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Book Author(s): Warren C. Trenchard

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## INTRODUCTION

The book of Sirach contains discussions of a wide variety of topics that arise from everyday life in Palestine in the second century B.C. These include descriptions of and counsel concerning various classes of people, such as physicians, scribes, friends, counselors, enemies, craftsmen, rich, poor, wisemen, and fools.<sup>1</sup> However, one of the most prominent features of Sirach is the rather large amount of space that it devotes to the discussion of women. Of the 1390 verses in Sirach, 105, or about 7 percent, deal with women. While some of the units concerning women are isolated distichs, about two-thirds of the material is found in sections of five verses or longer. One such section contains thirty-two verses.

In view of its quantitative significance, it is indeed curious that to date no one has produced a comprehensive treatment of this material about women in Sirach. The commentaries<sup>2</sup> on the book are understandably inadequate. In the course of their treatment of the whole work, they provide important textual, linguistic, and exegetical data on the texts that relate to women. However, they do not consider the problem of women in Sirach in any thoroughgoing, systematic way. The only studies specifically devoted to the topic of women in Sirach are two very short articles in Expository Times. One<sup>3</sup> is from just before the turn of the century and the other<sup>4</sup> almost eighty years later. The brevity and general nature of these articles disqualify them as serious attempts to understand the issue. The same can be said of the Festschrift article by

Kenneth E. Bailey,<sup>5</sup> which compares Ben Sira's view of women to that of the NT.<sup>6</sup>

Despite the paucity of specific studies on the issue of women in Sirach, scholars have offered various opinions on the nature of Ben Sira's view. These opinions tend to fall into two groups. Some have expressed the notion that Ben Sira is personally negative toward women.<sup>7</sup> Others have interpreted his remarks about women as balanced<sup>8</sup> or merely a reflection of his sources and contemporary conditions.<sup>9</sup> Yet, none of these scholars has seriously attempted to support these claims. Their opinions on Ben Sira's view of women take on more the character of a priori remarks than genuinely informed statements.

The purpose of this study is at once general and specific. In a general sense it is designed to fill the gap of scholarship on the issue of women in Sirach. Thus, I will systematically analyze all the material concerning women in the book, providing detailed exegesis in each case. More specifically, I will endeavor to resolve the question of the nature of Ben Sira's view of women. This will involve an examination of the evidence to determine whether or not Ben Sira was personally negative toward women.<sup>10</sup>

In the early stages of my investigation of the issue I did not know the direction that my resolution of the problem of Ben Sira's view of women would take. However, after a preliminary examination of the initial data that I had gathered, I was able to detect a developing tendency in the evidence. It was then that I formulated the following working hypothesis for this study: Ben Sira is personally negative toward women. Thus, in addition to reviewing and analyzing all his remarks about women, I will seek to test the reasonableness of this hypothesis in view of the evidence of the text.

As I prepare to analyze certain portions of Sirach, it will be helpful to briefly review several matters of introduction. Unlike most Jewish treatises from this period, the book contains the identification of its author. According to 50:27 his name was Joshua the son of Eleazar the son of Sira.<sup>11</sup> Since the

last of these three designations in Heb is ben-sîrâ', in Jewish circles and beyond it has become customary to refer to the author as Ben Sira. I will follow this practice in the present study and use the name Ben Sira in reference to the author of the book. When I refer to the book itself or cite material from it, I will use the title Sirach.<sup>12</sup> The author was apparently the master of a school,<sup>13</sup> which was probably in Jerusalem.<sup>14</sup>

Scholars are generally agreed on placing the date of composition around 180 B.C.<sup>15</sup> This is determined largely by the statement of his grandson in the Prologue to the Gr translation that he went to Egypt in the year 132 B.C. and translated his grandfather's work sometime thereafter.<sup>16</sup> The other main factor in dating the composition is its reflection of a generally tranquil urban society. This would require a date prior to the outbreak of the Maccabean Revolt in 168 B.C.; in fact, probably before 171 B.C., when Antiochus Epiphanes appointed Menelaus as high priest.

The book of Sirach is easily classified in general terms as an example of wisdom literature. In this respect it most nearly resembles the OT book Proverbs. Scott<sup>17</sup> notes that wisdom was a phenomenon common to all the ancient Near Eastern societies as "the fine fruit of a tradition originally rooted in the mores of family and tribe and local community." It includes simple domestic sayings and grandiose proclamations of kings, traditional folk maxims and literary masterpieces.<sup>18</sup>

In recent years some scholars<sup>19</sup> have come to view Sirach more specifically as a textbook for young men studying in Ben Sira's school. It is seen not so much as a book of elementary instruction but as a work to support progressive learning.<sup>20</sup>

Perhaps the most important development in Sirach research that related to the purpose of this study has been the recognition that the book is a composite corpus consisting of compiled traditional materials woven into the text at numerous points and Ben Sira's own compositions. This was early recognized by Box-Oosterley,<sup>21</sup> who saw Ben Sira using OT words and ideas as springboards for his own views. More recently, scholars have

expanded this to include Gr sources as well.<sup>22</sup> However, in most cases what appears to be traditional material in Sirach cannot now be identified with extant literature.<sup>23</sup> Such material may often be recognized in the text by its formal discontinuity with surrounding material. This includes cases where poetically designed distichs (traditional) are followed by one or more loosely formed distichs which elaborate on or qualify the theme of the first distich (compositional). Traditional material may also be detected through a repetition of various formal elements in a series of distichs. Forms like Zahlensprüche<sup>24</sup> are generally regarded as traditional.

Ben Sira has left clues concerning his compositional technique. In 33:16-18 (30:25-27)<sup>25</sup> he describes himself as "one who gleans after the grape-gatherers" and who fills his wine press "for all who seek instruction."<sup>26</sup> In 39:1 he notes that the student of the law "will seek out the wisdom of all the ancients." In 18:29 he suggests that those who study sayings become capable of producing proverbs themselves. Thus, both by his testimony and by the evidence left in the text itself we are safe to consider the book a composite of traditional materials and his own composed materials.<sup>27</sup>

Ben Sira originally wrote in Heb, and his grandson produced a translation in Gr. However, apart from certain rabbinic citations,<sup>28</sup> the Heb text was lost until near the end of the nineteenth century, when about two-thirds of it was discovered among the Cairo Geniza materials.<sup>29</sup> Another MS from the Geniza was published in 1931.<sup>30</sup> But the most dramatic and significant discovery came in 1964, when a Sirach scroll containing portions of 39:27-44:17 was found during the excavation of Masada.<sup>31</sup> This MS has been dated in the first half of the first century B.C.<sup>32</sup> The Geniza MSS by comparison are medieval. Several fragments of Sirach have also been discovered among the Dead Sea scrolls.<sup>33</sup>

The grandson's Gr translation apparently lies behind the LXX text of Sirach,<sup>34</sup> which became the standard text of the book during the centuries when the Heb was lost. It continues

to serve this function for those sections where the Heb is still not extant. The Gr has survived in two major recensions. The shorter text, which is generally held to be the original Gr version, is usually designated GrI. The longer text, with its scattered additional distichs and sections and which is dated to about 70-60 B.C., is designated GrII.<sup>35</sup> Most of the text has also been preserved in the Syr Peshitta,<sup>36</sup> which was probably translated from the Heb, but often influenced by the Gr. Another important witness to the text is the Old La,<sup>37</sup> which was translated from the Gr and which exhibits a text much like GrII. The text also survives in Cop, Arm, and Eth.

My final note of introduction to Sirach concerns the organization of the book. In a recent study Roth<sup>38</sup> has argued for a progressive development of Sirach. He sees 1:1-23:27 and 51:1-30 as Ben Sira's original book. To this Ben Sira added three successive sections: 24:1-32:13; 32:14-38:23; 38:24-50:29. It is beyond the scope of this study to address the issue of Ben Sira's progressively developing his book. However, the organization which Roth identifies seems sound.

Before proceeding to the text itself, let me offer a few remarks concerning the methods I have employed in this study. The first has to do with the plan of approach to the material needing to be analyzed. I have chosen to assemble all of Ben Sira's material related to woman into the five categories of good wife, mother (and widow), bad wife, adulteress (and prostitute), and daughter. These five categories will in turn constitute the five chapters of the study. In a loose sense they are arranged to progress from the most positive to the most negative. I will analyze each text within a given category and ascertain its contribution toward the verification of my working hypothesis. These individual findings will be summarized in a conclusion to each chapter. The conclusion at the end of the whole study will review these data for all the categories from the perspective of the various types of evidence observed.

The first step in any responsible exegesis of a text is the determination of the actual reading of the text. This work, of

course, may be left to text critics and editors of published texts, with the exegete merely accepting their decisions. However, there is still need for the exegete to periodically make textual decisions. This is especially true when the number of witnesses is small and when important MSS have been recovered since the publication of standard critical texts. Both these conditions exist with regard to the text of Sirach. Thus, I will prepare a critical translation for each unit of the Sirach text which I will discuss. By this, I mean a translation of the text based on what I perceive to represent most accurately the original text. I will provide extensive notation to the translations with readings from the three principal textual sources, Heb, Gr, and Syr, as well as occasional references to the La, and discussions of the various potential readings.

This study will be limited to a literary analysis of Sirach in an effort not only to catalog Ben Sira's remarks on women but especially to determine the nature of his view on women. Thus, my methods of approach to the study will be related to the literature. Beyond this literary limitation I have not chosen to conduct a study based on any particular analytical technique, such as form criticism. Instead, I have decided to permit the phenomena of each text to dictate the methods necessary for the proper interpretation of that text.

Foremost among the approaches that I will use is tradition-composition analysis. I indicated above that Sirach is a composite work, containing both traditional materials and those composed by Ben Sira himself. I am especially indebted to the work of Werner Fuss, noted above, for the classification of these materials, though I have not always followed his conclusions. I will show that the way Ben Sira arranges, edits, deletes, and expands traditional materials in his discussions of women provides important evidence concerning his view of women.

Ben Sira was influenced by both biblical and extrabiblical sources. Principal among these was the OT, especially its wisdom literature like Proverbs. Most of his vocabulary and many of his phrases and figures are drawn from the OT. For this reason

it will be necessary for me to periodically employ comparative analysis in relating Ben Sira to his biblical idea source. I will compare and contrast his topic choices, tone, application of figures, and assertions concerning women to those of the OT. The value of these observations lies not so much in their establishment of the veracity of my working hypothesis but in their potential for confirmation.

Much of the task of unlocking the meaning of the texts that I will consider involves standard exegetical practices. These include contextual analysis, grammatical and linguistic analysis, historical analysis, form analysis, and, in its literary sense, structural analysis.<sup>39</sup>

Through the application of these various techniques I will explore Ben Sira's numerous and variegated remarks concerning women and will present them in a systematic and organized fashion. Furthermore, I will demonstrate that Ben Sira wrote about women as he did, because he was motivated by a personal, negative bias against them.



