She is not readily perceived by many.  
 2 3 Listen, my child, and accept my judgment;  
 Do not reject my counsel.  
 2 4 Put your feet into her fetters,  
 And your neck into her collar.  
 2 5 Bend your shoulders and carry her,  
 And do not fret under her bonds.  
 2 6 Come to her with all your soul,  
 And keep her ways with all your might.  
 2 7 Search out and seek, and she will become known to you;  
 And when you get hold of her, do not let her go.  
 2 8 For at last you will find the rest she gives,  
 And she will be changed into joy for you.  
 2 9 Then her fetters will become for you a strong defense,  
 And her collar a glorious robe.  
 3 0 Her yoke is a golden ornament,  
 And her bonds a purple cord.  
 3 1 You will wear her like a glorious robe,  
 And put her on like a splendid crown.  
 3 2 If you are willing, my child, you can be disciplined,  
 And if you apply yourself you will become clever.  
 3 3 If you love to listen you will gain knowledge,

- And if you pay attention you will become wise.
- 3 4 Stand in the company of the elders.  
Who is wise?  
Attach yourself to such a one.
- 3 5 Be ready to listen to every godly discourse,  
And let no wise proverbs escape you.
- 3 6 If you see an intelligent person,  
Rise early to visit him;  
Let your foot wear out his doorstep.
- 3 7 Reflect on the statutes of the Lord,  
And meditate at all times on his commandments.  
It is he who will give insight to your mind,  
And your desire for wisdom will be granted" (6:18-37).
- 2 7 "See with your own eyes that I have labored but little  
And found for myself much serenity.
- 2 8 Hear but a little of my instruction,  
And through me you will acquire silver and gold" (51:27-28).  
In Proverbs wisdom teaches that
- 1 7 "I love those who love me,  
And those who seek me diligently find me.
- 1 8 Riches and honor are with me,  
Enduring wealth and prosperity.
- 1 9 My fruit is better than gold, even fine gold,  
And my yield than choice silver" (8:17-19).  
Now Sirach says the following:
- 1 6 "The fear of the Lord is the crown of wisdom,  
Making peace and perfect health to flourish.
- 1 7 He saw her and apportioned her;  
He rained down knowledge and discerning comprehension,  
And he exalted the glory of those who held her fast"  
(1:16-17, RSV).  
Similarly says Proverbs,  
"The crucible is for silver, and the furnace is for gold,  
But the Lord tests the heart" (17:3),  
While Sirach says  
"For gold is tested in the fire,  
And those found acceptable,  
in the furnace of humiliation" (2:5).  
Both books teach that  
"Health and fitness are better than any gold,  
And a robust body than countless riches"  
(Sir 30:15-31; Prov 42:15-43:33).  
Sirach also makes reflections on Job; amidst his severe sufferings  
Job would recall his previous life of glory and would say:
- 2 1 "They listened to me, and waited,  
And kept silence for my counsel.
- 2 2 After I spoke they did not speak again,  
And my word dropped upon them like dew.
- 2 3 They waited for me as for the rain;  
They opened their mouths as for the spring rain.

2 4 I smiled on them when they had no confidence;  
And the light of my countenance they did not extinguish.

2 5 I chose their way, and sat as chief,  
And I lived like a king among his troops,  
Like one who comforts mourners" (Job 29:21-25).

Sirach would present this as the experience of humanity:

"The rich person speaks and all are silent;

They extol to the clouds what he says.

The poor person speaks and they say,

'Who is this fellow?' And should he stumble,

They even push him down" (13:23).

One could even say that the idea of Sirach about the glory of God and the nothingness of man found in Sirach should be coming from Job (cf. Job 18:1-7).

In Sirach we also find references and allusions to Psalms: the thoughts of Sirach however are theologically developed and profound.

For example, the psalmist would say the following:

"...wine to gladden the human heart,

Oil to make the face shine,

And bread to strengthen the human heart" (Ps 104:15),

While Sirach would also add that the happiness in connection with wine will depend on the manner of its use:

"Wine 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"

(31:27; cf. 31:12-31).

One can see two laments in Sirach that are similar to psalms:

- I. "1 O Lord, Father and Master of my life,  
Do not abandon me to their designs,  
And do not let me fall because of them!  
2 Who will set whips over my thoughts,  
And the discipline of wisdom over my mind,  
So as not to spare me in my errors,  
And not overlook my sins?  
3 Otherwise my mistakes may be multiplied,  
And my sins may abound,  
And I may fall before my adversaries,  
And my enemy may rejoice over me.  
4 O Lord, Father and God of my life,  
Do not give me haughty eyes,  
5 And remove evil desire from me.  
6 Let neither gluttony nor lust overcome me,  
And do not give me over to shameless passion" (Sir 23:1-6).
- II. " 1 Have mercy upon us, O God of all,  
2 And put all the nations in fear of you.  
3 Lift up your hand against foreign nations  
And let them see your might.  
4 As you have used us to show your holiness to them,  
So use them to show your glory to us.  
5 Then they will know, as we have known

That there is no God but you, O Lord.  
 6 Give new signs, and work other wonders;  
 7 Make your hand and right arm glorious.  
 8 Rouse your anger and pour out your wrath;  
 9 Destroy the adversary and wipe out the enemy.

1 0 Hasten the day, and remember the appointed time,  
 And let people recount your mighty deeds.  
 1 1 Let survivors be consumed in the fiery wrath,  
 And may those who harm your people meet destruction.  
 1 2 Crush the heads of hostile rulers who say,  
 "There is no one but ourselves."  
 1 3 Gather all the tribes of Jacob,  
 14-16 And give them their inheritance, as at the beginning.  
 1 7 Have mercy, O Lord, on the people called by your name,  
 On Israel, whom you have named your firstborn,  
 1 8 Have pity on the city of your sanctuary,  
 Jerusalem, the place of your dwelling  
 1 9 Fill Zion with your majesty,  
 And your temple with your glory.  
 2 0 Bear witness to those whom you created in the beginning,  
 And fulfill the prophecies spoken in your name.  
 2 1 Reward those who wait for you  
 And let your prophets be found trustworthy.  
 2 2 Hear, O Lord, the prayer of your servants,  
 According to your goodwill toward your people,  
 And all who are on the earth will know  
 That you are the Lord, the God of the ages" (36:1-22).  
 Similarly, like the hymns of praise (psalms), there are several hymns  
 of praise in Sirach. See for example the following hymns:

15 "I will now call to mind the works of the Lord,  
 And will declare what I have seen.  
 By the word of the Lord his works are made;  
 And all his creatures do his will.

1 6 The sun looks down on everything with its light,  
 And the work of the Lord is full of his glory.  
 1 7 The Lord has not empowered even his holy ones  
 To recount all his marvelous works,  
 Which the Lord the Almighty has established  
 So that the universe may stand firm in his glory..."  
 (42:15-43:33)

2 2 "And now bless the God of all,  
 Who everywhere works great wonders  
 Who fosters our growth from birth,  
 And deals with us according to his mercy.

2 3 May he give us gladness of heart,  
 And may there be peace in our days in Israel,  
 As in the days of old.

2 4 May he entrust to us his mercy,  
 And may he deliver us in our days!" (50:22-24).  
 (See also 1:1-10; 18:1-7; 39:12-35; 42:15-43:33; 51:1-12).



Since the thought of the sages surpass religious, cultural, and national boundaries, and the experience of humankind are always the same everywhere, Sirach tried to personalize not only the wisdom of his ancestors but also the wisdom that he acquired from other nations and peoples as he travelled abroad; he tried to give this wisdom to his Jewish readers. Scholars today think that Sirach had taken several ideas from the Greek culture.<sup>81</sup> They also think that the Egyptian Instructions of Duauf (cf. ANET, 432-434) gives basis for Sir 38:24- 39:11. Similarly, as we have mentioned in the beginning of this book, Sirach also depends much on Papyrus Insinger.

Although Sirach was very open to all cultures and religions, he did not hold a syncretistic notion of things. All faiths meant not the same for him. His mind was open but remained very faithful to the faith of his ancestors and respected it. By taking elements from other religions, he thought, one would enrich his own religion and culture. Notably, many Jews at the time of Sirach were attracted to Greek culture and were ready to forsake the traditions of their fathers. Sirach told them that Jerusalem was the real centre of wisdom (23:3-8). He saw the Jews as the most esteemed people on earth (24:12) and Jerusalem as the holy city of the only God (24:11).

There were two basic things that persuaded Sirach to exalt Jerusalem: 1) the great impression that the Greek culture and philosophy had created on the Jews and 2) the persecution that the righteous Jews had been suffering from the authorities under foreign rule. These things began to discourage many to hold on to the Jewish way of life. Sirach declared to them that if anyone wants to acquire real wisdom, instead of clinging to the Greek philosophy, he has to obey the law of God (15:1) and be ready to withstand trials against his faith (2:1-10; 4:17-19). If one is ready to cling to his God even amidst his sufferings, God will protect him (2:10-11). One has to strive continuously to acquire wisdom:

"My child, from your youth choose discipline,  
And when you have gray hair you will still find wisdom"  
(6:18; cf. also 14:20-27).

If one does so, wisdom would embrace him like a mother and like a new bride (15:2). Although wisdom guides people to glory (4:11-16), unfortunately, she is unattainable for many (6:22). One can acquire wisdom only having fear of God and by obeying his commandments; he should also keep himself away from sins:

"If they go astray she will forsake them,  
And hand them over to their ruin" (4:19).  
As a result fools and sinners will not succeed in attaining wisdom:

7 "The foolish will not obtain her,  
And sinners will not see her.  
8 She is far from arrogance,  
And liars will never think of her" (15:7-8).

### **Retribution**

Sirach basically admits the main teaching of Proverbs, i.e., retribution. For example, note the following verses:

"11 Do not envy the success of sinners,  
For you do not know what their end will be like.  
1 2 Do not delight in what pleases the ungodly;  
Remember that they will not be held guiltless all their lives"  
(9:11-12).

"He makes room for every act of mercy;  
Everyone receives in accordance with one's deeds" (16:14).

"Afterward he will rise up and repay them,  
And he will bring their recompense on their heads" (17:23).

"8 If you pursue justice,  
You will attain it and wear it like a glorious robe.  
9 Birds roost with their own kind,  
So honesty comes home to those who practice it" (27:8-9).

"26 Whoever digs a pit will fall into it,  
And whoever sets a snare will be caught in it.  
27 If a person does evil, it will roll back upon him,  
And he will not know where it came from" (27:26-27).  
The book concludes with a command to do good works that God rewards you in time:

"Do your work in good time,  
And in his own time God will give you your reward" (51:30).

The recognition of this principle however is not exclusive or exaggerated. Together with Job and Ecclesiastes Sirach advises to accept the God-given life as it is and to enjoy the happiness given by the creator. Like Job, Sirach thought that certain experiences were beyond human understanding:

1 "My child, when you come to serve the Lord,  
Prepare yourself for testing.  
2 Set your heart right and be steadfast,  
And do not be impetuous in time of calamity.  
3 Cling to him and do not depart,  
So that your last days may be prosperous.  
4 Accept whatever befalls you,  
And in times of humiliation be patient.  
5 For gold is tested in the fire,  
And those found acceptable,  
In the furnace of humiliation" (2:1-5).

"One's enemies are friendly when one prospers,  
But in adversity even one's friend disappears" (12:9).

Sirach might be thinking of the friends of Job when he speaks this verse. One should also know that if he wants to be wise he should pass through the experiences of Job:

"11 Wisdom teaches her children  
And gives help to those who seek her.  
1 2 Whoever loves her loves life,  
And those who seek her from early morning  
Are filled with joy.  
1 3 Whoever holds her fast inherits glory,  
And the Lord blesses the place she enters.  
1 4 Those who serve her minister to the Holy One;  
The Lord loves those who love her.  
1 5 Those who obey her will judge the nations,  
And all who listen to her will live secure.  
1 6 If they remain faithful, they will inherit her;  
Their descendants will also obtain her.  
1 7 For at first she will walk with them on tortuous paths;  
She will bring fear and dread upon them,  
And will torment them by her discipline  
Until she trusts them,

And she will test them with her ordinances.

18 Then she will come straight back to them again  
And gladden them,  
And will reveal her secrets to them" (4:11-18).

According to Qoheleth, human life is a gift of God and man can unhesitatingly enjoy the life given to him. The same idea is found in the following words of Sirach:

1 4 "Do not deprive yourself of a day's enjoyment;  
Do not let your share of desired good pass by you.  
1 5 Will you not leave the fruit of your labors to another,  
And what you acquired by toil to be divided by lot?  
1 6 Give, and take, and indulge yourself,  
Because in Hades one cannot look for luxury" (14:14-16).

Qoheleth instructed people to be prudent in making vows before God and if one vows something he should also be ready to fulfill it without delay (Eccl 5:1-7). Sirach also give the same instruction:

"22 Let nothing hinder you from paying a vow promptly,  
And do not wait until death to be released from it.  
2 3 Before making a vow, prepare yourself;  
And do not be like a man who tempts the Lord" (Sir 18:22-23).

According to Qoheleth, some people work hard and make a lot of money; however, they will not get the chance to enjoy this wealth (cf. 6:1-2); the same thing will be taught by Sirach in the following way:

"18 One becomes rich through diligence and self-denial,  
And the reward allotted to him is this:  
1 9 When he says, "I have found rest,  
And now I shall feast on my goods!"  
He does not know how long it will be  
Until he leaves them to others and dies" (11:18-19)

When Job and Ecclesiastes asked people to accept the given life as it is, this was the consequence of the thinking that God was transcendent and that he stood above human comprehension. The same notion would be shared by Sirach:

"Like a tempest that no one can see,  
So most of his works are concealed" (16:21).  
"1 He who lives forever created the whole universe;  
2 The Lord alone is just.  
3-4 To none has he given power to proclaim his works;  
And who can search out his mighty deeds?  
5 Who can measure his majestic power?  
And who can fully recount his mercies?  
6 It is not possible to diminish or increase them,  
Nor is it possible to fathom the wonders of the Lord.  
7 When human beings have finished,  
They are just beginning, and when they stop,  
They are still perplexed" (18:1-7).  
"To none has he given power to proclaim his works;  
And who can search out his mighty deeds?" (11:4).

On the one hand Sirach believed that God was just and he would reward each one according to his works; on the other hand, like Job he taught that the reasons for all human sufferings were not comprehensible for man. One may become successful in life even without being righteous; one may suffer evil even if he is righteous. When all these concepts were brought together to a mature level Sirach seems to have come to the following conclusion:

"26 For it is easy for the Lord on the day of death  
To reward individuals according to their conduct.  
2 7 An hour's misery makes one forget past delights,  
And at the close of one's life one's deeds are revealed" (11:26-27).

### **Life After Death**

Even at the time of Sirach Jews did not begin to believe in Life after death. Sirach thought that after death man would go to the residence of darkness, the underworld:

"27 Who will sing praises to the Most High in Hades  
In place of the living who give thanks?  
2 8 From the dead, as from one who does not exist, Thanksgiving has ceased;  
Those who are alive and well sing the Lord's praises" (17:27-28)  
One can live after his death only through his sons.  
"1 He who loves his son will whip him often,  
So that he may rejoice at the way he turns out.  
2 He who disciplines his son will profit by him,  
And will boast of him among acquaintances.  
3 He who teaches his son will make his enemies envious,  
And will glory in him among his friends.  
4 When the father dies he will not seem to be dead,  
For he has left behind him one like himself" (30:1-4).

Sirach also wishes that the righteous judges of Israel live through their children:

"May their bones send forth new life from where they lie,  
And may the names of those who have been honored  
Live again in their children" (46:12).

### **Sirach and Monotheism**

The sages were seeking the creator-God. This search led them to the notion of one creator of the whole world; if there is only one creator for the whole universe there is only one God. This idea subsequently led them to monotheism. The same God has created, sees, and preserves the whole universe; he lives forever:

" 1 He who lives forever created the whole universe;  
2 The Lord alone will be declared righteous" (18:1-3).  
"19 The works of all flesh are before him,  
And nothing can be hid from his eyes.  
2 0 From everlasting to everlasting he beholds them,  
And nothing is marvelous to him" (39:19-20).

Although Sirach was basically a wisdom sage, we have seen that he was also well versed in the teachings of the fathers. At the end of his reflection about the world and its creator, he concluded that the creator-God of the sages and the creator-redeemer-God of the ancestors are one and the same. Here Sirach comes closer to the Deuteronomist's notion of God. That Sirach was a monotheist in the line of Deuteronomy is clear from his comment on the Israelite kings. Like the Deuteronomist's Sirach sees only Josiah and Hezekiah as righteous kings:

"1 The name of Josiah is like blended incense  
Prepared by the skill of the perfumer;  
His memory is as sweet as honey to every mouth,  
And like music at a banquet of wine.  
2 He did what was right by reforming the people,  
And removing the wicked abominations.  
3 He kept his heart fixed on the Lord;  
In lawless times he made godliness prevail.

4 Except for David and Hezekiah and Josiah,  
 All of them were great sinners,  
 For they abandoned the law of the Most High;  
 The kings of Judah came to an end" (49:1-4).  
 This one God should be known by all peoples. That was the desire  
 of Sirach:

1 Have mercy upon us, O God of all,  
 2 And put all the nations in fear of you.  
 3 Lift up your hand against foreign nations  
 And let them see your might.  
 4 As you have used us to show your holiness to them,  
 So use them to show your glory to us.  
 5 Then they will know,  
 As we have known that there is no God but you, O Lord.  
 6 Give new signs, and work other wonders" (36:1-5).

The true God is eternal (42:21); he created everything through his word (39:18-21; 42:15); he also knows everything that happens in the universe (39:19-20; 42:18-20). The divinely established order in the universe bears testimony to the know-ledge and the glory of this God (43:1-33). God has created all things in the world, and he has marvelously put together all events that happen there (16:26-30). Man can only wonder by looking at this great work:

"How desirable are all his works,  
 And how sparkling they are to see" (42:22).

The monotheistic notion of Sirach was however different from that of the Deuteronomist, who, at least apparently, advo-cated herem, i.e., the annihilation of all non-believers and pagans (cf. Deut 31:3; Josh 9:24; Num 21:2). Sirach was searching for the creator-God of the universe; he thought that the whole humankind was the creation of God and that he shows mercy to all peoples irrespective of religion:

"The compassion of human beings is for their neighbors,  
 But the compassion of the Lord is for every living thing.  
 He rebukes and trains and teaches them,  
 And turns them back, as a shepherd his flock" (18:13).

If there is only one God who gives a law to the universe (wisdom) and if his law is what that brings man to God and works as a medium of communication between God and the world, then the law that God has set in the world (wisdom) and the law that he revealed to his servant (Moses) should be the same (24:23). In both the will of God for humankind is revealed. These are the laws of the same God. As a result Sirach identified Torah with wisdom:

"1 Wisdom praises herself,  
 And tells of her glory in the midst of her people.  
 2 In the assembly of the Most High she opens her mouth,  
 And in the presence of his hosts she tells of her glory:  
 3 "I came forth from the mouth of the Most High,  
 And covered the earth like a mist. ....  
 6 Over waves of the sea, over all the earth,  
 And over every people and nation I have held sway.  
 7 Among all these I sought a resting place;  
 In whose territory should I abide?  
 8 "Then the Creator of all things gave me a command,  
 And my Creator chose the place for my tent.  
 He said, 'Make your dwelling in Jacob,  
 And in Israel receive your inheritance.' ....  
 10 In the holy tent I ministered before him,

And so I was established in Zion.

- 1 1 Thus in the beloved city he gave me a resting place,  
And in Jerusalem was my domain. ....
- 1 9 "Come to me, you who desire me,  
And eat your fill of my fruits.
- 2 0 For the memory of me is sweeter than honey,  
And the possession of me sweeter than the honeycomb.
- 2 1 Those who eat of me will hunger for more,  
And those who drink of me will thirst for more.
- 2 2 Whoever obeys me will not be put to shame,  
And those who work with me will not sin."
- 2 3 All this is the book of the covenant  
Of the Most High God,  
The law that Moses commanded us  
As an inheritance for the congregations of Jacob" (24:1-24).  
The same thought is visible other passages (15:1; 17:11; 19:20;  
21:11; 34:8) and when he makes his reflection on Moses:  
"He made him hear his voice,  
And led him into the thick darkness,  
And gave him the commandments face to face,  
The law of life and knowledge,  
To teach Jacob the covenant,  
And Israel his judgments" (45:5).  
Sirach consequently give the following advice:
- "2 The wise will not hate the law,  
But the one who is hypocritical  
About it is like a boat in a storm.
- 3 The sensible person will trust in the law;  
For such a one the law is as dependable  
As a divine oracle" (33:2-3).  
From the identification of  
Torah with the universal law of the creator  
who is thought to be the only God (monotheism), certain conclusions will be drawn by Sirach:  
1. If the God of Jacob is the creator of the universe (God of sages), and his law gives wisdom, then  
the temple in which the law of Jacob is set is very important:
- "8 Then the Creator of all things gave me a command,  
And my Creator chose the place for my tent. ....
- 1 0 In the holy tent I ministered before him,  
And so I was established in Zion.
- 1 1 Thus in the beloved city he gave me a resting place,  
And in Jerusalem was my domain" (24:8-11).
2. If the Law of Moses gives wisdom, then the sacrifices and  
blessing prescribed by Torah are also important:
- 8 The offering of the righteous enriches the altar,  
And its pleasing odor rises before the Most High.
- 9 The sacrifice of the righteous is acceptable,  
And it will never be forgotten.
- 1 0 Be generous when you worship the Lord,  
And do not stint the first fruits of your hands.
- 1 1 With every gift show a cheerful face,

And dedicate your tithe with gladness.

1 2 Give to the Most High as he has given to you,  
And as generously as you can afford.

1 3 For the Lord is the one who repays,  
And he will repay you sevenfold" (35:8-13).

If the law and sacrifices are essential, the priests who administer these offerings are important as well. Sirach not only makes a meditation on Aaron, the very first priest of Israel (45:6-12), but also gives other reflections on priesthood:

"29 With all your soul fear the Lord,  
And revere his priests.

30 With all your might love your Maker,  
And do not neglect his ministers.

31 Fear the Lord and honor the priest,  
And give him his portion, as you have been commanded:  
The first fruits, the guilt offering,  
The gift of the shoulders, the sacrifice of sanctification,  
And the first fruits of the holy things" (7:29-31).

Just as Aaron and his son Phinehas, Sirach also respected the Maccabean Priest Simon who was probably his contemporary (cf.

50:1-21).

Sirach did not stop his discussion with a declaration of the importance of offerings and sacrifices, and his invitation to respect the priests. He also spoke about a corresponding inner spiritual attitude that should accompany any sacrifice if it is to be acceptable, because the God of the sage is a righteous God:

"21 If one sacrifices ill-gotten goods,  
The offering is blemished;

22 The gifts of the lawless are not acceptable.

23 The Most High is not pleased  
With the offerings of the ungodly,  
Nor for a multitude of sacrifices does he forgive sins" (34:21-23).

"The sacrifice of the righteous is acceptable,  
And it will never be forgotten" (35:9).

In fact, for Sirach, obedience to the Law was better than a mechanical way of offering sacrifices; in this way of thinking, Sirach might be coming closer to the Deuteronomic notion of obedience (Deut 11:17; 28:62-63)

"1 The one who keeps the law makes many offerings;

2 One who heeds the commandments  
Makes an offering of well-being.

3 The one who returns a kindness offers choice flour,

4 And one who gives alms sacrifices a thank offering.

5 To keep from wickedness is pleasing to the Lord,  
And to forsake unrighteousness is an atonement" (35:1-5).

Not only at the time of sacrifices, if one wants to be wise he should be perfect in all his actions. The payers of such a person will surely be heard:

"25 If a man washes after touching a dead body,  
And touches it again, what has he gained by his washing?

26 So if a man 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?"

(34:25-26 or 25-29 NRSV).

"19 He will not ignore the supplication of the orphan,  
Or the widow when she pours out her complaint.  
18 Do not the tears of the widow run down her cheek  
19 As she cries out against the one who causes them to fall?  
20 The one whose service is pleasing to the Lord  
Will be accepted,  
And his prayer will reach to the clouds

21 The 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" (35:19-21).

As already indicated, Sirach was an advocate of social justice. He taught that everyone has to be aware of the poor in the society and practice justice:

"8 Give a hearing to the poor,  
And return their greeting politely.  
9 Rescue the oppressed from the oppressor;  
And do not be hesitant in giving a verdict.  
10 Be a father to orphans,  
And be like a husband to their mother;  
You will then be like a son of the Most High,  
And he will love you more than does your mother" (4:8-10).  
"As water extinguishes a blazing fire,  
So almsgiving atones for sin" (3:30).

Summarizing the above said points one can say that Sirach was one who held a high and developed theology. We have already seen that Sirach not only meditates on the Law and the Prophets of his ancestors, but also takes part in the tradition of the sages who were in search of their creator and reflect on the wisdom tradition of the other nations. The openness without being syncretistic makes Sirach truly a wise person. His exhortations are highly theological, comprehensive, inclusive, mature, and based on experience. However, like his predecessors he was also not free from a male oriented social view (cf. Sir 25:13-26).

### **Sirach is a Pointer to the New Testament Theology**

By reflecting on the Law, the Prophets, the other existing writings of the ancestors, and the wisdom of the neighboring nations, Sirach seems to have developed a high theology that comes very close to the New Testament; we can see that the book was widely used by the early church, which in its turn should have influenced the New Testament authors. All the moral teachings of Sirach might be labeled as 'Christian.' For example, see the following verses:

"For the Lord is compassionate and merciful;  
He forgives sins and saves in time of distress"  
(Sir 2:11; Cf. Jn 8:11).

"Do not babble in the assembly of the elders,  
And do not repeat yourself when you pray"  
(Sir 7:14; cf. Mt 6:7).

The Jewish belief that Elijah should come before the messiah is held by Sirach:

"At the appointed time, it is written, you are destined  
To calm the wrath of God before it breaks out in fury,  
To turn the hearts of parents to their children,  
And to restore the tribes of Jacob" (48:10; cf. Luke 1:16-17).



When Sirach prays, he calls God his father:  
 "1 O Lord, Father and Master of my life,  
 Do not abandon me to their designs,  
 And do not let me fall because of them!  
 2 Who will set whips over my thoughts,  
 And the discipline of wisdom over my mind,  
 So as not to spare me in my errors,  
 And not overlook my sins?  
 3 Otherwise my mistakes may be multiplied,  
 And my sins may abound,  
 And I may fall before my adversaries,  
 And my enemy may rejoice over me.  
 4 O Lord, Father and God of my life,  
 Do not give me haughty eyes,  
 5 and remove evil desire from me.  
 6 Let neither gluttony nor lust overcome me,  
 And do not give me over to shameless passion" (23:1-6).

Thanking God about his favors, Sirach says the following words:

"10 I cried out, "Lord, you are my Father;  
 Do not forsake me in the days of trouble,  
 When there is no help against the proud  
 11 I will praise your name continually,  
 And will sing hymns of thanksgiving."  
 My prayer was heard" (51:10).

In fact, Psalms had visualized God as the father of the anointed king and the Book of Deuteronomy and Prophets visualized God as the father of Israel:

"I will tell of the decree of the Lord:  
 He said to me, "You are my son;  
 Today I have begotten you" (Ps 3:7; cf. also 2Sam 7:14);  
 "Do you thus repay the Lord,  
 O foolish and senseless people?  
 Is not he your father, who created you,  
 Who made you and established you" (Deut 32:6).

"With weeping they shall come, and 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" (Deut 31:9).

"For you are our father, though Abraham does not know us  
 And Israel does not acknowledge us;  
 You, O Lord, are our father;  
 Our Redeemer from of old is your name" (Is 63:16).

"Yet, O Lord, you are our Father;  
 We are the clay, and you are our potter;  
 We are all the work of your hand" (Is 64:8).

"Have we not all one father?  
 Has not one God created us?  
 Why then are we faithless to one another,  
 Profaning the covenant of our ancestors?" (Mal 2:10).

Notably the first biblical author who calls God his father is Sirach. Considering God as the father

of an individual in fact agrees with the basic vision of the wisdom tradition. The sage is looking for the personal God who intervenes in the personal life of the individual. He is not looking for his national God.

The sage being a seeker of God who intervenes in the personal life of the individual, and not the God of the Law and the Prophets, slowly comes to the recognition of God as his father. This is the point where Sirach comes very close to the New Testament. One of the important teachings of the New Testament is that God is the father and that believers are the children of God in Jesus Christ (cf. Mt 5:43-48; 6:9-13). Even two centuries before the birth of Jesus, Sirach is thinking arrives at this theological level. This theological excellence and the magnitude of exhortations in all possible areas of human life made the book renowned among the Jews of the second century B.C. and was translated into different languages.

#### End Notes

78 Cf. A.A. DiLella, "Wisdom of Ben-Sira," ABD VI, 931-932

79 Cf. A.A. DiLella, "Wisdom of Ben-Sira," 931-932.

80 Cf. A.A. DiLella, "Wisdom of Ben-Sira," 934; Y. Yadin, *The Ben Sira Scroll from Masada*, Jerusalem, 1965, 2-4, 6-8

81 Cf. A.A. DiLella, "Wisdom of Ben-Sira," ABD VI, 933