

ECCLESIASTICUS / BEN SIRA'S BOOK OF WISDOM / SIRACH

<http://my.execpc.com/~gto/Apocrypha/Summaries/sirach.html>

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IX. In praise of the famous (44:1-50:21)

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<http://www.catholicdoors.com/outline/o-sir.htm>

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Harper's Bible Dictionary, edited by Paul J. Achtemier (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1985):

Ecclesiasticus, or **the Wisdom of Jesus the Son of Sirach**, a book of instruction and proverbs, written in Hebrew around 180 b.c. in Jerusalem by an instructor of wealthy youths. It was translated into Greek in Alexandria by the author's grandson sometime after 132 b.c. The work is of value because it provides extensive evidence for the character of Judaism and Jewish society in Palestine just prior to the Maccabean revolt (167-64 b.c.). We gain a picture of a social order highly polarized between rich and poor, powerful and weak, male and female, pious and nonobservant, and Jew and Gentile, as well as a look into the development of the way of Torah—life centered around the Mosaic law—which will become the central characteristic of Judaism when the Temple is no more.

Much of the Hebrew of Ecclesiasticus has survived in manuscripts found in the Genizah (an attic where badly worn Torah scrolls were 'treasured' away when retired from service) of the Ezra Synagogue in Cairo, as well as in a few fragments from the Dead Sea Scrolls. Although not considered canonical, the book remained in use within Judaism as late as the eleventh century a.d. The complete version has survived in Greek translation as a part of the Septuagint. In western Christianity it came to be known as Ecclesiasticus, 'the Church's Book,' probably because it was the most important of the writings not found in the Hebrew Bible to be preserved in the Vulgate. Protestants relegate it to the Apocrypha, while Catholics classify it as deuterocanonical.

Ecclesiasticus defies outline in any detail, since much of it consists of short passages on a variety of topics, from how to give and attend a party to exhortations to care for the poor. The predominant types of language are the art proverb and the instruction genre, the latter of which is characterized by imperatives followed by reasons for fulfilling the command. The outline which accompanies this article gives some idea of its contents.

Jesus, the son of Sirach, were he alive today, would be a professor of public administration. In some ways, his book reads like a modern-day text on business ethics, although he prefers the public sector to the private and assumes that all merchants are corrupt (26:29). His goal is to instruct the young in the art of living well, in the best sense of the phrase. His students will seek careers in public service as scribes, the class from which public administrators, civil servants, and diplomats were drawn (see 39:1-11). Frugality, hard work, compassion for the poor, honesty, and independence rather than riches are the true measure of character, although wealth is preferable to poverty. The goal of instruction is to learn self-control and correct management techniques in both private and public life in order to enjoy the good life, under the guidance of the Law of God. The major problem for modern readers in his advice is in the treatment of women. He characterizes the wickedness of a wife as the highest of all evil (25:13) and claims that sin and death had their origin from a woman (25:24). The good wife, he asserts, is silent, while one must remain eternally vigilant in caring for a daughter to preserve her purity (26:10-12, 14). While the attitudes are undoubtedly those of the age, the tone with which they are expressed seems more personal in character.

While Ecclesiasticus stands in the wisdom tradition of Proverbs, an important transformation has taken place. Where once there had been a clear separation between the responsibility of the priest for Torah, or Law, and the sage for counsel (Jer. 18:18), the two have come together in Ecclesiasticus. Wisdom is now to be found in the Temple in Jerusalem (24:10) and is identified with 'the book of the covenant of the Most High God, the law which Moses commanded us' (24:23). Ecclesiasticus settles the debate in postbiblical Judaism over the dwelling place of wisdom, like Baruch 3:9-4:4, by declaring that it has been revealed to Israel by God in the moral instruction of the Law, rather than reserved in the heavens where only the specially initiated receive instruction in the secrets of the cosmos (cf. Wisd. of Sol. 8:15-22; 9:4, 9-10; 1 Enoch 42). According to Ecclesiasticus, the sage must be satisfied with the limitations of the human intellect (3:21-24).

The marriage of Torah and counsel is also reflected in the models for the good life offered in the praise of the famous in chaps. 44-50. The highest praise is reserved for Moses, Aaron, and Phinehas the son of Eleazar, priestly heroes important for their work as public administrators and leaders of worship, each of whom, in the son of Sirach's eyes, was the recipient of a covenant with God (chap. 45). Next in rank comes David. He is pictured as an effective ruler concerned for the administration of public worship, who was given a covenant of kingship (45:25; 47:2-11). In his own time, the son of Sirach offers the model of Simon the Just, the high priest who was the theocratic ruler of his people from about 219 to 196 b.c. and as such combined the offices of priest and king (thus wedding Torah and counsel). Simon is pictured both as an effective public administrator and leader of worship in a passage important for its information about the worship of the Temple in the Second Temple period (50:1-21). Ecclesiasticus' praise of the famous also makes it clear that by 200 b.c. both the Torah and the Prophets are fixed divisions of Scripture in Palestinian Judaism.