

Chapter Title: Introduction

Book Title: Ben Sira's Teaching on Friendship

Book Author(s): Jeremy Corley

Published by: Brown Judaic Studies. (2020)

Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctvzgb9d5.7>

---

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact [support@jstor.org](mailto:support@jstor.org).

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at <https://about.jstor.org/terms>



This book is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives 4.0 International License (CC BY-NC-ND 4.0). To view a copy of this license, visit <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/>. Funding is provided by National Endowment for the Humanities.



JSTOR

*Brown Judaic Studies* is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *Ben Sira's Teaching on Friendship*

## Introduction

The purpose of this study is to elucidate Ben Sira's teaching on friendship<sup>1</sup> within the religious and cultural context of his time, in view of the Hellenistic emphasis on *φιλία* ("friendship").

While friendship is of contemporary interest in the realms of theology, philosophy, psychology, and general culture,<sup>2</sup> until recently there has been little research into the understanding of friendship in Second Temple Judaism. This study aims to fill the lacuna by focusing on the apocryphal/deuterocanonical Wisdom of Ben Sira. In fact, no book of the Hebrew Bible says as much about friendship as does the Wisdom of Ben Sira.<sup>3</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> Here I borrow D. Konstan's working definition of friendship as "a mutually intimate, loyal, and loving bond between two or a few persons" who are unrelated by blood; see his *Friendship in the Classical World* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 1.

<sup>2</sup> On the theology of friendship, see, e.g., G. Meilaender, *Friendship, a Study in Theological Ethics* (Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 1981); B. P. McGuire, *Friendship and Community: The Monastic Experience 350–1250* (Cistercian Studies 95; Kalamazoo, Mich.: Cistercian Publications, 1988); P. J. Wadell, *Friendship and the Moral Life* (Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 1989); C. White, *Christian Friendship in the Fourth Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992); E. Moltmann-Wendel, *Rediscovering Friendship* (London: SCM, 2000). On the philosophy of friendship, see, e.g., N. K. Badhwar, *Friendship: A Philosophical Reader* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1993); L. A. Blum, *Friendship, Altruism, and Morality* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1980); M. Pakaluk, ed., *Other Selves: Philosophers on Friendship* (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1991); O. Leaman, ed., *Friendship East and West: Philosophical Perspectives* (Richmond, Surrey: Curzon, 1996). On the psychology of friendship, see M. Argyle, *The Psychology of Interpersonal Behavior* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1967); S. Duck, *Friends, For Life: The Psychology of Close Relationships* (New York: St. Martin's, 1983); L. B. Rubin, *Just Friends: The Role of Friendship in Our Lives* (New York: Harper & Row, 1985). On friendship in general culture, see A. Bloom, *Love and Friendship* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1993); D. J. Enright and D. Rawlinson, *The Oxford Book of Friendship* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991).

<sup>3</sup> Cf. P. W. Skehan and A. A. Di Lella, *The Wisdom of Ben Sira* (AB 39; New York: Doubleday, 1987), 187. Note that the Greek manuscript Vaticanus (henceforth G<sup>B</sup>)

The present chapter deals with previous research on friendship in Ben Sira, friendship in the ancient world, the historical setting of Ben Sira, authorship and social setting, the sage's theology, his social ethics, literary aspects of his work, textual questions, and my method in this study. Chapters 2–6 consider the seven major pericopes in which Ben Sira treats friendship: 6:5–17; 9:10–16; 13:15–23; 19:13–17; 22:19–26; 27:16–21; 37:1–6. Chapter 7 offers a concluding summary, while the appendix offers a brief survey of the book's incidental references to friendship outside the seven major pericopes.<sup>4</sup>

### 1. Previous Studies of Friendship in Ben Sira

English-language treatments of the topic of friendship in Ben Sira have hitherto been concise thematic studies.<sup>5</sup> D. J. Harrington's 1994 survey of the topic briefly treats the theme under three headings: making friends, being friends, and losing friends.<sup>6</sup> In addition, W. H. Irwin's 1995 article examines Ben Sira's analogy between God's relationship with those who fear him and a person's relationship with one's friends.<sup>7</sup> Moreover, in his study of parallels between Ben Sira and other ancient

---

uses the word φίλος ("friend") forty-eight times in Ben Sira; hence, 30 percent of the Septuagint's 160 instances of the term occur in Ben Sira.

<sup>4</sup> In the seven major pericopes G<sup>B</sup> uses the word φίλος thirty times, while the incidental references employ φίλος eighteen times (see table 1 in the appendix).

<sup>5</sup> There are no treatments of friendship among the twenty-nine books on Ben Sira (all published 1965–1992) listed in D. J. Harrington's survey, "Sirach Research since 1965: Progress and Questions," in *Pursuing the Text: Studies in Honor of Ben Zion Wacholder on the Occasion of His Seventieth Birthday* (ed. J. C. Reeves and J. Kampen; JSOTSup 184; Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1994), 164–76. Note that Ben Sira's book is sometimes known by the Greek name Sirach or the Latin title Ecclesiasticus.

<sup>6</sup> D. J. Harrington, "Sage Advice about Friendship," *TBT* 32 (1994): 79–83. Harrington comments on Ben Sira's approach: "He was not much concerned with the definition of friendship, or why people need friends, or what constitutes friendship. Rather, he offers practical wisdom about making friends, being a faithful friend, and threats to friendship" (80). See also J. Corley, "Friendship according to Ben Sira," in *Der Einzelne und seine Gemeinschaft bei Ben Sira* (ed. R. Egger-Wenzel and I. Krammer; BZAW 270; Berlin: de Gruyter, 1998), 65–72.

<sup>7</sup> W. H. Irwin, "Fear of God, the Analogy of Friendship and Ben Sira's Theodicy," *Bib* 76 (1995): 551–59. Irwin states: "Ben Sira sees a similarity between friendship and the fear of God and the theme of testing in each" (552).

literature, J. T. Sanders notes the sage's affinities with Theognis's view of friendship, as well as with the teaching found in a demotic Egyptian sapiential work preserved in Papyrus Insinger.<sup>8</sup> In French, H. Duesberg's brief summary on friendship in Ben Sira observes a number of parallels between the sage's words and the insights of Theognis or the teachings of ancient Near Eastern wisdom literature.<sup>9</sup>

The only German publication before 1996 devoted to the theme of friendship in Ben Sira is a detailed tradition-critical study of Sir 6:5–17 by G. Krinetzki.<sup>10</sup> Krinetzki explains the poem's use of expressions, motifs, and idioms drawn from the Hebrew Bible and then discusses the sage's creative handling of these traditional materials.<sup>11</sup> In her study of Ben Sira's cultural environment, O. Wischmeyer also briefly considers friendship within her discussion of the family.<sup>12</sup> Furthermore, M. Paeslack treats Ben Sira's vocabulary of friendship (in the grandson's Greek translation) within the context of the LXX and the New Testament.<sup>13</sup>

---

<sup>8</sup> J. T. Sanders, *Ben Sira and Demotic Wisdom* (SBLMS 28; Chico, Calif.: Scholars Press, 1983), 30–32, 64–65, 70–71. Ben Sira's connection with Theognis was already noted by T. Middendorp (*Die Stellung Jesu ben Siras zwischen Judentum und Hellenismus* [Leiden: Brill, 1973], 15), while its similarity with Papyrus Insinger is mentioned by P. Humbert (*Recherches sur les sources égyptiennes de la littérature sapientiale d'Israël* [Mémoires de l'Université de Neuchâtel 7; Neuchâtel: Secrétariat de l'Université, 1929], 134).

<sup>9</sup> H. Duesberg, *Les scribes inspirés: Introduction aux livres sapientiaux de la Bible* (2 vols.; Paris: Maredsous; Tournai: Desclée, 1966), 2:625–28. Duesberg observes that the friendship concept in Ben Sira covers not only private friendship but also business relationships, as well as general social courtesy (2:625).

<sup>10</sup> G. Krinetzki, "Die Freundschaftsperikope Sir 6,5–17 in traditions-geschichtlicher Sicht," *BZ* 23 (1979): 212–33.

<sup>11</sup> Krinetzki (*ibid.*, 231) concludes by emphasizing the sage's creativity: "Es ist sicher nicht zu viel behauptet, wenn wir abschließend feststellen, daß Sirach bei aller Anlehnung an vorgeprägtes Traditionsgut zumeist sehr originelle Formulierungen und Gedanken ausgebildet hat."

<sup>12</sup> O. Wischmeyer, *Die Kultur des Buches Jesus Sirach* (BZNW 77; Berlin: de Gruyter, 1995), 33–34. She asserts that Ben Sira has in view individual rather than group friendships: "Sirach betrachtet also 'den Freund' von vornherein als individuellen, privaten Partner des familiären Lebenskreises, nicht aber als Teil eines öffentlichen Freundeskreises" (33).

<sup>13</sup> M. Paeslack, "Zur Bedeutungsgeschichte der Wörter φιλεῖν 'lieben,' φιλία 'Liebe,' 'Freundschaft,' φίλος 'Freund' in der LXX und im NT," *ThViat* 5 (1953–1955): 51–142, esp. 78–79; see also G. Stählin, "φίλος, φίλη, φιλία," *TDNT* 9:146–71, esp. 156–57.

In 1996 F. V. Reiterer published the papers presented in German at a symposium on friendship in Ben Sira, held in 1995 at the University of Salzburg.<sup>14</sup> The papers treated seven of Ben Sira's friendship pericopes (Sir 6:5–17; 12:8–12; 19:6–19; 22:19–26; 25:1–11; 27:16–21; 37:1–6).<sup>15</sup> As the only book published on the theme of friendship in Ben Sira, its textual, poetic, and thematic studies are fundamental for any future discussion of the topic. The diversity of viewpoints adopted by individual scholars offers a variety of insights but leads perhaps to a certain disunity in approach.<sup>16</sup>

Also helpful to my study were the major commentaries on Ben Sira. The most important recent commentary is the work of P. W. Skehan and A. A. Di Lella.<sup>17</sup> Of great significance, too, are the older commentaries of R. Smend, N. Peters, and M. Z. Segal.<sup>18</sup>

---

<sup>14</sup> F. V. Reiterer, ed., *Freundschaft bei Ben Sira: Beiträge des Symposiums zu Ben Sira, Salzburg 1995* (BZAW 244; Berlin: de Gruyter, 1996).

<sup>15</sup> The Salzburg volume includes the seven symposium papers and two thematic studies: P. C. Beentjes, "‘Ein Mensch ohne Freund ist wie eine linke Hand ohne die Rechte’: Prolegomena zur Kommentierung der Freundschaftsperikope Sir 6,5–17" (pp. 1–18); L. Schrader, "Unzuverlässige Freundschaft und verlässliche Feindschaft: Überlegungen zu Sir 12,8–12" (pp. 19–59); H. V. Kieweler, "Freundschaft und böse Nachrede: Exegetische Anmerkungen zu Sir 19,6–19" (pp. 61–85); J. Marböck, "Gefährdung und Bewährung: Kontexte zur Freundschaftsperikope Sir 22,19–26" (pp. 87–106); O. Kaiser, "Was ein Freund nicht tun darf: Eine Auslegung von Sir 27,16–21" (pp. 107–22); G. Sauer, "Freundschaft nach Ben Sira 37,1–6" (pp. 123–31); F. V. Reiterer, "Gelungene Freundschaft als tragende Säule einer Gesellschaft: Exegetische Untersuchung von Sir 25,1–11" (pp. 133–69); I. Krammer, "Scham im Zusammenhang mit Freundschaft" (pp. 171–201); R. Egger-Wenzel, "Der Gebrauch von חַנּוּן bei Ijob und Ben Sira: Ein Vergleich zweier Weisheitsbücher" (pp. 203–38); followed by a useful bibliography (pp. 241–51). Unlike the Salzburg volume, my study does not discuss 12:8–12 or 25:1–11, except for a brief treatment of 12:8–9 and 25:1, 9 in the appendix. However, I do consider 9:10–16 and 13:15–23, two passages that are not discussed in the Salzburg volume.

<sup>16</sup> For instance, Greek parallels to Ben Sira's teaching receive some attention on pp. 36–38 and 67–68 but are regarded critically on pp. 15–16. Also, a retroverted Hebrew text contributes to the discussion on pp. 65–81 and 112, whereas retroversion is regarded as questionable on p. 88. In addition, illustrations of Ben Sira's teaching from the Hebrew Bible (e.g., from the narratives about David) receive consideration on p. 130 but are largely dismissed on pp. 13–15.

<sup>17</sup> Skehan and Di Lella, *Wisdom of Ben Sira*. Particularly useful is the extensive bibliography (93–127); see also the supplementary listing in A. A. Di Lella, "The Wisdom of Ben Sira: Resources and Recent Research," *CurBS* 4 (1996): 161–81. Bibliographic help is also provided in F. V. Reiterer, ed., *Bibliographie zu Ben Sira* (BZAW 266; Berlin: de Gruyter, 1998); and F. García Martínez, "Ben Sira: A

## 2. Friendship in the Ancient World

### a. Introduction

Ben Sira writes his poems on friendship within a cultural tradition linked most closely with Israel's heritage but also having some contacts with the cultures of ancient Greece, Egypt, and Mesopotamia. Here I survey writings on friendship from ancient Israel, Greece, Egypt, and Mesopotamia; the main focus is on texts that serve as possible antecedents or parallels for Ben Sira's teaching.

### b. Israel

Rather than providing an elaborate theology of friendship, the Hebrew Bible conveys its insights through both narratives and proverbial sayings, while certain biblical texts also attest to a political sense of friendship (= "alliance").<sup>19</sup>

Many of the friendship narratives in the Hebrew Bible center around the figure of David. The classic example is David's friendship with Jonathan, sealed with a covenant (1 Sam 18:1–3; 20:3, 8, 17; cf. the phraseology of Sir 6:17a; 37:2b); another case is the king's friendship with Barzillai (1 Sam 17:27–29; 19:32–40). In addition, 1 Sam 25:18–35 tells of

---

Bibliography of Studies, 1965–1997," *Masada VI: The Yigael Yadin Excavations 1963–1965: Final Report* (ed. S. Talmon; Jerusalem: Israel Exploration Society, 1999), 233–52.

<sup>18</sup> R. Smend, *Die Weisheit des Jesus Sirach, erklärt* (Berlin: Reimer, 1906) [henceforth: *Sirach, erklärt*]; N. Peters, *Das Buch Jesus Sirach oder Ecclesiasticus* (EHAT 25; Münster i.W.: Aschendorff, 1913); M. Z. Segal, *ספר בן־סירא השלם* (3d ed.; Jerusalem: Bialik Institute, 1972). For a recent summary of scholarship on Ben Sira, see M. Gilbert, "Siracide," *DBSup* 12:1389–1437.

<sup>19</sup> For a general survey of the Hebrew root אהב ("love," "be a friend"), see A. T. H. Luc, "The Meaning of 'HB in the Hebrew Bible" (Ph. D. diss., University of Wisconsin, Madison, 1982); cf. J. Bergman, A. O. Haldar, and G. Wallis, "אהב," *TDOT* 1:99–118. Here I leave out of consideration the idea of friendship with God, on which subject see E. Peterson, "Der Gottesfreund: Beiträge zur Geschichte eines religiösen Terminus," *ZKG* 42 (1923): 161–202; and Konstan, *Friendship in the Classical World*, 167–70. Although Israel's tradition calls Abraham the "friend of God" (Isa 41:8; 2 Chr 20:7; CD 3.2; *Jub.* 17:18; Jas 2:23), Ben Sira does not develop the concept of "friendship toward God" (Wis 7:14) as something distinct from the love of God (Sir 1:10 G; cf. Deut 6:5). I also leave aside the love of neighbor (Lev 19:18), on which see H. P. Mathys, *Liebe deinen Nächsten wie dich selbst: Untersuchungen zum alttestamentlichen Gebot der Nächstenliebe (Lev 19,18)* (OBO 71; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1986); cf. T. Söding, "Nächstenliebe bei Jesus Sirach: Eine Notiz zur weisheitlichen Ethik," *BZ* 42 (1998): 239–47.

Abigail's friendly attitude toward David, which led to their marriage after Nabal's death (1 Sam 25:39–42).<sup>20</sup>

Other friendship stories in the Hebrew Bible concern Ruth and Job. The successful international friendship between Ruth and Naomi (Ruth 1:6–18; 2:19–3:5; 4:13–17) occurs within the relationship of mother-in-law and daughter-in-law.<sup>21</sup> By contrast, although Job's friends remain with him at his time of suffering (Job 2:11–13), they fail as comforters (Job 13:4–5; 16:2–5; 19:2–3).

Within the prophetic and sapiential texts of the Hebrew Bible, there are several laments over the faithlessness of false friends. After warning of the slander of neighbors (Jer 9:4–5), Jeremiah says that his former friends now watch for his downfall (Jer 20:10). Similarly, Ps 41:10 laments a betrayal by a close friend (a motif occurring in Sir 37:2), just as Job mourns that his quondam friends have turned against him (Job 19:14, 19; cf. 6:14–17; 12:4; 16:20).

The book of Proverbs also warns that, whereas prosperity causes one to acquire friends, poverty generally leads one to lose them (Prov 14:20; 19:4, 6–7; cf. Sir 6:11–12; 12:8–9; 13:21–23). Even though a faithful person is rare (Prov 20:6), Proverbs does refer to a friend who sticks closer than a brother (Prov 18:24). Nevertheless, although Israel's protocanonical wisdom books (Proverbs, Job, Qoheleth) speak of friendship in various places, Ben Sira's book is the earliest extant Jewish wisdom text to deal extensively with the subject.

In addition, friendship in the Hebrew Bible can have a political sense. Especially in the preexilic era, "friendship" can refer to an international treaty; for instance, 1 Kgs 5:15 describes King Hiram of Tyre as a "friend" (חֵן, i.e., "ally") of David.<sup>22</sup> Some of the historical books of the Bible also refer to "friends of the king," that is, royal advisors. Thus, 1 Kgs 4:5 designates Solomon's advisor Zabud as "the companion of the king" (רֵעֵה הַמֶּלֶךְ), while 2 Sam 15:37 and 16:16 call Hushai

<sup>20</sup> For my proposal that 1 Sam 25 underlies Sir 6:5–17, see my exegesis of 6:5b, 9b, 16a, 17b in ch. 2 below.

<sup>21</sup> See G. S. Jackson, "Naomi, Ruth, and Orpah," *TBT* 32 (1994): 68–73. On Job's experience, see briefly Marböck, "Gefährdung und Bewährung," 97–98. On Qoh 4:9–12, see T. M. Hart, "Qoheleth Looks at Friendship," *TBT* 32 (1994): 74–78.

<sup>22</sup> In referring to the MT, I have followed Hebrew verse numberings throughout; thus, 1 Kgs 5:15 MT = 1 Kgs 5:1 in English translations. On the political sense of friendship language, see W. L. Moran, "The Ancient Near Eastern Background of the Love of God in Deuteronomy," *CBQ* 25 (1963): 77–87, esp. 78–82; J. A. Thompson, "The Significance of the Verb *Love* in the David-Jonathan Narratives in 1 Samuel," *VT* 24 (1974): 34–38.

“the companion of David” (רֵעֵה דָוִד).<sup>23</sup> In the Hellenistic era, the phrase “friends of the king” appears frequently in 1 Maccabees (e.g., 1 Macc 2:18; 3:38; 10:20; 11:57), while the term “first friends” also occurs in 1 Macc 10:65; 11:27; 2 Macc 8:9.<sup>24</sup>

In his allusions to the Hebrew Bible Ben Sira refers to both narrative and sapiential material on friendship. Although he is aware of the Hellenistic imperial government, his cautious instinct warns against political friendship with those in authority (cf. Sir 9:11–13; 13:9–13).

Although friendship is not a major theme in most of the Qumran texts, it receives some treatment in sapiential writings such as 4QInstruction and 4Q424 (though their fragmentary nature makes exact interpretation uncertain).<sup>25</sup> For instance, 4Q417 2 i 7 (part of 4QInstruction) apparently matches Sir 9:11–13 in its advice to be wary of evil and hostile persons, while 4Q424 1.6 seems to share with Sir 27:16–21 a concern that a friend keep one’s secrets.

### c. Greece

Homer, the father of Greek poetry, speaks of friendship, such as that between Achilles and Patroclus.<sup>26</sup> Although Sir 13:17a resembles Homer’s saying on the hostility between wolves and lambs (*Il.*

---

<sup>23</sup> Cf. T. N. D. Mettinger, *Solomonic State Officials: A Study of the Civil Government Officials of the Israelite Monarchy* (ConBOT 5; Lund: Gleerup, 1971), 63–69. In my study all biblical translations are mine, unless noted otherwise.

<sup>24</sup> On these categories in the Seleucid administrative system, see E. Bickerman, *Institutions des Séleucides* (Service des Antiquités: Bibliothèque archéologique et historique 26; Paris: Geuthner, 1938), 40–50; on the Greco-Roman context, see C. Spicq, “φίλος τοῦ Καίσαρος,” *TLNT* 3:458–61; Konstan, *Friendship in the Classical World*, 95–98, 105–8.

<sup>25</sup> For a brief introduction to these works, see D. J. Harrington, *Wisdom Texts from Qumran* (New York: Routledge, 1996), 40–63.

<sup>26</sup> On friendship in the Greco-Roman world, see the survey provided by Konstan, *Friendship in the Classical World*, which includes one reference to Ben Sira (p. 150, quoting St. Ambrose); idem, “Greek Friendship,” *AJP* 117 (1996): 71–94. See also L. Dugas, *L’amitié antique d’après les moeurs populaires et les théories des philosophes* (2 vols.; Paris: Alcan, 1894; rev. ed., 1914); K. Treu, “Freundschaft,” *RAC* 8:418–34; J. C. Fraisse, *Philia: la notion d’amitié dans la philosophie antique: essai sur un problème perdu et retrouvé* (Paris: Vrin, 1974); P. Marshall, *Enmity in Corinth* (WUNT 2/23; Tübingen: Mohr, 1987), 1–34; L. F. Pizzolato, *L’idea di amicizia nel mondo antico classico e cristiano* (Filosofia 238; Turin: Einaudi, 1993); J. T. Fitzgerald, ed., *Friendship, Flattery, and Frankness of Speech: Studies on Friendship in the New Testament World* (NovTSup 82; Leiden: Brill, 1996); idem, ed., *Greco-Roman Perspectives on Friendship* (SBLRBS 34; Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1997).



22.262–265), it is unlikely that Ben Sira took the motif directly from him.<sup>27</sup>

Much of the poetry of the sixth-century B.C.E. Greek elegiac writer Theognis consists of sayings concerning friendship, especially warnings about the fickleness of supposed friends (e.g., Theognis 115–116; 643–644; 697–698).<sup>28</sup> The number of parallels between Theognis and Ben Sira on this and other topics leads Sanders to claim: “It would appear that Ben Sira did, indeed, read and use the elegiac poems of Theognis, at least Book 1.”<sup>29</sup>

The tragedian Euripides (480–406 B.C.E.) portrays the friendship of Orestes and Pylades in his play *Orestes*. He employs financial imagery to speak of the value of friendship (*Orest.* 1155–1156; cf. Sir 6:14–15) and speaks of the importance of fidelity in friendship (*Orest.* 725–727; cf. Sir 6:14–16). Moreover, the tragedian differentiates true friends from those who have merely the “name” of friends (*Orest.* 454–455; cf. Sir 37:1) and speaks of the duty of assisting one’s friends in their time of need (*Orest.* 665; cf. Sir 37:4–5).<sup>30</sup>

---

<sup>27</sup> On the parallel, see my exegesis of Sir 13:17a in ch. 4 below. Note also that Sir 14:18 uses a motif similar to *Il.* 6.148–149; cf. Sanders, *Ben Sira and Demotic Wisdom*, 39. On friendship in Homer, see Konstan, *Friendship in the Classical World*, 24–42; and J. T. Fitzgerald, “Friendship in the Greek World Prior to Aristotle,” in Fitzgerald, ed., *Greco-Roman Perspectives on Friendship*, 13–34, esp. 15–26.

<sup>28</sup> On Theognis’s view of friendship, see W. Donlan, “*Pistos Philos Hetairois*,” in *Theognis of Megara: Poetry and the Polis* (ed. T. J. Figueira and G. Nagy; Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1985), 223–44; Konstan, *Friendship in the Classical World*, 49–52; Fitzgerald, “Friendship in the Greek World Prior to Aristotle,” 29–33. Whereas some of the poems in Theognis’s book 2 (1231–1388) express homosexual themes, these are lacking in Ben Sira. By contrast with the Hellenistic environment where homosexual practice was common, the sage teaches that “he who acquires a wife gains the best acquisition, a helper like himself and a pillar of support” (36:29 G), and asserts the superiority of a wife over all other friends (40:23).

<sup>29</sup> Sanders, *Ben Sira and Demotic Wisdom*, 29. Sanders asserts that Ben Sira “uses Theognis material to expand themes which he inherits from the Judaic proverbial tradition; this is true especially of his use of Theognis’ observations about friendship” (55). For a more critical examination of the proposed parallels between Ben Sira and Theognis, see H.-V. Kieweler, *Ben Sira zwischen Judentum und Hellenismus: Eine Auseinandersetzung mit Th. Middendorp* (BEATAJ 30; Frankfurt a.M.: Lang, 1992), esp. 129–95.

<sup>30</sup> On Euripides’ view of friendship, see J. Tyler, “*Philia and Echthra in Euripides*” (Ph. D. diss., Cornell University, 1969); U. Schmidt-Berger, “*Philia: Typologie der Freundschaft und Verwandtschaft bei Euripides*” (Ph. D. diss., University of Tübingen, 1973); and briefly Konstan, *Friendship in the Classical World*, 58–63.

The figure of Socrates (469–399 B.C.E.) is prominent in the works of both Plato and Xenophon. Plato (427–348 B.C.E.) recounts Socrates' discussion of friendship in the *Lysis*,<sup>31</sup> where he applies the maxim of "like to like" to friendship between good persons.<sup>32</sup> Plato's contemporary Xenophon (430–356 B.C.E.) treats friendship particularly in his defense of Socrates, entitled *Memorabilia*. Socrates' teaching on friendship, as recorded by Xenophon, emphasizes the need both to test potential friends and to value faithful friends, who should be few in number.<sup>33</sup>

The Greek orator Isocrates (436–338 B.C.E.) also speaks of friendship in his oration *To Demonicus*.<sup>34</sup> He admonishes, "Be pleasant to all, but cultivate the best" (*Demon.* 20; cf. Sir 6:6), and teaches, "Prove your friends by means of the misfortunes of life. . . . We come to know our friends when we are in misfortune" (*Demon.* 25; cf. Sir 6:7–10; 12:8–9). In addition, he insists on the duty of guarding secrets (*Demon.* 22; cf. Sir 27:16–21).

The classic Greek treatment of friendship occurs in books 8 and 9 of the *Nicomachean Ethics* of Aristotle (384–322 B.C.E.).<sup>35</sup> In discussing the nature of friendship, the philosopher says: "Some define it as a matter of similarity; they say that we love those who are like ourselves: whence the

---

<sup>31</sup> On Plato's view of friendship, see D. Bolotin, *Plato's Dialogue on Friendship: An Interpretation of the Lysis, with a New Translation* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1979); A. W. Price, *Love and Friendship in Plato and Aristotle* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1989); O. Kaiser, "Lysis oder von der Freundschaft," in *Der Mensch unter dem Schicksal: Studien zur Geschichte, Theologie und Gegenwartsbedeutung der Weisheit* (BZAW 161; Berlin: de Gruyter, 1985), 206–31.

<sup>32</sup> *Lysis* 214d asserts: "There is a hidden meaning, dear friend, intended by those who say that like is friend to like, namely that the good alone is friend to the good alone"; cf. W. R. M. Lamb, trans., *Plato: Lysis, Symposium, Gorgias* (LCL; New York: Putnam, 1925), 43. See Sir 13:15–17 for a similar sentiment.

<sup>33</sup> Cf. *Mem.* 2.6.1 (testing; cf. Sir 6:7); 2.4.1 (fidelity; cf. Sir 6:14–16); 2.6.27 (freeness; cf. Sir 6:6). On Xenophon's view of friendship, see Konstan, *Friendship in the Classical World*, 79–86.

<sup>34</sup> G. Norlin and L. van Hook, trans., *Isocrates* (LCL; 3 vols.; New York: Putnam, 1928–1945), 1:5–35; the two quotations of Isocrates are from 1:15, 19. On Isocrates' view of friendship, see Konstan, *Friendship in the Classical World*, 93–97.

<sup>35</sup> See S. Stern-Gillet, *Aristotle's Philosophy of Friendship* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1995); P. Schollmeier, *Other Selves: Aristotle on Personal and Political Friendship* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1994); J. Steinberger, *Begriff und Wesen der Freundschaft bei Aristoteles und Cicero* (Erlangen: privately published, 1955); Price, *Love and Friendship in Plato and Aristotle*. More briefly, see Konstan, *Friendship in the Classical World*, 67–78; F. M. Schroeder, "Friendship in Aristotle and Some Peripatetic Philosophers," in Fitzgerald, ed., *Greco-Roman Perspectives on Friendship*, 35–57, esp. 35–45.

proverbs 'Like finds his like,' 'Birds of a feather flock together,' and so on" (*Eth. nic.* 8.1.6 §1155a).<sup>36</sup> He also asserts that "the happy man requires friends" (*Eth. nic.* 9.9.3 §1169b).<sup>37</sup> In addition, he divides friendships into three categories: those for utility, those for pleasure, and those for virtue (*Eth. nic.* 8.3.1–8.4.6 §1156a–1157b).<sup>38</sup> Although it is unlikely that Ben Sira knew Aristotle's works, the Greek philosopher expresses some ideas that also appear in the Hebrew sage's writing.

#### d. Egypt

Egypt's early wisdom literature makes some reference to friendship; for example, the third-millennium B.C.E. Instruction of Ptahhotep (sections 33–35) urges the testing of a potential friend, as well as a generous attitude toward friends.<sup>39</sup>

From the mid-second millennium B.C.E. the Instruction of Any 5.7–8 offers teaching similar to Ben Sira's (cf. Sir 9:13, 16; 6:17):

Keep away from a hostile man,  
Do not let him be your comrade;  
Befriend one who is straight and true,  
One whose actions you have seen.  
If your rightness matches his,  
The friendship will be balanced.

The closest similarities to Ben Sira's friendship instructions occur, however, in two demotic works from the late Ptolemaic era, the Instruction of Ankhsheshonq and Papyrus Insinger.<sup>40</sup> Ankhsheshonq

<sup>36</sup> H. Rackham, trans., *Aristotle: The Nicomachean Ethics* (LCL; New York: Putnam, 1926), 453. This widespread idea appears in Sir 6:11, 17; 13:15–16.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, 559. Likewise, Ben Sira includes "friend and comrade" among his list of good things (40:23) and declares: "Happy is the one who finds a true friend" (25:9a L); see my brief discussion in the appendix.

<sup>38</sup> Ben Sira, by contrast, divides friendship into two basic categories: fickle, self-centered friendships of mere utility (6:8–12; 37:4), and lasting, unselfish friendships of the wise and God-fearing (6:14–17; 9:10, 14–16; 37:5–6). Note that whereas Aristotle engages in systematic philosophical discourse, Ben Sira speaks in the concise poetic style of proverbial wisdom.

<sup>39</sup> For a translation, see *AEL* 1:72–73. On testing, compare Sir 6:7; on generosity, compare Sir 14:13. For the following quotation from the Instruction of Any, see *AEL* 2:138.

<sup>40</sup> Though the manuscript of Ankhsheshonq is late Ptolemaic (probably second or first century B.C.E.), its composition may be earlier (cf. *AEL* 3:159). Equally, whereas the handwriting of P. Insinger is from the first century C.E., the

14.8, for instance, urges caution toward potential friends (cf. Sir 6:7): “If you become the companion of a wise man whose heart you do not know, do not open your heart to him.”<sup>41</sup> Moreover, Ankhsheshonq 13.6 notes the effect of the company one keeps (cf. Sir 9:14): “The friend of a fool is a fool; the friend of a wise man is a wise man.”

Papyrus Insinger also has many affinities with the Wisdom of Ben Sira, particularly in the area of friendship.<sup>42</sup> A section concerning social relationships (P. Insinger 11.23–12.18) exhibits some resemblances to Ben Sira. Like Ben Sira, P. Insinger 12.15 insists on testing potential friends (cf. P. Insinger 11.23; Sir 6:7): “One does not discover the heart of a wise man if one has not tested him in a matter.”<sup>43</sup> In addition, P. Insinger 12.18 teaches that adversity provides the real test of friendship (cf. Sir 6:8; 12:8): “One does not discover the heart of a friend if one has not consulted him in anxiety.”

#### e. Mesopotamia

The Wisdom of Ahiqar, found in a late fifth-century B.C.E. Aramaic papyrus, counsels vigilance in social relationships. Besides advising the complete keeping of confidences, Ahiqar employs animal imagery to urge caution in one’s friendships.<sup>44</sup>

#### f. Conclusion

This survey of friendship in the ancient world has drawn out various ideas current in ancient Israel, Greece, Egypt, and Mesopotamia. While it

---

composition is probably late Ptolemaic (*AEL* 3:184). Even if the latter work originated after Ben Sira’s death, the Hebrew sage may have known an earlier model on which it is based.

<sup>41</sup> For this quotation of Ankhsheshonq and the following one, see *AEL* 3:169–70. Other sayings of Ankhsheshonq concerning friends and companions include 13.2, 7–8, 24; 14.3; 16.4; 21.6, 10; 26.13, 22; 28.4. For further similarities between Ankhsheshonq and Ben Sira, see Sanders, *Ben Sira and Demotic Wisdom*, 103–5.

<sup>42</sup> The resemblances have been noted by Humbert, *Recherches sur les sources*, 134; W. Fuß, “Tradition und Komposition im Buche Jesus Sirach” (Th.D. diss., University of Tübingen, 1962), 64; Sanders, *Ben Sira and Demotic Wisdom*, 64–65, 70–71.

<sup>43</sup> This quotation from P. Insinger and the next one are both from *AEL* 3:195. Other sayings of P. Insinger on friends and companions include 6.21; 13.13, 18; 16.8.

<sup>44</sup> Keeping confidences: Ahiqar Saying 15; cf. Sir 27:16–21. Animal imagery: Ahiqar Sayings 9–10; 28; 36; cf. Sir 13:17–19. See the editions of J. M. Lindenberger, *The Aramaic Proverbs of Ahiqar* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1983); I. Kottsieper, *Die Sprache der Ahiqarsprüche* (BZAW 194; Berlin: de Gruyter, 1990).

is certain that Ben Sira knew Israelite wisdom texts such as the book of Proverbs, it is unlikely that he was acquainted with Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*. However, the many parallels suggest the possibility that he had some direct or indirect knowledge of the poetry of Theognis and knew some form of the demotic sapiential tradition contained in Papyrus Insinger.<sup>45</sup>

### 3. Historical Setting

#### a. Dating of Ben Sira's Book

Scholars agree that Ben Sira's book dates from 195–175 B.C.E.<sup>46</sup> The panegyric on Simeon II (Sir 50:1–24) indicates its earliest possible date to be approximately 196 B.C.E., when this high priest died.<sup>47</sup> The absence of any reference to the religious turmoil that followed the accession of the Seleucid king Antiochus IV Epiphanes (175–164) suggests 175 B.C.E. as the latest possible date.<sup>48</sup> A date between 195–175 B.C.E. is also indicated by

---

<sup>45</sup> So Skehan and Di Lella, *Wisdom of Ben Sira*, 49: "The dependence of Ben Sira on several non-Jewish writings seems beyond question... He probably even read, in whole or in part, the works of Theognis and Phibis [= P. Insinger]"; cf. Sanders, *Ben Sira and Demotic Wisdom*, 54–55, 96–100. However, Middendorp's suggestions of parallels between Ben Sira and Greek literature on the theme of friendship (*Die Stellung Jesu ben Siras*, 9, 14–16, 18, 21, 23) receive a cautious assessment from Kieweler, *Ben Sira zwischen Judentum und Hellenismus*, 84, 94–95, 100–101, 120–25, 127–28, 145–48, 150–52, 175–76, 204, 206.

<sup>46</sup> Cf. Skehan and Di Lella, *Wisdom of Ben Sira*, 10 (ca. 180 B.C.E.); M. Hengel, *Judaism and Hellenism* (2 vols.; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1974), 1:131 (190–175 B.C.E.); M. Gilbert, "Wisdom Literature," in *Jewish Writings of the Second Temple Period* (ed. M. E. Stone; CRINT 2/2; Assen: Van Gorcum, 1984), 291 (190 B.C.E.); Segal, ספר בן-סירה השלם, 6 (ca. 180 B.C.E.); H. Jagersma, *A History of Israel from Alexander the Great to Bar Kochba* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1986), 42 (ca. 190 B.C.E.); D. S. W. Williams, "The Date of Ecclesiasticus," VT 44 (1994): 563–66 (ca. 175 B.C.E.).

<sup>47</sup> Skehan and Di Lella, *Wisdom of Ben Sira*, 9. The phrases "in his generation" (בְּדוֹרוֹ) and "in his days" (בְּיָמָיו) in 50:1–3 suggest that the high priest was no longer alive when Ben Sira wrote (ibid., 550). The date of Simeon II's death is not entirely certain; see O. Mulder, *Simon de hogepriester in Sirach 50* (Almelo: privately published, 2000), esp. 410. Most scholars identify Simeon II with "Simeon the Just" (cf. Skehan and Di Lella, *Wisdom of Ben Sira*, 550). However, J. C. VanderKam considers the title as belonging to Simeon I; see "Simon the Just: Simon I or Simon II?" in his *From Revelation to Canon* (JSJSup 62; Leiden: Brill, 2000), 224–40.

<sup>48</sup> Shortly after his accession, Antiochus Epiphanes began his program of enforced hellenization by appointing Jason as high priest (2 Macc 4:7–15). The

the grandson's prologue to his Greek translation of Ben Sira's book, since he speaks of himself as "having arrived in Egypt in the thirty-eighth year of the reign of [ἐπί] the king Euergetes [= 132 B.C.E.] and having been there at the same time [συγχρονίσας]" (Prologue 27–28).<sup>49</sup> Thus, if Ben Sira published his work between 195–175 B.C.E., he may have been born around 245 B.C.E. and died around 175 B.C.E.

#### b. Historical Evidence

The generation living after Ben Sira's death underwent the crisis of Antiochus Epiphanes' persecution of the Jews and the Maccabean reaction; as sources for this history we have the two books of Maccabees and the book of Daniel, as well as Josephus's *Antiquities*. For Ben Sira's own lifetime, however, there is a dearth of historical sources. Archaeology has yielded the Zeno papyri, which provide evidence for the Ptolemaic administration of Transjordan in the mid-third century B.C.E., and also the Hephzibah inscription of about 195 B.C.E., commanding the Seleucid soldiers to protect the local villagers.<sup>50</sup> In addition, Josephus's *Antiquities* preserves the "Tobiad romance" (*Ant.* 12.4.1–11 §§154–236) as well as Antiochus III's decree (*Ant.* 12.3.3–4 §§138–146) remitting certain taxes in Jerusalem and acknowledging the sacredness of the temple for the Jews (ca. 198 B.C.E.).<sup>51</sup>

---

king's hellenizing program culminated in his plunder of the Jerusalem temple in 169 B.C.E. (1 Macc 1:20–24; cf. Dan 11:28) and his profanation of the sanctuary in 167 B.C.E. (1 Macc 1:44–63; 2 Macc 6:1–11; cf. Dan 11:31–36).

<sup>49</sup> Although the thirty-eighth year of King Ptolemy VII Physkon Euergetes II (170–164 and 146–117 B.C.E.) was 132 B.C.E., the aorist participle *συγχρονίσας* implies that the grandson was writing after the king's death in 117 B.C.E.; cf. Skehan and Di Lella, *Wisdom of Ben Sira*, 9. Thus, if the grandson published his translation ca. 115 B.C.E., his grandfather could have written two generations earlier, not long before 175 B.C.E.

<sup>50</sup> On the Zeno papyri, see Hengel, *Judaism and Hellenism*, 1:21–22, 39–43, 47–48; on the Hephzibah (Scythopolis) inscription, see J. E. Taylor, "Seleucid Rule in Palestine" (Ph. D. diss., Duke University, 1979), 108–68. On the historical background to Ben Sira's life, see L. L. Grabbe, "Jewish Historiography and Scripture in the Hellenistic Period," in *Did Moses Speak Attic? Jewish Historiography and Scripture in the Hellenistic Period* (ed. L. L. Grabbe; JSOTSup 317; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2001), 129–55.

<sup>51</sup> On the "Tobiad romance," see Hengel, *Judaism and Hellenism*, 1:268–70; he notes that it contains "gross errors" as well as "exact information" (1:269). For a detailed analysis of Antiochus III's decree, see Taylor, "Seleucid Rule in Palestine," 51–107.

### c. The Ptolemaic and Seleucid Empires

In the third and early second centuries B.C.E. Palestine was under the control of Hellenistic rulers, first the Ptolemies of Egypt (301–200 B.C.E.) and thereafter the Seleucids of Syria. Whereas during the Fourth Syrian War Antiochus III failed to conquer Palestine for the Seleucid Empire, being defeated at Raphia in 217 B.C.E., he was victorious at the Battle of Panium around 200 B.C.E.<sup>52</sup> The people of Jerusalem initially welcomed the Seleucids (Josephus, *Ant.* 12.3.3 §136; cf. Dan 11:14) and were doubtless pleased when Antiochus III issued a decree reducing the city's taxation (Josephus, *Ant.* 12.3.3 §§138–144). However, needing money for reparations to the Romans after the Peace of Apamea (188 B.C.E.), the Seleucids levied further taxes (Dan 11:20), while the finance minister Heliodorus sought to plunder the treasury of the Jerusalem temple (according to 2 Macc 3:4–40). In view of the violence and greed of Israel's Ptolemaic and Seleucid rulers, Ben Sira offers sober warnings to his students not to befriend those with civil authority (Sir 9:13).

### d. Hellenization in Palestine

The process of the hellenization of Palestine began with Alexander the Great's conquest of Palestine from the Persian Empire in 332 B.C.E.<sup>53</sup> Thereafter, Hellenistic culture gained importance in Palestine. It is likely that under the influence of Greek cultural patterns, esteem for friendship (φιλία) increased. Although after Ben Sira's death the Maccabees were successful in defeating Antiochus Epiphanes, they could not escape the dominance of the Greek language. Whereas Ben Sira, a resolute but moderate opponent of Hellenism,<sup>54</sup> writes entirely in a Hebrew free of Greek

---

<sup>52</sup> For a sketch of the history of the period, see Hengel, *Judaism and Hellenism*, 1:1–12; Jagersma, *History of Israel*, 22–43; Skehan and Di Lella, *Wisdom of Ben Sira*, 13–16; L. L. Grabbe, *Judaism from Cyrus to Hadrian* (2 vols.; Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1992), 1:212–20; J. K. Aitken, "Biblical Interpretation As Political Manifesto: Ben Sira in His Seleucid Setting," *JJS* 51 (2000): 191–208, esp. 202–5.

<sup>53</sup> See Hengel, *Judaism and Hellenism*, 1:58–106; and the critical response of L. H. Feldman, *Jew and Gentile in the Ancient World* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1993), esp. 6–18. O. Kaiser sees the importance of friendship in Ben Sira's day as a response to the increasing isolation of the individual in a time of change; see "Gottesgewißheit und Weltbewußtsein in der frühhellenistischen jüdischen Weisheit," in *Der Mensch unter dem Schicksal*, 122–34, esp. 128–30.

<sup>54</sup> While the sage resolutely opposes the radical hellenizers who desert the law of the Most High (41:8), his writings exhibit traces of Hellenistic culture (his esteem for friendship, his mention of symposia, his echoes of the sentiments of Theognis, his similarities with Stoic thought). "Ben Sira borrowed Gentile

loanwords, the story of the Maccabean resistance to enforced hellenization is (ironically) preserved in Greek in the two books of Maccabees.

#### e. The Tobiads and the Oniads

In the mid-third century B.C.E. the high priest Onias III lost the civil leadership (προστασία) of his people, as a result of his refusal to continue paying taxes to the Ptolemies. In his place Joseph son of Tobias was appointed to the office. By promising the Ptolemies higher tax revenues, he gained not only the official leadership of the Jewish people but also the position of tax farmer (διοικητής) for the whole of "Syria and Phoenicia."<sup>55</sup>

During the twenty-two years that this Tobiad held power (Josephus, *Ant.* 12.4.6 §186),<sup>56</sup> Jerusalem became a prosperous city. According to Josephus's source, Joseph son of Tobias "brought the Jewish people from poverty and a state of weakness to more splendid opportunities of life" (*Ant.* 12.4.10 §224).<sup>57</sup> However, this Tobiad was notorious for his cruelty toward those who refused to pay taxes to him (*Ant.* 12.4.5 §§180–185), and his respect for the Torah was scant. Although the high priest seems to have regained the προστασία with the decree of Antiochus III around 198 B.C.E., the Tobiad family remained powerful. Hence, when Ben Sira criticizes the blind pursuit of riches (Sir 31:5–7) and the disregard of the poor (13:17–23) on the part of Israel's wealthy class, it is quite possible that he is referring to the Tobiads and their circle.<sup>58</sup>

#### f. Demographic Trends

During the third century B.C.E. immigration from Greece and improved farming methods led to an increase in the population of Palestine,<sup>59</sup> resulting in the foundation of new cities. The influx of foreigners and the process of urbanization, combined with the economic hardship due to the high level of taxation, doubtless contributed to a weakening of family bonds among the Judean population. In this context,

---

thoughts and expressions as long as these could be reconciled with the Judaism of his day" (Skehan and Di Lella, *Wisdom of Ben Sira*, 16).

<sup>55</sup> Josephus, *Ant.* 12.4.1–4 §§158–179; cf. Hengel, *Judaism and Hellenism*, 1:27.

<sup>56</sup> Josephus's dating of those twenty-two years after the Seleucid conquest of Palestine seems anachronistic. Joseph son of Tobias may have held power between 239–217 B.C.E.; cf. Hengel, *Judaism and Hellenism*, 1:269.

<sup>57</sup> H. St. J. Thackeray et al., trans., *Josephus* (LCL; 10 vols.; New York: Putnam; Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1926–1965), 7:113.

<sup>58</sup> Cf. V. Tcherikover, *Hellenistic Civilization and the Jews* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society of America, 1959), 148–51.

<sup>59</sup> Cf. Hengel, *Judaism and Hellenism*, 1:39–47.



it is likely that friendship became more important in Jewish culture, as Ben Sira's ample treatment of the topic suggests.

#### 4. Authorship and Social Setting

##### a. Place of composition

All indications point to Jerusalem as the place where Ben Sira composed his work,<sup>60</sup> since the city plays a central role in the book. The author's praise of the high priest Simeon II (50:1–24) not only describes his repairs to the temple and fortification of the city (50:1–4) but also gives what seems to be an eyewitness account of the temple liturgy (50:5–21). In addition, the sage beseeches God's mercy on the holy city of Jerusalem (36:18–19) in a prayer that begins: "Save us" (36:1).<sup>61</sup> Furthermore, the wisdom that he praises in 24:1–29 comes to dwell in Jerusalem (24:10–11). All these observations imply that the sage composed his book in Jerusalem.

##### b. Identity of the Author

The sage's full name was probably Yeshua ben Eleazar ben Sira, but I will use the name by which he is commonly known, Ben Sira.<sup>62</sup> The fifty-one chapters of his didactic poetry indicate that he was a teacher. He directs his words to young men (cf. Sir 9:1–9; 36:26–31; 42:9–14), whom, following an ancient sapiential tradition (e.g., Prov 1:10; 2:1; 3:1), he often addresses individually as בְּנִי ("my son"; e.g., Sir 3:12, 17; 4:1). He probably ran an educational establishment, since in 51:23 G he urges the unlearned to lodge in the "house of instruction."<sup>63</sup> Moreover, his praise of

<sup>60</sup> Although 50:27c G calls the author ὁ Ἱεροσολυμίτης ("the Jerusalemite"), this designation is lacking in H<sup>b</sup> and S and may be secondary.

<sup>61</sup> Emphasis added. In favor of Ben Sira's authorship of 36:1–22, see J. Marböck, "Das Gebet um die Rettung Zions in Sir 36,1–22 (G: 33,1–13a; 36:16b–22) im Zusammenhang der Geschichtsschau Ben Siras," in *Gottes Weisheit unter Uns* (Herders Biblische Studien 6; Freiburg i.B.: Herder, 1995), 149–66, esp. 157–58. Unless otherwise indicated, all Ben Sira references are to H, where extant, or else to G.

<sup>62</sup> While Sir 50:27c G calls him Ἰησοῦς υἱὸς Σιραχ Ἐλεαζαρ ("Jesus son of Sira [son of] Eleazar"), 50:27b and 51:30gh H<sup>b</sup> name him שִׁמְעוֹן בֶּן יֵשׁוּעַ בֶּן אֱלֵעָזָר בֶּן סִירָא ("Simeon son of Yeshua son of Eleazar son of Sira"); cf. Skehan and Di Lella, *Wisdom of Ben Sira*, 3.

<sup>63</sup> Scholars dispute when schools began in ancient Israel; cf. Hengel, *Judaism and Hellenism*, 1:78–83; A. Lemaire, "The Sage in School and Temple," in *The Sage in Israel and the Ancient Near East* (ed. J. G. Gammie and L. G. Perdue; Winona

the scribal profession (39:1–11) in comparison with manual occupations (38:24–34) echoes a long educational tradition deriving from Egypt, where a similar “Satire on the Trades” (ca. 1900 B.C.E.) occurs in several papyri.<sup>64</sup> Indeed, Ben Sira may have been one of the “scribes of the Temple” mentioned by Josephus (*Ant.* 12.3.3 §142).<sup>65</sup>

A somewhat aristocratic tone pervades the sage’s writing. His widespread traveling (Sir 34:9–13) may indicate that he was a diplomat or counselor (38:33; 39:4). His students were probably from the upper class,<sup>66</sup> although he cautions them against the unbridled pursuit of wealth (31:5–7) and urges them to care for the poor (4:1–10). His poetry mentions certain Hellenistic customs, such as the symposium (31:12–32:13).<sup>67</sup>

## 5. Theological Themes in Ben Sira’s Teaching

### a. The Fear of God, Wisdom, and the Law

Three interconnected themes in Ben Sira’s theology are the fear of God, wisdom, and the law, which together provide guidance for right living and a happy life (cf. Sir 9:14–16; 19:20; 21:11).

---

Lake, Ind.: Eisenbrauns, 1990), 165–81; J. L. Crenshaw, “Education in Ancient Israel,” *JBL* 104 (1985): 601–15; J. P. J. Olivier, “Schools and Wisdom Literature,” *JNSL* 4 (1975): 49–60; Wischmeyer, *Die Kultur des Buches Jesus Sirach*, 175–77; J. J. Collins, *Jewish Wisdom in the Hellenistic Age* (OTL; Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 1997), 36–38.

<sup>64</sup> For a translation, see *AEL* 1:184–92; cf. Skehan and Di Lella, *Wisdom of Ben Sira*, 449. See also C. A. Rollston, “Ben Sira 38:24–39:11 and the Egyptian Satire of the Trades: A Reconsideration,” *JBL* 120 (2001): 131–39, where Rollston sets the “Satire” within a broader literary tradition in Egypt.

<sup>65</sup> Compare the tentative suggestion of Hengel, *Judaism and Hellenism*, 1:133. On the importance of the temple cult and the priestly class in Ben Sira’s thought, see S. M. Olyan, “Ben Sira’s Relationship to the Priesthood,” *HTR* 80 (1987): 261–86.

<sup>66</sup> Cf. R. Gordis, “The Social Background of Wisdom Literature,” *HUCA* 18 (1943–1944): 77–118; compare the sage’s advice on the treatment of slaves (Sir 7:20–21; 33:25–30). According to Collins (*Jewish Wisdom in the Hellenistic Age*, 30), “Ben Sira made his living by instructing the well-to-do.” B. G. Wright suggests that “Ben Sira would have belonged to a retainer class that acted as mediators between the rulers, primarily priests in ancient Judea, and ordinary Jews”; see his “‘Fear the Lord and Honor the Priest’: Ben Sira As Defender of the Jerusalem Priesthood,” in *The Book of Ben Sira in Modern Research* (ed. P. C. Beentjes; BZAW 255; Berlin: de Gruyter, 1997), 189–222; quotation from p. 195.

<sup>67</sup> See Wischmeyer, *Die Kultur des Buches Jesus Sirach*, 106–9, as well as my exegesis of Sir 9:10 in ch. 3 below.

One of the most prominent themes in Ben Sira's work is the fear of God, which appears more than fifty-five times in his book.<sup>68</sup> The sage uses this theme, derived from the earlier biblical books, to bring various aspects of social ethics, seemingly secular, into the sphere of Yahwist religion.<sup>69</sup>

From the opening poem of the book (Sir 1:1–10) to its final acrostic (51:13–30), wisdom is also a major theme in Ben Sira.<sup>70</sup> Accordingly, in 9:14b the sage advises making friends with wise persons.

Furthermore, keeping the law is an important element in Ben Sira's teaching.<sup>71</sup> He recommends that God's law should guide one's friendships (9:15b G), including the manner of reproofing a friend (19:17b G).

#### b. Creation and Retribution

Creation is still another significant theme in the sage's theology.<sup>72</sup> It underlies the sage's formulation of the axiom "like to like"

---

<sup>68</sup> For a thorough survey, see J. Haspecker, *Gottesfurcht bei Jesus Sirach: Ihre religiöse Struktur und ihre literarische und doktrinäre Bedeutung* (AnBib 30; Rome: Pontifical Biblical Institute, 1967); cf. his list of occurrences of the phrase (48–50). On the connection between fear of the Lord, wisdom, and the law, see Skehan and Di Lella, *Wisdom of Ben Sira*, 75–80, as well as A. A. Di Lella, "Fear of the Lord As Wisdom: Ben Sira 1,11–30," in Beentjes, ed., *Book of Ben Sira in Modern Research*, 113–33.

<sup>69</sup> Thus, Ben Sira introduces the theme of the fear of God at the end of pericopes in 6:16b; 9:16b; 25:10–11; 40:26–27. On the same theme in earlier biblical tradition, see L. Drousseau, *La Crainte de Dieu dans l'Ancien Testament* (LD 63; Paris: Cerf, 1970).

<sup>70</sup> See esp. J. Marböck, *Weisheit im Wandel: Untersuchungen zur Weisheitstheologie bei Ben Sira* (BBB 37; Bonn: Hanstein, 1971; repr., BZAW 272; Berlin: de Gruyter, 1999); O. Rickenbacher, *Weisheitssperikopen bei Ben Sira* (OBO 1; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1973). For a brief survey, see A. A. Di Lella, "The Meaning of Wisdom in Ben Sira," in *In Search of Wisdom: Essays in Memory of John G. Gammie* (ed. L. G. Perdue et al.; Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 1993), 133–48.

<sup>71</sup> On this topic, see M. Jolley, "The Function of Torah in Sirach (Wisdom Literature)" (Ph. D. diss., Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, 1993); E. J. Schnabel, *Law and Wisdom from Ben Sira to Paul: A Tradition-Historical Enquiry into the Relation of Law, Wisdom, and Ethics* (WUNT 2/16; Tübingen: Mohr, 1985), 8–92; S. Burkes, "Wisdom and Law: Choosing Life in Ben Sira and Baruch," *JSJ* 30 (1999): 253–76.

<sup>72</sup> See K. W. Burton, "Sirach and the Judaic Doctrine of Creation" (Ph. D. diss., University of Glasgow, 1987); R. A. Argall, *1 Enoch and Sirach: A Comparative Literary and Conceptual Analysis of the Themes of Revelation, Creation and Judgment* (SBLEJL 8; Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1995), 135–64; S. Goan, "Creation in Ben Sira,"

(13:15–16), his appreciation for the goodness of friendship (25:9; 40:23), and his use of the root יצר (“form”) in 37:3.

The concept of divine retribution, a further important element in the theology of Ben Sira,<sup>73</sup> may underlie his thought in 22:23. However, wider questions of theodicy and free will have little place in the sage’s instruction on friendship.<sup>74</sup>

### c. Life and Death

Life and death are significant concepts in Ben Sira’s theology (see 11:14; 15:17; 37:18; cf. Deut 30:15).<sup>75</sup> The approach of death can easily come about, whether as a result of befriending someone powerful (Sir 9:13) or through betrayal by a friend (37:2). Although the later versions insert mention of life after death, in Ben Sira’s original text there is no afterlife in which humans may receive rewards or punishments (cf. 7:17; 14:16; 17:27–28).<sup>76</sup> Instead, death is the “decree for all flesh” (41:4 G).<sup>77</sup>

---

*MiS* 36 (1995): 75–85; F. V. Reiterer, “Die immateriellen Ebenen der Schöpfung bei Ben Sira,” in *Treasures of Wisdom: Studies in Ben Sira and the Book of Wisdom: Festschrift M. Gilbert* (ed. N. Calduch-Benages and J. Vermeylen; BETL 143; Leuven: Peeters, 1999), 91–127.

<sup>73</sup> See A. A. Di Lella, “Conservative and Progressive Theology: Sirach and Wisdom,” *CBQ* 28 (1966): 139–54, esp. 143–46; W. Dommershausen, “Zum Vergeltungsdenken des Ben Sira,” in *Wort und Geschichte* (ed. H. Gese and H.-P. Rüger; AOAT 18; Kevelaer: Butzon & Bercker, 1973), 37–43; Argall, *1 Enoch and Sirach*, 211–47; Skehan and Di Lella, *Wisdom of Ben Sira*, 83–87.

<sup>74</sup> On the sage’s theodicy, see G. L. Prato, *Il problema della teodicea in Ben Sira* (AnBib 65; Rome: Pontifical Biblical Institute, 1975); U. Wicke-Reuter, *Göttliche Providenz und menschliche Verantwortung bei Ben Sira und in der Frühen Stoa* (BZAW 298; Berlin: de Gruyter, 2000); L. Schrader, *Leiden und Gerechtigkeit: Studien zu Theologie und Textgeschichte des Sirachbuchs* (BBET 27; Frankfurt a.M.: Lang, 1994), esp. 205–32. On free will, see J. Hadot, *Penchant mauvais et volonté libre dans la sagesse de Ben Sira (L’Ecclésiastique)* (Brussels: Presses Universitaires, 1970).

<sup>75</sup> Cf. M. Milani, “La correlazione tra morte e vita in Ben Sira: Dimensione antropologica, cosmica e teologica dell’antitesi” (S.S.D. diss., Pontifical Biblical Institute, Rome, 1995).

<sup>76</sup> Cf. V. Hamp, “Zukunft und Jenseits im Buche Sirach,” in *Alttestamentliche Studien: Friedrich Nötscher zum Sechzigsten Geburtstag, 19. Juli 1950, Gewidmet von Kollegen, Freunden und Schülern* (ed. H. Junker and J. Botterweck; BBB 1; Bonn: Hanstein, 1950), 86–97; Collins, *Jewish Wisdom in the Hellenistic Age*, 92–96.

<sup>77</sup> On Sir 41:1–4, see F. V. Reiterer, “Deutung und Wertung des Todes durch Ben Sira,” in *Die alttestamentliche Botschaft als Wegweisung: Festschrift für Heinz Reinelt* (ed. J. Zmijewski; Stuttgart: Katholisches Bibelwerk, 1990), 203–36;

## 6. Social Ethics

## a. Caution, Honor, and Shame

Extreme caution characterizes Ben Sira's teaching on behavior in society.<sup>78</sup> Hence, caution is a hallmark of the sage's teaching on friendship. One must test a potential friend (6:7), be wary of friends (6:13), and realize that not every self-proclaimed friend actually is one (37:1). Moreover, the sage encourages his students not to neglect a needy friend, in case they themselves suffer as a result of the caution of others (22:25–26).

Closely allied to Ben Sira's cautious outlook is the importance for him of gaining honor and avoiding shame (cf. Sir 41:14a; 41:16–42:8).<sup>79</sup> Whereas false shame may lead a person to make unnecessary promises, thereby causing the end of friendship (20:23), true shame is the appropriate response to one's use of insulting words (41:22c). The sage also sees revealing a confidence as something shameful (22:22c).

## b. Women

In recent years Ben Sira's outlook toward women has been a focus of scholarly attention.<sup>80</sup> The fact that the sage's teaching on friendship (9:10–16; 37:1–6) twice follows an instruction on relations with women (9:1–9; 36:26–31) suggests that the friendship passages refer principally to

---

Schrader, *Leiden und Gerechtigkeit*, 233–52 (pp. 252–301 consider the sage's other passages on death).

<sup>78</sup> See J. T. Sanders, "Ben Sira's Ethics of Caution," *HUCA* 50 (1979): 73–106; he notes the similarity with the cautious outlook of Papyrus Insinger (103–6).

<sup>79</sup> *Ibid.*, 83–86; cf. Krammer, "Scham im Zusammenhang mit Freundschaft"; D. A. deSilva, "The Wisdom of Ben Sira: Honor, Shame, and the Maintenance of the Values of a Minority Culture," *CBQ* 58 (1996): 433–55; C. V. Camp, "Understanding a Patriarchy: Women in Second Century Judaism through the Eyes of Ben Sira," in *Women Like This: New Perspectives on Jewish Women in the Greco-Roman World* (ed. A. J. Levine; SBLEJL 1; Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1991), 1–39; *idem*, "Honor and Shame in Ben Sira: Anthropological and Theological Reflections," in Beentjes, ed., *Book of Ben Sira in Modern Research*, 171–87; P. J. Botha, "The Ideology of Shame in the Wisdom of Ben Sira: Ecclesiasticus 41:14–42:8," *OTE* 9 (1996): 353–71.

<sup>80</sup> Cf. W. C. Trenchard, *Ben Sira's View of Women: A Literary Analysis* (BJS 38; Chico, Calif.: Scholars Press, 1982); M. Gilbert, "Ben Sira et la femme," *RTL* 7 (1976): 426–42; Skehan and Di Lella, *Wisdom of Ben Sira*, 90–92; Camp, "Understanding a Patriarchy"; S. Schroer, *Die Weisheit hat ihr Haus gebaut: Studien zur Gestalt der Sophia in den biblischen Schriften* (Mainz: Grünewald, 1996), 96–109.

relations with male friends.<sup>81</sup> This accords with the fact that the sage's students were young males. Nevertheless, the allusions underlying Sir 6:5–17 present a female character (Abigail) as a model of friendship, while the male figure (Nabal) is a counterexample of boorishness.<sup>82</sup>

### c. Social Justice

In line with biblical teaching, found in the law codes, the prophets, and the wisdom literature, Ben Sira insists on the need for social justice (cf. 4:1–10; 34:21–35:22).<sup>83</sup> This aspect is prominent in Sir 13:15–23, which graphically delineates the mistreatment of the poor by the rich. The sage's use of animal imagery in 13:17–19 derives particularly from prophetic critiques of Israel's leaders.

### d. Speech

Like other sages, Ben Sira considers control of speech an important part of wise social behavior.<sup>84</sup> Sirach 27:16–21 teaches that the betrayal of confidences spells the end of friendship. Similarly, Sir 22:22 contrasts the forgivable offense of a rash word against a friend with the unpardonable fault of betraying a secret behind his back. As a counterpart, Sir 19:13–17 discusses a beneficial use of the tongue, namely, to reprove a misbehaving friend.

---

<sup>81</sup> Cf. the titles "Les femmes" for 9:1–9 and "Rapports avec les hommes" for 9:10–18 in H. Duesberg and P. Auvray, *Le livre de l'Écclesiastique* (SBJ; Paris: Cerf, 1953), 53–54. See also P. J. Botha, "Through the Figure of a Woman Many Have Perished: Ben Sira's View of Women," *OTE* 9 (1996): 20–34, esp. 30–32.

<sup>82</sup> See further my exegesis of Sir 6:5–17 in ch. 2.

<sup>83</sup> Cf. Skehan and Di Lella, *Wisdom of Ben Sira*, 88–90; Marböck, "Macht und Mächtige im Buche Jesus Sirach," in *Gottes Weisheit unter Uns*, 185–94; J. Corley, "Social Responsibility in Proverbs and Ben Sira," *ScrB* 30 (2000): 2–14; B. Baldauf, "Arme und Armut im Buch Ben Sira: Eine philologisch-exegetische Untersuchung" (M.Th. diss., University of Salzburg, 1983); V. Morla Asensio, "Poverty and Wealth: Ben Sira's View of Possessions," in R. Egger-Wenzel and I. Krammer, eds., *Der Einzelne und seine Gemeinschaft bei Ben Sira*, 151–78.

<sup>84</sup> Cf. J. I. Okoye, *Speech in Ben Sira with Special Reference to 5,9–6,1* (European University Studies 23/535; Frankfurt a.M.: Lang, 1995); G. Krinetzki, "Die Sprüche über das Reden und Schweigen in Sir 20 in traditionskritischer Sicht," in "Diener in eurer Mitte": *Festschrift für Dr. Antonius Hofmann, Bischof von Passau zum 75. Geburtstag* (ed. R. Beer et al.; Passau: Passavia Universitätsverlag, 1984), 64–81; A. A. Di Lella, "Use and Abuse of the Tongue: Ben Sira 5,9–6,1," in "Jedes Ding hat seine Zeit...": *Studien zur israelitischen und altorientalischen Weisheit: Diethelm Michel zum 65. Geburtstag* (ed. A. A. Diesel et al.; BZAW 241; Berlin: de Gruyter, 1996), 33–48.

7. Ben Sira's Poetry<sup>85</sup>a. Literary Forms<sup>86</sup>

Although Ben Sira sometimes uses hymns, prayers, and a long encomium, most of his book consists of didactic poems.<sup>87</sup> All seven pericopes discussed in my study belong to the category of the didactic poem.<sup>88</sup> While incorporating traditional proverbs and biblical phrases, the sage molds his poems into neat literary constructions.

## b. Structure of Ben Sira's Book

Ben Sira's book may be divided into eight parts (each starting with a sapiential poem) plus the appendices (which end with a wisdom poem).<sup>89</sup>

---

<sup>85</sup> On Ben Sira's poetry, see Skehan and Di Lella, *Wisdom of Ben Sira*, 63–74; on poetic techniques in biblical Hebrew, see esp. W. G. E. Watson, *Classical Hebrew Poetry* (JSOTSup 26; Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1984); as well as L. Alonso Schökel, *A Manual of Hebrew Poetics* (SubBi 11; Rome: Pontifical Biblical Institute, 1988).

<sup>86</sup> On the literary genres employed by Ben Sira, see W. Baumgartner, "Die literarischen Gattungen in der Weisheit des Jesus Sirach," *ZAW* 34 (1914): 161–98; Skehan and Di Lella, *Wisdom of Ben Sira*, 21–30; cf. also P. J. Nel, *The Structure and Ethos of the Wisdom Admonitions in Proverbs* (BZAW 158; Berlin: de Gruyter, 1982), 9–17. Hymns include Sir 18:1–7; 39:16–35; 42:15–43:33; 51:1–12; prayers include 22:27–23:6; 36:1–22. The "Praise of the Ancestors" in 44:1–50:24 uses the form of an encomium, according to T. R. Lee, *Studies in the Form of Sirach 44–50* (SBLDS 75; Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1986), esp. 206–39.

<sup>87</sup> Baumgartner applies the term *Lehrgedicht* ("didactic poem") to Sir 6:5–17 ("Die literarischen Gattungen," 164); so also Beentjes, "Ein Mensch ohne Freund," 8. Rather than just assembling maxims, the sage generally creates thematic poems. Haspecker (*Gottesfurcht bei Jesus Sirach*, 121) asserts that Ben Sira's book includes genuine redactional units intended by the author. Similarly, in Egyptian wisdom literature the *sebayit* consists of integrated units of instruction on sapiential themes, rather than mere lists of individual proverbs.

<sup>88</sup> The primary setting of the friendship pericopes is thus the schoolroom (cf. Sir 51:23), where perhaps they served as writing exercises. It is also possible that, like the elegiac poetry of Theognis, some of Ben Sira's friendship poems (e.g., 6:5–17; 9:10–16) were recited at banquets and symposia (cf. 32:3–8). For an examination of the Hebrew sage's use of earlier material, see Fuß, "Tradition und Komposition."

<sup>89</sup> I have adapted the following structure from Skehan and Di Lella, *Wisdom of Ben Sira*, xiii–xvi. See also J. D. Harvey, "Toward a Degree of Order in Ben Sira's Book," *ZAW* 105 (1993): 52–62, whence I have taken the titles of parts 1–4, 6–7 (61); Harvey calls 32:14–33:18 a wisdom poem (53). See further the discussion in J. Marböck, "Structure and Redaction History of the Book of Ben Sira: Review and

- Part 1, 1:1–4:10: “Understanding Wisdom”  
 begun by wisdom poem (1:1–10)
- Part 2, 4:11–6:17: “Applying Wisdom Personally”  
 begun by wisdom poem (4:11–19)
- Part 3, 6:18–14:19: “Applying Wisdom Socially”  
 begun by wisdom poem (6:18–37)
- Part 4, 14:20–23:27: “Applying Wisdom to Speech and Thought”  
 begun by wisdom poem (14:20–15:10)
- Part 5, 24:1–32:13: “Applying Wisdom to Domestic Life”  
 begun by wisdom poem (24:1–34)
- Part 6, 32:14–38:23: “Using Wisdom to Make Good Decisions”  
 begun by wisdom poem (32:14–33:18)
- Part 7, 38:24–42:14: “Demonstrating the Results of Wisdom”  
 begun by wisdom poem (38:24–39:11)
- Part 8, 42:15–50:24: “Wisdom in Creation and History”  
 begun by wisdom poem (42:15–43:33)
- Appendices, 50:25–51:30  
 ended by wisdom poem (51:13–30)

Attention to this overall structure reveals that the friendship pericopes do not occur randomly in Ben Sira’s book but rather fit in with their wider context. Thus, part 2 (“Applying Wisdom Personally”) contains the first friendship poem (6:5–17), concerning wise personal conduct in relation to potential friends. Because part 3 deals with “Applying Wisdom Socially,” it naturally has much to say on friendship (7:12, 18; 9:10–16; 12:8–9; 13:15–23; 14:13). In its treatment of “Applying Wisdom to Speech and Thought,” part 4 discusses both one form of speech that benefits friendship, namely, reproof (19:13–17), and the damage to friendship caused by other kinds of speech, namely, insults and breaches of confidentiality (22:19–26). Since part 5 deals with “Applying Wisdom to Domestic Life,” Sir 27:16–21 considers the harm done to friendship by the disclosure of secrets, which typically occurs behind the closed doors of one’s home. Finally, because part 6 concerns “Using Wisdom to Make Good Decisions,” Sir 37:1–6 treats distinguishing between good and bad friends.

---

Prospects,” in Beentjes, ed., *Book of Ben Sira in Modern Research*, 61–79; H.-W. Jüngling, “Der Bauplan des Buches Jesus Sirach,” in *Den Armen eine frohe Botschaft: Festschrift für Bischof Franz Kamphaus zum 65. Geburtstag* (ed. J. Hainz et al.; Frankfurt a.M.: Knecht, 1997), 89–105; G. Sauer, “Gedanken über den thematischen Aufbau des Buches Ben Sira,” in Caldich-Benages and Vermeylen, eds., *Treasures of Wisdom*, 51–61; O. Mulder, *Simon de hogepriester in Sirach 50*, 41–60.



## c. Delimitation

Delimiting pericopes in Ben Sira can be a complex task because of textual problems and the aphoristic nature of the book. One may use both internal criteria (genre,<sup>90</sup> subject matter, and style) and external factors (the context). I have found seven stylistic criteria helpful in delimitating Ben Sira's pericopes: repetition of key words, *inclusio*, nonalphabetic acrostics, opening and closing rhyme, chiasm, a closing refrain, and favorite concluding themes.<sup>91</sup> A brief treatment of these seven points follows.

First, repetition of a key word often indicates the subject matter of a pericope; thus, Sir 6:5–17 G employs φίλος ("friend") nine times, while 22:19–26 G uses it five times. Second, *inclusio* marks the opening and closing cola of 27:16–21, which both employ the phrase מְגַלֵּה סוֹד ("one who reveals a confidence").<sup>92</sup> Third, a nonalphabetic acrostic of twenty-two or twenty-three bicola frequently indicates a unified poem or cluster of poems; for instance, 36:26–37:11 is a twenty-three-line poem on the choice of associates (wife, friends, and advisors), within which 37:1–6 forms a subunit on friendship.<sup>93</sup> Fourth, opening and closing rhyme often marks the start of a new pericope or its conclusion.<sup>94</sup> Fifth,

<sup>90</sup> Thus, the prayer in 36:1–22 is distinct from the teaching that begins in 36:23. However, since much of Ben Sira comprises didactic poems, frequently no difference of genre may exist between adjacent units.

<sup>91</sup> On these stylistic features, see Watson, *Classical Hebrew Poetry*, 287–95 (key words); 282–87 (*inclusio*); 199 (nonalphabetic acrostics); 229–34 (rhyme); 201–8 (chiasm); 295–99 (refrains); 65 (thematic closure).

<sup>92</sup> See my reconstructed text in ch. 5 below. For a twofold *inclusio* delimiting 13:15–23, see the delimitation section of ch. 4; for a list of Ben Sira's *inclusiones*, see Skehan and Di Lella, *Wisdom of Ben Sira*, 73–74.

<sup>93</sup> Recognition of a nonalphabetic acrostic in the surrounding material may also help demarcate a pericope; thus, a twenty-two-line poem (5:1–6:4) precedes the sage's first friendship passage (6:5–17), while a twenty-two-line sapiential poem (6:18–37) follows. Skehan and Di Lella provide a list of Ben Sira's nonalphabetic acrostics (*ibid.*, 74). On the analogy of the alphabetic acrostic (e.g. Sir 51:13–30; Pss 111; 112; Prov 31:10–31), I define a "nonalphabetic acrostic" as a Hebrew poem in which the number of lines (22 or 23) imitates the number of letters in the Hebrew alphabet. Skehan and Di Lella offer an explanation of the twenty-third line in such poems (*ibid.*, 576). In his brief discussion of biblical twenty-two-line poems (*Classical Hebrew Poetry*, 199), Watson asserts that such compositions "were obviously modelled on alphabetic acrostics, the restrictive feature of alphabetic sequence being lifted."

<sup>94</sup> Examples of opening rhyme include 6:5a (internal rhyme); 9:10bd; 13:15ab, 16a. Instances of concluding rhyme include 6:17a (internal rhyme); 9:16ab;

a chiastic pattern (combined with an *inclusio*) unifies one pericope (27:16–21).<sup>95</sup> Sixth, Ben Sira sometimes employs a closing refrain to mark the end of a passage.<sup>96</sup> Seventh, the sage sometimes uses a favorite theme, such as the fear of God or the law or death, to conclude a pericope.<sup>97</sup>

#### d. Stanzaic Patterns

In my study I divide Ben Sira's poems into stanzas.<sup>98</sup> On a smaller scale, key words often serve to delimit stanzas; thus, the threefold repetition of one phrase in 6:8–10 and of another in 6:14–16 shows the stanzaic pattern in 6:5–17. An *inclusio* may also delimit a stanza; thus, the resemblance of 6:8b and 6:10b suggests that 6:8–10 is a stanza. Sometimes, too, opening and closing rhyme occurs; thus, in 13:15–23 the first stanza uses internal rhyme in its last bicolon (13:20a), while the second has rhyme in its opening bicolon (13:21ab).

#### e. Sound Patterns: Rhyme, Alliteration, and Assonance

Sirach 44:1–8 provides the clearest example of end-rhyme in the sage's book.<sup>99</sup> Besides the examples of opening and closing rhyme listed

---

13:23abcd. For further discussion of opening and closing rhyme, see the poetic analyses of Sir 6:5–17 (ch. 2); 9:10–16 (ch. 3); and 13:15–23 (ch. 4) below. Of interest is Watson's observation: "In Akkadian poetry, rhyme . . . serves to mark strophic structure" (*ibid.*, 231).

<sup>95</sup> On the chiasm in Sir 27:16–21, see my poetic analysis in ch. 5 below. For a list of shorter chiastic patterns in Ben Sira's book (including 6:5–6a, 14; 9:10), see Skehan and Di Lella, *Wisdom of Ben Sira*, 67–73.

<sup>96</sup> One closing refrain occurs in 6:4a H<sup>A</sup> = 19:3b H<sup>C</sup>; another in 20:30–31 G = 41:14–15 G; another in 31:11b H<sup>B</sup> = 44:15b H<sup>BM</sup>. Compare the refrain in Isa 9:11, 16, 20 and 10:4; or Cant 2:7; 3:5; 5:8.

<sup>97</sup> For the fear of God, see 6:16b (concluding 6:5–17); 9:16b (ending 9:10–16); 25:10–11 (concluding 25:7–11); 40:26–27 (ending 40:18–27); cf. Haspecker, *Gottesfurcht bei Jesus Sirach*, 136 n. 30. For the law, see 9:15 G (concluding 9:10–16); 19:17 G (ending 19:13–17). Poems ending with mention of death (or the grave or worms) include 7:1–17, 18–36; 9:1–9; 11:7–28; 13:24–14:19; 18:30–19:3; 27:22–28:7; 39:1–11; 44:1–15.

<sup>98</sup> Stanzaic divisions are also noted in Skehan and Di Lella, *Wisdom of Ben Sira*, *passim*. On stanzaic patterns in biblical poetry, see Watson, *Classical Hebrew Poetry*, 163–65.

<sup>99</sup> On Sir 44:1–8, see P. W. Skehan, "Staves, Nails and Scribal Slips (Ben Sira 44:2–5)," *BASOR* 200 (1970): 66–71; for the reading **בְּנִיכָהּ** ("in song," 44:5b), see pp. 69–70. On rhyme in Sir 5:6; 10:27; 11:3; 13:1, 24; 36:18–19, see Skehan and Di Lella, *Wisdom of Ben Sira*, 64–67. On biblical Hebrew rhyme, see Watson, *Classical Hebrew Poetry*, 229–34.

above, many *bicola* exhibit rhyme (e.g., 6:11; 7:18). In addition, Ben Sira often uses alliteration (e.g., 6:5ab, 14b, 15ab, 17ab) and assonance (e.g., 6:5ab, 8a, 11–12a, 12b–13).<sup>100</sup>

## 8. Texts, Editions, and Textual Criticism

### a. Texts and Text Editions<sup>101</sup>

The earliest Hebrew Ben Sira MSS come from between 100 B.C.E. and 73 C.E.<sup>102</sup> However, the six Cairo Genizah MSS from the tenth to twelfth centuries C.E., comprising about two-thirds of the sage's book, constitute the majority of the extant Hebrew texts.<sup>103</sup>

---

<sup>100</sup> See the listing in Skehan and Di Lella, *Wisdom of Ben Sira*, 64–67. On Hebrew alliteration and assonance, see Watson, *Classical Hebrew Poetry*, 222–29. On alliteration and assonance in Sir 6:5–17, see the poetic analysis of the pericope in ch. 2 below.

<sup>101</sup> For a listing of the Hebrew MSS, see Skehan and Di Lella, *Wisdom of Ben Sira*, 52–53 (texts), 93–94 (publications); G. Sauer, *Jesus Sirach (Ben Sira)* (JSHRZ 3/5; Gütersloh: Mohn, 1981), 485–86; A. Minissale, *La versione greca del Siracide: Confronto con il testo ebraico alla luce dell'attività midrascica e del metodo targumico* (AnBib 133; Rome: Pontifical Biblical Institute, 1995), 29–30. For the new critical edition, see P. C. Beentjes, *The Book of Ben Sira in Hebrew: A Text Edition of All Extant Hebrew MSS and a Synopsis of All Parallel Hebrew Ben Sira Texts* (VTSup 68; Leiden: Brill, 1997); note that Beentjes sometimes departs from the standard verse numeration (e.g., on pp. 27–28 he prints 6:5–17 as 6:4–16). For the Hebrew MSS discovered before 1968 (i.e., excluding H<sup>F</sup>), two hand editions are readily available: the publication (with parallel Greek, Syriac, and Latin texts) of F. Vattioni, *Ecclesiastico: Testo ebraico con apparato critico e versioni greca, latina e siriana* (Pubblicazioni del Seminario di Semitistica, Testi 1; Naples: Istituto Orientale di Napoli, 1968); and the Hebrew edition (with an English introduction) of Z. Ben-Ḥayyim, *The Book of Ben Sira: Text, Concordance and an Analysis of the Vocabulary* (Jerusalem: Academy of the Hebrew Language/Shrine of the Book, 1973).

<sup>102</sup> The Masada scroll, containing portions of Sir 39:27b–44:17b (henceforth H<sup>M</sup>), dates from the early first century B.C.E. The two fragments (2Q18) from Qumran Cave 2, consisting of a few words of Sir 6:14–31 (henceforth H<sup>2Q</sup>), come from the latter half of the first century B.C.E., while the Cave 11 Psalms Scroll (11QP<sup>s</sup>), containing Sir 51:13a–20c, 30b (henceforth H<sup>11Q</sup>), dates from the early first century C.E. Cf. Skehan and Di Lella, *Wisdom of Ben Sira*, 53. Part of Sir 18:33 occurs in the Qumran Beatitudes text 4Q525 25.4, according to E. Puech, *Textes Hébreux (4Q521–4Q528, 4Q576–4Q579): Qumran Cave 4.18* (DJD 25; Oxford: Clarendon, 1998), 164–65.

<sup>103</sup> Cf. Skehan and Di Lella, *Wisdom of Ben Sira*, 52–53. The six MSS are H<sup>A</sup>, H<sup>B</sup>, H<sup>C</sup>, H<sup>D</sup>, H<sup>E</sup>, and H<sup>F</sup>. For details of the first publications of these MSS, see (besides the following footnotes) the bibliography at the end of this study.

Out of the seven pericopes discussed in detail in chapters 2–6 below, three (Sir 6:5–17; 9:10–16; 13:15–23) are attested in H<sup>A</sup>, an eleventh-century MS from the Cairo Genizah. Both 6:5–17 and 13:15–23 occur in MS leaves (T-S 12.864) housed at Cambridge University Library,<sup>104</sup> while the Genizah MS of 9:10–16 (ENA 2536) is kept at the Jewish Theological Seminary of America in New York.<sup>105</sup> Sirach 37:1–6 is extant in two Cairo Genizah MSS, namely, among portions of H<sup>B</sup> housed at the British Library in London,<sup>106</sup> and among the leaves of H<sup>D</sup> kept at the Bibliothèque de l'Alliance Israélite Universelle in Paris.<sup>107</sup> For the remaining three pericopes (Sir 19:13–17; 22:19–26; 27:16–21) no Hebrew MSS are extant.<sup>108</sup>

The three major ancient versions (in descending order of importance) are the Greek (G), the Syriac (S), and the Latin (L). For the Greek text I have used J. Ziegler's critical edition in the Göttingen Septuagint series.<sup>109</sup> All extant Greek MSS interchange 30:25–33:13a with 33:13b–36:16a; however, for these portions Ziegler has restored

---

<sup>104</sup> For Sir 3:6b–7:29a; 11:34b; 12:2a–16:26b, see S. Schechter and C. Taylor, *The Wisdom of Ben Sira: Portions of the Book Ecclesiasticus from Hebrew Manuscripts in the Cairo Genizah Collection Presented to the University of Cambridge by the Editors* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1899), 3–10. For photographs, see *Facsimiles of the Fragments Hitherto Recovered of the Book of Ecclesiasticus in Hebrew* (Oxford: Oxford University Press; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1901).

<sup>105</sup> For 7:29a–11:33d; 12:1; 11:34a, see E. N. Adler, "Some Missing Chapters of Ben Sira," *JQR* 12 (1899–1900): 466–80, esp. 468–71 (with photographs).

<sup>106</sup> For 31:12–31; 36:24–37:26, see G. Margoliouth, "The Original Hebrew of Ecclesiasticus XXXI.12–31, and XXXVI.22–XXXVII.26," *JQR* 12 (1899–1900): 1–33, esp. 4–12.

<sup>107</sup> For 36:29a–38:1a, see I. Lévi, "Fragments de deux nouveaux manuscrits hébreux de l'Écclesiastique," *REJ* 40 (1900): 1–30, esp. 3–4; note that Lévi designates this MS H<sup>C</sup>.

<sup>108</sup> I suggest, however, that the previously unexplained word פִּסָּג ("test") that follows Sir 36:31 in the anthological H<sup>C</sup> belongs to 27:17a (cf. S); see further ch. 5 below. A gloss after 31:2ab H<sup>B</sup> exhibits loose similarities with 27:16; see the footnote on 41:18c in the appendix. For discussion of a Cairo Genizah prosodic poem based on Sir 22:22cd–23:9, see ch. 6 below. In the following section on method, I explain my reasons for reconstructing a Hebrew text for 19:13–17; 22:19–26; 27:16–21.

<sup>109</sup> J. Ziegler, *Sapientia Iesu Filii Sirach* (2d ed.; Septuaginta 12/2; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1980); I have followed his verse numbering throughout. I have also consulted H. B. Swete, *The Old Testament in Greek* (3d ed.; 3 vols.; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1907), 2:644–754, as well as (for G<sup>248</sup>) J. H. A. Hart, *Ecclesiasticus: The Greek Text of Codex 248* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1909).

the correct verse numeration (in parentheses) in his publication of the Greek text. In the absence of a critical edition of the Syriac text, I have referred to A. M. Ceriani's facsimile edition of the Ambrosian Codex (S<sup>A</sup>) and to P. A. de Lagarde's publication of the British Library Codex 12142 (S<sup>L</sup>).<sup>110</sup> For the Old Latin text found in the Vulgate MSS I have employed the Rome critical edition of San Girolamo.<sup>111</sup>

## b. Textual Criticism

Whereas the whole question of the textual criticism of Ben Sira is vast and complex, the present discussion is necessarily brief.<sup>112</sup> Following Di Lella's 1966 study, most scholars now accept the general authenticity of the Cairo Genizah Hebrew MSS, while acknowledging that they contain corruptions acquired in the course of transmission.<sup>113</sup> The corruptions are of various kinds: scribal errors, retroversions, theological editings, and expansions or omissions.

*i. Scribal Errors.* Orthographic errors and corruptions abound in the Hebrew MSS of Ben Sira, although scribes have corrected some mistakes by means of marginal notes. Comparison with another Hebrew MS or with the versions often brings to light such errors. For instance, in 37:4 comparison with H<sup>B</sup> reveals two mistakes in H<sup>D</sup>: the reading וְהַיְהוֹדָה

<sup>110</sup> A. M. Ceriani, *Translatio Syra Pescitto Veteris Testamenti ex codice Ambrosiano sec. fere VI photolithographice edita*, 2/4 (Milan: Pogliani, 1878); P. A. de Lagarde, *Libri veteris testamenti apocryphi syriace* (Leipzig: Brockhaus; London: Williams & Norgate, 1861). I have also used the Polyglot of B. Walton (S<sup>W</sup>), *Biblia sacra polyglotta*, 4 (London: Roycroft, 1657), and the Mosul edition (S<sup>M</sup>), *Biblia sacra juxta versionem simplicem quae dicitur Pshitta*, 2 (Beirut: Imprimerie Catholique, 1951).

<sup>111</sup> *Biblia Sacra iuxta latinam vulgatam versionem*, 12: *Sapientia Salomonis, Liber Hiesu filii Sirach* (Rome: Typis Polyglottis Vaticanis, 1964); see also the (as yet incomplete) Beuron edition of W. Thiele, *Vetus Latina: Die Reste der altlateinischen Bibel 11/2: Sirach (Ecclesiasticus)* (Freiburg i.B.: Herder, 1987–), of which by 1998 seven fascicles were published, covering Sir 1:1–19:28.

<sup>112</sup> On the textual criticism of Ben Sira, see briefly Skehan and Di Lella, *Wisdom of Ben Sira*, 55–60; and Gilbert, "Siracide," 12:1390–1402. Fuller treatments appear in A. A. Di Lella, *The Hebrew Text of Sirach: A Text-Critical and Historical Study* (Studies in Classical Literature 1; The Hague: Mouton, 1966); H.-P. Rüger, *Text und Textform im hebräischen Sirach: Untersuchungen zur Textgeschichte und Textkritik der hebräischen Sirachfragmente aus der Kairoer Geniza* (BZAW 112; Berlin: de Gruyter, 1970); Schrader, *Leiden und Gerechtigkeit*, 13–57; Minissale, *La versione greca del Siracide*.

<sup>113</sup> See Di Lella, *Hebrew Text of Sirach*, esp. 47–77. For a table listing corruptions in the Hebrew MSS, see Minissale, *La versione greca del Siracide*, 153–71.

("table," H<sup>B</sup>) is supported by S against the reading  $\text{תַּחַת}$  ("the pit," H<sup>D</sup>), while the reading  $\text{מִפְּרִי נֹב}$  ("from fruit"/"from Nob," H<sup>P</sup>) is evidently an error for  $\text{מִנְּנִיב}$  ("aloof," H<sup>B</sup>; cf. G, S).<sup>114</sup>

ii. *Retroversions.* Di Lella suggests that the Cairo Genizah MSS contain some retroversions from S, while Ziegler proposes that they preserve some retroversions from G.<sup>115</sup>

iii. *Theological Adaptations.* Translators or scribes have made theological adaptations to the text during the course of its transmission. S tends to omit references to the law; thus, whereas Sir 19:17b G says, "And give place to the law of the Most High," 19:17b S merely repeats the thought of 19:15b S.<sup>116</sup> In addition, S deletes what it perceives as unfavorable mentions of the poor; for instance, it omits the whole of 13:20, which is present in H<sup>A</sup> and G. The versions also alter Ben Sira's sayings to incorporate references to the afterlife. Thus, whereas 7:17b H<sup>A</sup> asserts, "A mortal's hope is worms," 7:17b G declares, "An impious person's punishment is fire and worms."<sup>117</sup>

iv. *Other Expansions or Doublets, and Omissions.* Occasionally the textual witnesses omit single verses or longer passages; for example, S passes over most of Ben Sira's discussion of true and false shame (41:14–42:8), retaining only parts of 41:19–20.<sup>118</sup> More often, the texts contain expansions. After 13:17b, for instance, H<sup>A</sup> adds a gloss lacking in G, S, and L:

---

<sup>114</sup> Minissale (*La versione greca del Siracide*, 165–68) provides a classified list of scribal errors in H.

<sup>115</sup> On retroversions from S, see Di Lella, *Hebrew Text of Sirach*, 106–47. On retroversions from G, see J. Ziegler, "Zwei Beiträge zu Sirach," *BZ* 8 (1964): 277–84; idem, "Ursprüngliche Lesarten im griechischen Sirach," in *Mélanges Eugène Tisserant* (7 vols.; Studi e testi 231; Vatican City: Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana, 1964), 1:461–87.

<sup>116</sup> Cf. M. M. Winter, "The Origins of Ben Sira in Syriac," *VT* 27 (1977): 237–53, 494–507, esp. 498 (a list of eight passages where S removes or alters a reference to the law found in G). On the tendency in S to favor the poor, see 245–49.

<sup>117</sup> See further C. Kearns, "The Expanded Text of Ecclesiasticus: Its Teaching on the Future Life As a Clue to Its Origin" (S.S.D. diss., Pontifical Biblical Institute, Rome, 1951); cf. Minissale, *La versione greca del Siracide*, 225–26. For the tendency of S to eliminate passages contrary to belief in the afterlife, see M. D. Nelson, *The Syriac Version of the Wisdom of Ben Sira Compared to the Greek and Hebrew Materials* (SBLDS 107; Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1988), 113–14.

<sup>118</sup> Cf. Nelson, *Syriac Version*, 69–80. On Sir 13:17, see further the text-critical note in ch. 4 below.

"And so is a rich person toward a withdrawn [= poor] man." In his edition of G, Ziegler prints the many expansions of the later Greek recension (GII) in small print, whereas the earlier text (GI, found mostly in G<sup>BSA</sup>) appears in print of a normal size.<sup>119</sup>

In view of the complexities of the textual situation for Ben Sira, no simple rules can solve all the problems; as Skehan and Di Lella assert, "the careful critic must take into account all these bewildering features and then make a judgment that seems the most reasonable for the particular text under consideration." In the next section I will explain my textual method, including the rationale for my Hebrew retroversions of Sir 19:13–17; 22:19–26; 27:16–21.

## 9. Method of Study

### a. General Procedure

I shall offer a detailed discussion of Ben Sira's seven major pericopes on friendship (6:5–17; 9:10–16; 13:15–23; 19:13–17; 22:19–26; 27:16–21; 37:1–6).<sup>120</sup> Since (according to G<sup>B</sup>) these seven passages account for thirty of the sage's forty-eight uses of φίλος ("friend"), this discussion will treat the majority of the sage's thoughts on friendship. My concluding chapter summarizes the findings from the exegesis of the seven pericopes. An appendix then provides a brief survey of the eighteen other uses of φίλος scattered throughout Ben Sira's book; a table of these eighteen occurrences lists the vocabulary of H (where extant) and S alongside each instance in G.

For each of the seven major pericopes, after an introduction, I begin by delimiting the pericope, using internal criteria (subject matter and style) and external factors (the context). Next I provide a Hebrew text, based on the Genizah MSS where extant (6:5–17; 9:10–16; 13:15–23; 37:1–6).<sup>121</sup> For those pericopes lacking a Hebrew text (19:13–

<sup>119</sup> Examples of expansion in GII include 13:14 (not in H<sup>A</sup>, G<sup>BSA</sup>, or S); 19:18–19 (not in G<sup>BSA</sup> or S); 22:23ef (not in G<sup>BSA</sup> or S). The text of GII appears mainly in G<sup>248</sup>, G<sup>V</sup>, and in the other Origenic and Lucianic witnesses. Sometimes, however, GII preserves an original bicolon omitted in GI, such as Sir 1:21; cf. Skehan and Di Lella, *Wisdom of Ben Sira*, 142. For the following quotation, see *ibid.*, 60.

<sup>120</sup> Chapter 2 treats Sir 6:5–17 and 37:1–6 together because the two pericopes have many verbal and thematic resemblances. Similarly, ch. 5 considers 19:13–17 and 27:16–21 together because both these passages concern the effect of speech on friendship.

<sup>121</sup> Though the Qumran and Cairo Genizah MSS do not generally include vocalization, I have provided vowels to make my readings clear, following Segal, ספר בן־סירה השלם, in most cases.

17; 22:19–26; 27:16–21), I reconstruct one by means of retroversion. There follow text-critical notes and my English translation, which is rather literal to avoid obscuring the Hebrew idioms. Then I offer a poetic analysis, explaining the stanzaic structure of the pericope and examining its stylistic features (e.g., alliteration and assonance). Next I situate the pericope in its context within Ben Sira's book. The major part of the discussion of each pericope is the verse-by-verse exegesis, which comments on the words used and places the sage's thought against the background of other treatments of friendship in ancient literature (especially Greek and Egyptian). I finish the discussion of each pericope with a brief conclusion.

#### b. Text-Critical Method

The examination of the textual questions earlier in this chapter indicated the complexity of the textual criticism of Ben Sira's book. Here I outline my own method.<sup>122</sup>

Where extant, the text of H has initial priority. However, if the ancient versions or the context suggest that H is corrupt, I make corrections, usually on the basis of G or S. Frequently corruptions in H involve scribal error or orthographic confusion.<sup>123</sup> Another kind of corruption is an expansionary gloss, such as 13:17c H<sup>A</sup>.

In the absence of H, I weigh both G and S. Where G agrees with S, I make a retroversion into Hebrew, often following Segal's retroverted text. Where G and S disagree, I seek the reason for the disagreement; for example, the translator of S has omitted the reference to the "law of the Most High" (19:17b G) because of his hostility to the law. An expanded text may indicate a corruption; thus, 22:22c G is overlong and probably inauthentic in its present form. Where no obvious cause exists for the difference between the readings in G and S, a text-critical decision is finally a matter of judgment; the reading of G is generally preferable, but sometimes that of S better fits a Semitic milieu.

---

<sup>122</sup> The following studies provided great assistance for my text-critical work: R. Smend, *Die Weisheit des Jesus Sirach, hebräisch und deutsch* (Berlin: Reimer, 1906) [henceforth: *Sirach, hebräisch und deutsch*]; idem, *Sirach, erklärt*; N. Peters, *Der jüngst wiederaufgefundene hebräische Text des Buches Ecclesiasticus* (Freiburg i.B.: Herder, 1902); idem, *Das Buch Jesus Sirach*; G. H. Box and W. O. E. Oesterley, "Sirach," *APOT* 1:268–517; Segal, *ספר בן־סירא השלם*; Skehan and Di Lella, *Wisdom of Ben Sira*; Di Lella, *Hebrew Text of Sirach*; Rüger, *Text und Textform*; Minissale, *La versione greca del Siracide*.

<sup>123</sup> See the text-critical notes on Sir 6:5–17 for examples of scribal error (6:14<sup>e</sup> and 6:16<sup>g</sup>) and orthographic confusion (6:5<sup>a</sup> and 6:7<sup>b</sup>).



## c. Explanation for My Retroversions Where No Hebrew Text Is Extant

Discoveries from the Cairo Genizah and the Dead Sea area have failed to yield the Hebrew text of three of Ben Sira's friendship pericopes (19:13–17; 22:19–26; 27:16–21). Absence of a Hebrew original in these instances creates a problem of method: Which text should be chosen as the basis for study? Where the Hebrew is unavailable, most scholars select the Greek text as the primary basis for their translation and commentary. However, it seems to me that such a policy would be inadequate for the present study, because Ben Sira wrote in Hebrew (a Semitic language) rather than Greek (an Indo-European language). His thought-world and literary style are both fundamentally Semitic, and his work is full of subtle allusions to earlier books of the Hebrew Bible. Naturally, the grandson's Greek translation could generally not reproduce poetic devices such as assonance, alliteration, and rhyme, often found in Ben Sira's Hebrew. Moreover, in certain places the grandson misunderstood the Hebrew text. In other cases GI omitted parts of verses, while GII often added verses. The following discussion of three sample texts (24:1–34; 25:1–11; 25:13–26:27) will show some of the corruptions in GI and at the same time illustrate the benefits of an attempt at retroversion into Hebrew.<sup>124</sup>

*i.* 24:1–34.<sup>125</sup> In discussing his retroversion, Skehan notes the abundance of rhyming assonances, particularly with *-î* and *-â* suffixes.

24:13: Striking rhyme of לְבָנוֹן ("Lebanon") and הַרְמוֹן ("Hermon"); cf. עֵרְמוֹן ("plane tree") in verse 14d.

24:26–27: Another remarkable rhyme of קְצִיר ("harvest," v. 26b) and בְּצִיר ("vintage," v. 27b).

<sup>124</sup> Where H is not extant, Segal has produced a retroversion based on G and (to a lesser extent) on S (סֵפֶר בֶּן־סִירָא הַשְּׁלָם), *passim*). In the case of Bar 3:9–5:9, D. G. Burke has made a similar attempt at retroversion from Greek (and sometimes Syriac); see *The Poetry of Baruch: A Reconstruction and Analysis of the Original Hebrew Text of Baruch 3:9–5:9* (SBLSCS 10; Chico, Calif.: Scholars Press, 1982). After providing his retroverted Hebrew text and textual notes, Burke presents a chapter entitled "An Analysis of the Baruch Poetry" (299–321), where he discusses such features as parallel word-pairs and Hebrew rhyme.

<sup>125</sup> In the case of ch. 24 (of which no Hebrew text is extant), P. W. Skehan has proposed a retroversion ("Structures in Poems on Wisdom: Proverbs 8 and Sirach 24," *CBQ* 41 [1979]: 374); he observes the frequency of rhyming assonances (377–79). See also his list of six earlier scholars who have made similar attempts at retroverting the passage (366 n. 3). In addition, note the comment of P. Faure ("Comme un fleuve qui irrigue: Ben Sira 24,30–34, I. Critique textuelle," *RB* 102 [1995]: 5–27): "La critique textuelle de Sir 24,30–34 nous porte à préférer le texte syriaque au texte grec" (27).

24:27: G has ὡς φῶς (= כְּאוֹר, “like light”) for כְּנַיִר (“like the Nile,” cf. S).

ii. 25:1–11. 25:1ab: G<sup>BSA</sup> reads: “In three things I was beautified, and I arose in beauty before the Lord and human beings.” This reading, out of context here, seems to be a Christian expansion referring to Jesus’ three days in the tomb and his rising again. By contrast, S preserves the correct text; hence Ziegler emends G according to S.<sup>126</sup>

25:8b: Probably because of distaste for the Semitic animal imagery (“ox” and “ass”), G has omitted this colon, thereby losing one item from the decalogue of macarisms. By contrast, the colon appears in H<sup>c</sup> and S.

25:9a: The reading of G, φρονήσις (“sense”), is probably a sapiential interpretation, since L has “a true friend” and S may be revocalized to give “a friend.”

iii. 25:13–26:27. 25:15: Missing the allusion to Deut 32:33, the grandson rendered שֵׁן (“poison”) with its homonym, κεφαλή (“head”), and קָוָה (“venom”) with its homonym, θυμός (“wrath”).<sup>127</sup>

25:21b: G reads אִשָּׁה (= γυναῖκα, “woman”) instead of עַל יֵשׁ לָהּ (“what is hers”) in H<sup>c</sup> (cf. S).

26:22: G renders מְצוֹרֶת מָוֶת (“deadly snare”) by its homonym πύργος θανάτου (“tower of death”).

The above survey of several mistranslations and inadequacies of G in Sir 24:1–26:27 confirms the conclusion of Skehan and Di Lella: “Though GI remains the most reliable form of the book as a whole, it nevertheless contains many scribal errors and other corruptions as well as mistranslations due to the grandson’s failure to understand the underlying Hebrew.”<sup>128</sup> In this connection, our discussion of the above-mentioned sample passages has also illustrated the potential benefits of retroversion into Hebrew, especially in the recovery of Hebrew poetic features. Although the resultant text is obviously hypothetical, retroversion offers

<sup>126</sup> Cf. Ziegler, *Sapientia Iesu Filii Sirach*, 76–78. On Sir 25:1–11, see Reiterer, “Gelungene Freundschaft als tragende Säule einer Gesellschaft,” as well as my discussion of 25:1, 9 in the appendix.

<sup>127</sup> On 25:15, see Skehan and Di Lella, *Wisdom of Ben Sira*, 346. On 26:22, see P. W. Skehan, “Tower of Death or Deadly Snare? (Sir 26:22),” in *Studies in Israelite Poetry and Wisdom* (CBQMS 1; Washington, D.C.: Catholic Biblical Association of America, 1971), 127.

<sup>128</sup> *Wisdom of Ben Sira*, 59. For an extensive tabular listing of differences between the Hebrew and Greek texts of Ben Sira, see Minissale, *La versione greca del Siracide*, 174–258.

the possibility of working in the Hebrew language and of deciding between G and S.<sup>129</sup> I do not wish to present my retroversions as the last word in reconstructing Ben Sira's Hebrew text, but rather as an attempt to get closer to the sage's original thought-world and to understand better the Semitic pattern of his poetry.

In my endeavor to reconstruct the Hebrew of Ben Sira, I aim to take into account the translation techniques of the ancient versions.<sup>130</sup> Although G tends toward lexical inconsistency, Wright concludes: "Many specific elements of the parent text may be reconstructed in spite of the grandson's general lack of consistency in some of these areas." Indeed, in exegetical discussions scholars often have recourse to Segal's retroverted text even if they do not usually favor such retroversions.<sup>131</sup> Hence, in this study I take the risk of producing retroversions for 19:13–17; 22:19–26; 27:16–21, in the hope that the benefits of this approach will outweigh the disadvantages.

---

<sup>129</sup> The alternative would be to present a composite text in several languages. Note that for his reconstructed Urtext of Sir 3:1–16 (15 bicola), R. Bohlen combines Hebrew, Greek, and Syriac texts (*Die Ehrung der Eltern bei Ben Sira* [TThSt 51; Trier: Paulinus, 1991], 39).

<sup>130</sup> See esp. B. G. Wright, *No Small Difference: Sirach's Relationship to Its Hebrew Parent Text* (SBLSCS 26; Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1989); Nelson, *Syriac Version*; Winter, "The Origins of Ben Sira in Syriac." For instance, Wright (*No Small Difference*, 115) notes G's flexibility in lexical representation; but see the following quotation from p. 235.

<sup>131</sup> Thus, Kieweler's exegesis of Sir 19:6–19 ("Freundschaft und böse Nachrede," 64–81), takes note of Segal's retroversion; see his comment (64): "Die Rückübersetzung vermag das mögliche Umfeld des fehlenden Textes aufzuzeigen, nicht aber den Text in seiner Originalität wiederherzustellen."