



TEXTS IN DIALOGUE

JESUS BEN SIRÁ 24
ON WISDOM, WHO HAS FOUND AN EARTHLY DWELLING PLACE

Veronika Bachmann

Jesus Ben Sira is a text which, like the book of Proverbs, belongs to the category of Biblical wisdom literature – at least from a Roman Catholic point of view. Summarised in a slightly casual way, it belongs neither to the Jewish Tanach nor to the Protestant Bible because the text is available to us only in Greek and not in Hebrew. The secondary status which the book of Ben Sira has acquired in the Biblical canon should not prevent us from recognising that the book was definitely quite popular in the pre-Christian era. This is supported by discoveries made in the 19th and 20th centuries. These are related to the question of the original text. In the foreword, the translator claims that his version is his own Greek translation of a text written in Hebrew by his learned grandfather. He requests the reader's indulgence in the event that the translation is found to be unsatisfactory here and there, conceding: "It is not all the same thing if one reads something in the original Hebrew or it is translated into another language". And we can all agree with that. The grandson asserts that he nonetheless translated the text into Greek "in order to reproduce it for those who wish to educate themselves in distant lands, having committed themselves to living in accord with the Law". Here we are dealing with the Jewish diaspora in Egypt, most likely the diaspora community in Alexandria in particular. Up until the 19th century it was necessary simply to accept the translator's word that he had translated a Hebrew original. Or one could entertain the suspicion that he made this up in order to confer greater credibility and authority on his text. It is indeed the case, however, that discoveries were made – in the Geniza in Cairo in the 19th century and at Masada and Qumran in the 20th – of manuscripts containing fragments of the book of Ben Sira in Hebrew. Thus, at least according strictly to the linguistic criterion, the book entirely deserved a place in every Biblical canon! In the meantime, on the basis of textual findings, an actual field of research has developed. The manuscripts have been compared with each other and people have speculated as to how the discrepancies can be accounted for.

In the case of Ben Sira 24, we are dealing with a passage which has only survived in Greek. This makes things easier, as there are no variants to discuss. Additionally, it is possible to see the chapter as a unit standing on its own. Taking all 51 chapters into account, it forms the literal centre of the book. And the genre which we find here underscores this point: in Chapter 24, it is no longer a matter of proverbial utterances by Wisdom – as earlier and later in the book. Instead we encounter here, as in Proverbs 8, a lengthier speech by Wisdom. "Wisdom praises herself", we read in the introduction (24:1). As in Proverbs 8, a glance back at Wisdom's origins is connected with an invitation to turn one's attention to her. A mythical and figurative language prevails in the speech. It should provoke a keen interest in wisdom and convincingly demonstrate that *this* is the authentic, divinely-sanctioned standard of reference. Whoever follows it can expect a life of abundance.

The chapter radiates a powerful optimism, which is also palpable in the rest of the book. In this Ben Sira 24 follows the book of Proverbs: wisdom, according to this concept, is not merely accessible; and in this regard, other texts are yet more sceptical – wisdom leads to wellbeing, as pointed out, and indeed in the here and now. The connection between deeds and life's course, according to this trusting view, functions correctly. With this optimism, the book of Ben Sira, like the book of Proverbs, belongs to *traditional* wisdom. Here it's not a matter of communicating the perception that good deeds do not always lead to good things or bad deeds to bad things – a theme which is addressed both in Job and in Ecclesiastes / Kohelet. It is not a question of *critical* wisdom. And it is also not all about commending, as in another deuterocanonical book, Wisdom of Solomon (Sapientia Salomonis), a solution to the question which asserts that the relationship between deeds and the course of life reaches its fulfilment beyond the world of here and now. Indeed, according to Wisdom of Solomon, for the righteous who suffer, an early death can be a blessing. Meanwhile, those who mock – and triumph – will come to feel God's judgment after their deaths. Thus the book Wisdom of Solomon most certainly appears to remind us of Christian notions. And yet, as we shall see, there are those who have referred to Ben Sira 24 in order to arrive at interpretations of the person and actions of Jesus of Nazareth.

With Proverbs 8 and Ben Sira 24 we are in another place which is different from Wisdom of Solomon's location. However, these two texts are themselves also different in some key regards. The most evident distinction: in Proverbs 8, Wisdom commends herself to the attention fundamentally of all persons – the whole of humanity. She involves herself in the affairs of the city, the place where people meet and communicate, and in the life of the crowd, actively promoting herself. The book of Proverbs thus reflects what can be called the "international" character of wisdom. In a daring way it situates its own religious symbolic system within this broader horizon. Therefore it is no surprise that there are passages in the book of Proverbs which we also find in Egyptian wisdom literature. So what is happening in Ben Sira 24? The introduction to the speech already demands our attention. Here Wisdom appears "in the midst of her people", in the "assembly of God". The circle of persons addressed is distinctly smaller. Nevertheless, Ben Sira 24 builds on the universal character of wisdom: thus verses 3-6 of the chapter describe the vastness of the cosmos and the special relationship between wisdom / Wisdom and God as the creator of the universe. However: just after this comes a major differentiation in the point of view – here the personified image of Wisdom, who has been wandering about up till now, seeks out a stable place of rest in order to establish her tent. In essence, every nation may be considered eligible in this context (verse 7). Yet God directs her to establish her tent in Israel. In this way, Ben Sira 24 begins to mark the special position of Israel and its traditions. It is *there* that Wisdom resides. The following verses add more detail: Sophia, as Chochmah is called in Greek, is established in Jerusalem, in Zion, that is, in a specially chosen city. Or, as we find formulated in verse 11: "In the city which He loves as He loves me, I found rest". By means of the concept of "being established", the text deftly makes a transition to a broader and more powerful world of imagery: Wisdom now compares herself to a tree which, having been planted and now sending down roots, is able to develop in a magnificent way, radiating beauty and producing nutritious fruit. The dimension of the present once again acquires features of paradise. A wondrous tree – we could say a tree of life – stands at the centre of the world. And this central point, this navel of the world, is Jerusalem.

Ben Sira 24 is daring not only in placing its own tradition in the broader frame of reference of wisdom. Ben Sira 24 also boldly presents its own as the one privileged and true tradition. Obviously there must have been other candidates keen to claim this prominent position at the time of the text's composition, operating from both insider and outsider perspectives. Because Wisdom's speech is addressed to an internal audience, in terms of the text's pragmatic purposes, it appears to be above all designed to project a range of seductive images in order to motivate people to remain loyally attached to their own tradition or to turn towards it with full devotion.

A final point is made in verse 23. After the city of Jerusalem is elevated to the status of source of all abundance and blessing, we arrive at the lofty declaration: "All of this is (or applies to) the

book of the covenant of the highest God, the Torah (gr.: *nomos*), which Moses commanded us to receive, as an inheritance for the communities of Jacob". Torah and Wisdom are placed on the same level! This sort of linkage is otherwise only posited by the deuterocanonical book of Baruch. There we find in chapter 3 (verses 37ff) a form of summary of Ben Sira 24:

"[God] found the whole way to knowledge / wisdom, and gave her to Jacob his servant and to Israel whom he loved. Afterward she appeared on earth and dwelt among human beings. She is the book of the commandments of God, and the law that endures for ever. All who cling to her, find life; all who abandon her, descend into death. Turn, O Jacob, and take her! Walk toward the shining of her light!"

All in all, it is a curious mixture of universalism and particularism which is embodied here in Ben Sira 24. This is in accord with the Hellenistic era and with the contexts and concerns of those responsible for its authorship.

When, a good 200 years later, men and women contemplated the role of Jesus of Nazareth – in interaction with God, Wisdom and the World – there were attempts to place Christ, rather than the Torah, on a plane with Wisdom. Prominent among these is the prologue to the book of the Gospel of John. Most likely because Jesus was a man and it seemed appropriate at that time to take up then widespread conceptions of neo-Platonic thought, the figure of Sophia was replaced with the *logos*. But it is precisely when one reads a text like Ben Sira 24 that the *logos* becomes transparent in relation to Wisdom. Thus the prologue to John boldly elevates Jesus to the status of creative principle and creative mediator. Both life and light are associated with him. Additionally, in the continuing text of the Gospel, images such as "the bread of life" and "the water of life" reinforce the proximity to a nourishing, abundance-promising wisdom. In the context of the prologue to John people like to refer to Christology. Accordingly, in the case of Ben Sira 24 we would need to speak of Sophiology. I believe that both terms are inadequate. Both texts are in a strict sense advertising texts, which figure more as an example of a poetic-narrative genre than of teaching. Both seek to elicit a positive response, both want to convince their readership that commitment to the Torah or belief in Jesus represent a choice in favour of the right way, which is full of blessing. The unifying element here is the issue of which way leads, for the individual and the collective, to an existence which is full of blessing.

In conclusion I would like to turn to a distinction which has not yet been touched upon. In John 6:35 we find words placed in the mouth of Jesus: "Whoever comes to me, shall never be hungry again, and whoever believes in me, shall never thirst again." I infer from this statement a deep yearning for rest – not just for Wisdom, but also for humanity. In Ben Sira 24:21 Wisdom says: "Whoever finds pleasure in me, shall continue to hunger; whoever drinks me, continues to thirst." What is this getting at? A person is supposed to find pleasure and yet want more ... Following Wisdom / the Torah does not happen without curiosity, without desire: this is most probably the idea which is behind this statement. And although one generally assigns the book of Ben Sira to traditional wisdom literature, at this point a position reflecting a critical understanding of perception becomes evident: fully grasping wisdom or the Torah is something which no human being will ever successfully accomplish. The verses 28-29 underscore this. This process of self-limitation in terms of a theory of perception strikes me as a theologian as very valuable, at least as valuable as a serious recognition of the human yearning for rest. Because not only the meaning of following God's commandments in the light of God's own unknowable nature is something which must be constantly considered and reconsidered. I would be pleased if the issue of what it means to follow Jesus could likewise be constantly considered and reconsidered as a topic. Not least because this very question leads back to the traditions upon which Christianity builds. Fortunately, the multi-vocal character of the Bible invites to do this. And it is to be hoped that in this way it becomes for us a tree of life.

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Translation: James Baaden