



*TEXTS IN DIALOGUE*

**STREAMS TO THE OCEAN OF WISDOM: REFLECTIONS ON BEN SIRACH 24**

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Although the Book of Ben Sira<sup>1</sup> was preserved in Greek, and became part of the Christian scriptures for the Eastern and Roman Catholic Churches, it was by no means unknown among Jews. Veronika<sup>2</sup> mentioned the Hebrew manuscripts found in the Cairo Genizah, and then later at Masada and Qumran. Alone among the books of the Apocrypha, Ben Sira is also quoted several times in the Talmud as a source of wisdom, and even designated, in one passage, as part of the *Ketuvim*, the sacred writings.<sup>3</sup> In another passage the Rabbis debate whether it is proper to cite the book of Ben Sira and derive teachings from it. Rav Joseph is sceptical, but every verse of Ben Sira that he raises as problematic turns out to be quite kosher!<sup>4</sup> One of the most intriguing bits of evidence of the book's Jewish popularity in former ages is the mention, by the great 10<sup>th</sup>-century Baghdad authority Saadia Gaon, of a Hebrew manuscript he had seen which contained cantillation marks, indicating that people may have been chanting it as Scripture.<sup>5</sup>

A striking feature of Ben Sira's style is his use of extended similes, sometimes attaining almost epic quality. This technique is very pronounced in Chapter 24, and yesterday Veronika discussed the way Wisdom compares herself to a tree – in fact many trees (I count seven trees, seven aromatic plants, and the grape vine to crown them all, a symbolic total of 15). This can be seen as looking backwards to Proverbs 3:18, and the metaphor of Wisdom as the tree of life. Since for Ben Sira Wisdom is manifested as the Torah, we have the beginning of the identification of the Torah as *etz hayyim*, the tree of life, which we sang in the service this morning.

I would like to focus on another of the metaphors of Chapter 24, which is not expressed by Wisdom herself, but by Ben Sira the narrator, after he has identified Wisdom with the Torah of Moses. This is the metaphor of water, which dominates the last ten verses of the chapter. If the tree met-

<sup>1</sup> This is how the book is known in Jewish tradition. The form Sirach derives from the Greek rendering in the Septuagint.

<sup>2</sup> This is the second of a pair of talks in the “Texts in Dialogue” programme of the International Jewish Christian Bible Week 2017. The first was given by Dr Veronika Bachmann, entitled “Jesus Sirach 24 – Von der Weisheit, die einen irdischen Wohnort gefunden hat”.

<sup>3</sup> Babylonian Talmud (BT), *Bava Kamma* 92b.

<sup>4</sup> BT, *Sanhedrin* 100b. Rav Joseph was an important Babylonian *amora* (leading rabbi) of the early 4<sup>th</sup> century. He was blind, and renowned for his exact knowledge of Scripture. Some suggest he was not opposed to studying Ben Sira, but only to reading it liturgically.

<sup>5</sup> See Michael L. Satlow, “The Wisdom of Ben Sira: How Jewish?” published 2015 on <thetorah.com>, accessed 20/07/2017. Note also the probable influence of Ben Sira 50 on an important early *piyyut* (liturgical poem) in the *avodah* (Temple service) section of the Yom Kippur liturgy.

aphor looks back to Proverbs – and beyond that to Genesis, and the Tree of Life in the midst of the Garden – one could say that the water metaphor looks forwards. In one sense, available to Ben Sira, it looks forward to Messianic times, for the Prophets see water as central to redemption. The culmination of Ezekiel's Temple vision is the spring that rises beneath the Temple's threshold, and becomes a shallow stream, then a deep tree-lined river, and ultimately brings the Dead Sea to life (Ezek. 47:1-12). Zechariah too foresaw living waters flowing from Jerusalem, eastward and westward, on the day of the Lord and for ever after (Zech. 14:8). From Isaiah onwards, redemption is associated with the waters that will, both literally and figuratively, make the desert bloom (Isa. 35:6-7, etc.).

Now, perhaps for the first time, the water of redemption is identified explicitly with Wisdom / Torah. Just as Wisdom, in Ben Sira's epic simile, was not one tree but a whole botanical garden, so she is not one river, but six – the four rivers that flow from Eden (Gen. 2:10-14) as well as the sacred Jordan and the mighty Nile. They flow from Spring, the time of first fruits, through the Summer harvest, and on to the Autumn vintage, a never-ceasing, ever-maturing flow of Wisdom. But could there be just six rivers of Wisdom? No, of course there is a seventh! In a bold, brilliant stroke, Ben Sira makes *himself* the seventh river. Not at first; he begins as a ditch, a mere irrigation channel, barely enough to water his own garden, but the sheer volume of Wisdom is such that his channel turns into a river, and his river into a sea.

This metaphor looks forward in another sense too, one that was not available to Ben Sira, for he could not know that one day Rabbis would come along and declare: *ein mayim ella torah*, "There is no water but Torah!" In the dry and desert land of the cruel Roman Empire, in times of destruction and exile, our Sages found their source of life giving water in the Torah – not just the scriptural text itself, but the ever-flowing, broadening stream of debate and interpretation that was enshrined in Talmud and midrash. Thus they interpret Isaiah 55:1, "Ho, all who thirst, come for water!" as a reference to Torah. Just as water brings life to the world, so words of Torah bring life to the world; just as water removes impurity, so words of Torah remove impurity; just as water flows from a high place to a lower place, so words of Torah leave the haughty and stay with the humble – and many, many more. Especially striking is the comparison: Just as the waters cover the nakedness of the sea, as it is said, "[The earth shall be filled with the knowledge of the Eternal] as the waters cover the sea" (Isa. 11:9), so the Torah covers the nakedness of Israel, as it says, "Love covers all transgressions" (Prov. 10:12).<sup>6</sup> Here, love is a synonym for Torah, but even the "waters" really mean the knowledge of God!

About a century-and-a-half after Ben Sira's grandson in Alexandria translated his book into Greek, and perhaps a century after another Alexandrian Jewish thinker wrote the Wisdom of Solomon, the idea of God's [self-] knowledge, or Wisdom, serving as the vehicle of creation and the intermediary between the unknowable God and the material universe, flowered in the Logos-theology of Philo Judaeus of Alexandria. Although Philo generally refers to the Logos in masculine terms – indeed, as the son of God – he also refers to Wisdom (which he takes as synonymous with the Logos) as "the mother and nurse of all."<sup>7</sup> Perhaps he was inspired by Ben Sira, who had written, "He who holds to the law will find Wisdom. She will come to meet him like a mother, and like the wife of his youth she will welcome him. She will feed him with the bread of understanding, and give him the water of wisdom to drink" (15:1-3).<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> For catalogues of these comparisons, see *Sifrei Deuteronomy* 48, *Song of Songs Rabbah* 1, 2b, 3 and *Midrash Psalms* 1:18. There is some evidence that this comparison of Torah to water was particularly prevalent in the school of R. Akiva; see below, and see his parable of the fox and the fishes in BT *Berakhot* 61b.

<sup>7</sup> Philo, *De Ebrietate* 31, cited in David Winston, *Logos and Mystical Theology in Philo of Alexandria*, Cincinnati: Hebrew Union College Press, 1985, p. 20. He explains Philo's feminine characterisation of Wisdom with reference to platonic ideas, and dismisses the explanation of H.A. Wolfson, who argued it was a wordplay on 'amon in Prov. 8:30, which could be read both 'imman (their mother) and 'omen (nurse). He does not note the reference in BS 15.

<sup>8</sup> In Chapter 24, some old authorities add, as verse 18, "I am the mother of beautiful love, of fear, of knowledge and of holy hope; being eternal, I therefore am given to all my children, to those who are named by him."

Veronika showed how the Wisdom / Logos idea was reflected in the Christological opening of the Fourth Gospel. Around the same time – the end of the 1<sup>st</sup> or beginning of the 2<sup>nd</sup> century – Rabbi Akiva was giving first expression to a Rabbinic Logos-theology:

“Beloved are Israel, for to them was given the precious instrument [that is, the Torah]; even greater is the love, that it was made known to them that they were given the precious instrument *with which the world was created*, as it is said, ‘Behold, I give you good instruction, forsake not my teaching’” (Prov. 4:2).<sup>9</sup>

As the Rabbis developed this Torah / Logos theology, they asserted that Torah pre-existed the creation of the universe<sup>10</sup> and served as the divine pattern or blueprint for creation: “God looked into the Torah and created the world.”<sup>11</sup>

If Christ was seen by the Johannine Church as the incarnation of God’s Word / Wisdom, so the Torah was seen in Rabbinic Judaism as the “inlibriation” of God’s Word / Wisdom.<sup>12</sup> Christ and the Torah are therefore parallel expressions of Wisdom, or to put it another way – since the early Church surely knew of the identification of Wisdom with Torah by Ben Sira and others – Christ can be seen as the incarnation of the Torah.

Veronika raised the challenging issue of particularism in Ben Sira. Wisdom had been universal, international, available to all intelligent, decent people, but becomes nationalised when she is identified with Israel’s Torah, and domiciled in Jerusalem. Has Lady Wisdom therefore shrunk and been domesticated? Have we tried to shut her indoors and rob her of freedom?

Perhaps here there is a paradox that lies at the heart of both Judaism and Christianity. In order to gain the most energy to expand and give life, Wisdom had to be concentrated in the smallest space. What is diffused everywhere is ineffective; to be everywhere is to be nowhere. In our chapter, Wisdom begins by covering the earth like a mist, making her throne in a pillar of cloud, circling alone the vault of heaven and walking in the deep abyss. These are images of distance, of obscurity, of splendid but fruitless isolation. Only when rooted in Jerusalem can the tree of life bear fruit. Only when concentrated in the Torah can the rivers of interpretation gush out. Only when born in a single life and dying a unique death can the Word open the path of life to all humanity. Our very universe, we are told, had to be concentrated in an infinitely small, energetic singularity, in order to explode outwards and give birth to the galaxies.

Ben Sira begins with no greater ambition than to water his own garden, but becomes one with the ocean of wisdom, touching the shore of every land. At the very end of the chapter he asks us to note “I have been working not merely for myself, but for all who are seeking wisdom” (v. 34). Perhaps there’s an echo here of Isaiah: “It is too small a thing that you should be my servant to raise up the tribes of Jacob and restore the survivors of Israel; I will make you a light of nations, that my salvation may reach to the ends of the earth” (Isa. 49:6). Ben Sira, too, sees his task to make light shine out of darkness like the daybreak (v. 32), to illuminate the whole world with Wisdom.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Mishnah, *Avot* 3:18.

<sup>10</sup> *Genesis Rabbah* 1:1. The Torah is not generally seen in Rabbinic Judaism as eternal and uncreated, as the Word came to be seen in Christianity (and the Qur’an in mainstream Islam), but as pre-existing creation for a long period. In kabbalistic thought, from the Middle Ages, Torah was identified with the (uncreated) divine emanations (*sefirot*, particularly *Tiferet* and *Malkhut*) and thus seen as a hypostasis of God. Furthermore, the identification of the (oral) Torah as *Malkhut* / *Shekhinah* can be seen as a reassertion of the feminine aspect of Wisdom.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.* 7:2, cf. *Avot de-Rabbi Natan A* 31.

<sup>12</sup> There is a further sense in which the Torah is incarnate in those who study and keep it, the community of Israel, just as the incarnate Word is further embodied in the Church.

<sup>13</sup> Note that Ben Sira, unlike most Wisdom authors, likens his teaching to prophecy. Perhaps the very identification of Wisdom with the Torah of Moses, the supreme prophet, makes this idea possible. See, however, Prov. 31:1, where the editor (depending on one’s interpretation of *massa*) might impute prophetic character to the words of Lemuel.