

Sirach (Ecclesiasticus): On the Difficult Relation between Divine Wisdom and Real Women in an Androcentric Document

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Introduction

The book of Jesus Sirach is one of those First Testament scriptures that were not accepted into the Hebrew Bible and therefore are classified in Christian tradition — depending on denomination — as deuterocanonical or apocryphal writings. In Judaism Sirach was quite popular up to the Middle Ages as texts found in Qumran and Masada as well as recovered medieval Hebrew manuscripts of Sirach indicate. The Reformers of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries often willingly made use of this book even though they denied its canonical status.

The Basis of the Text

To this day the basis of the text is uncertain, which is a major problem for the interpretation of the book of Jesus Sirach; this is connected with the complicated history of the text. Its Hebrew text was lost between the twelfth and the nineteenth century, and the book was accessible only in ancient translations (Greek, Syriac, Latin). Fragments of an eleventh- or twelfth-century manuscript were found in the Karaea Synagogue in Cairo in 1896, followed by discoveries of manuscripts in Qumran and Masada about fifty years later. Today about three-fifths of the Hebrew text is available to us. The full text of the Wisdom of Ben Sira, however, still exists only in its Greek translation.

Reconstructing the original Hebrew text is difficult because the different Hebrew manuscripts of the same text often differ from one another and also diverge significantly from the ancient translations. When doubt arises — which occurs quite frequently — one has to clarify first which version of the text an interpretation of a specific passage is based on.

Occasionally, there is also confusion on account of the mix-up of sheets in the Greek text of Sirach 30:25–36:16. Today modern translations, however, follow the

sequence found in the Latin and Syriac translations and the Hebrew manuscript E, which exists only in fragmentary form. Furthermore, in modern translations and in corresponding secondary literature the numbering of verses also varies sometimes. All these difficulties are visible even for nonspecialists when they just read two different translations of the book. The differences often affect the contents of the text.

Author and Time of Composition

Sirach is the only sapiential writing in the ancient Orient whose author we know by name. The Greek translation refers to him in different forms only as “Jesus”; the Hebrew text gives his name as “Simon Ben Jesus (Ben Eleazar) Ben Sira” (50:27; 51:30). This wisdom teacher, whom we will refer to as Ben Sira, wrote his book between 190 and 175 B.C.E., probably in Jerusalem. This was before the Maccabean uprising, which began in 167 B.C.E., a time in Palestine already marked by increasing tensions between Hellenism and Judaism.

Scholars disagree about how Ben Sira and his sapiential writing fit into that situation. Some see him as a representative of the Hellenistic spirit, others as a guardian of Jewish tradition fighting against precisely that spirit. I find the middle position of Marböck (1995) and others persuasive; according to this, Ben Sira tries to combine what he had learned in his many travels with a strong positive presentation of Jewish tradition. He appears to be influenced particularly by Egyptian wisdom. Moreover, his preference for the priestly tradition of his people leads to the assumption that he was a priest himself. But this must ultimately be left open. He certainly belonged to the Jerusalemite bourgeoisie and therefore seems to have been a man of means.

Structure and Content

With its fifty-one chapters, the book of Jesus Sirach is the most extensive work of wisdom literature in the ancient world. Its overall structure is clearly close to that of Proverbs, but it differs considerably from it as its material is often presented in thoroughly structured larger units.

The beginning, end, and middle of Sirach are dominated, not unlike Proverbs (→ Proverbs), by the theme of the personified divine Wisdom. Sirach 1–2 introduces us to the book by linking wisdom and the fear of God. The themes Ben Sira addresses in the next chapters are repeatedly interrupted by reflections on Wisdom personified (4:11–19; 6:18–37; 14:20–15:10). Those chapters move single-mindedly toward the middle of the book: Wisdom’s first-person speech in chapter 24. This chapter functions as a kind of hinge; it concludes the first part of the book

and launches the second part at its close by identifying wisdom and Torah. In this part, personified divine Wisdom barely plays a role any longer. Instead, several reflections are shaped by the order of creation and lead into a great, two-part hymnic composition: the praise of God's glory in creation (42:15–43:33) and in Israel's history (44:1–50:29). Only at the end of the book, the so-called appendix (51:13–30), does Wisdom personified appear once again but is now presented by the Wisdom Teacher, who urges all his students to take the search for Wisdom to heart.

Even though the theological reflections in Sirach are much more expansive in comparison to the book of Proverbs, they alone do not provide an adequate idea about the character of this sapiential writing. As a wisdom teacher, at home not only in the wisdom tradition of Israel but also in that of the ancient Orient in general, Ben Sira is basically interested in showing how human action can be shaped by wisdom in all areas of life. The perspective of this instruction, however, is unmistakably that of a well-educated upper-middle-class male, enjoying relatively secure conditions and some influence in public life. And so he does not teach concretely how *human beings* but how *men* should arrange their lives with wisdom. Accordingly, the topics of his sapiential sayings derive from the experience of men of his social class, his time, and his culture.

The topics of family and home play an important role here by sheer quantity alone; they often precede sections of concrete instruction. Next to units dealing with various persons in the house, (e.g., Sir 7:18–28 or 33:19–32), there are others about individual groups of persons: parents (e.g., 3:1–16), wives (e.g., chapters 25–26), sons (e.g., 30:1–13), daughters (e.g., 42:9–14), slaves (e.g., 33:25–32). Part of the sayings about friends also belongs here (e.g., 6:6–16). Other units that touch on life outside the home, in the public sphere, are concerned with providing bail for someone (29:14–20) or with dealing with the rich and powerful (8:10–19 and elsewhere); they equally address sacrifice and justice (34:21–35:12) and how to behave properly at a banquet (31:12–32:13).

According to Claudia V. Camp (1991), the hermeneutical key to understanding many of the concrete instructions is the (male) value system with its two poles of honor/shame and disgrace that is prevalent to some extent still today in the Mediterranean world. To gain honor and to keep away shame, one must show great prudence in dealing with others but also in relation to oneself and one's passions. Here the text often uses the nominal and verbal form of "to be ashamed." And so, for Ben Sira, proper shame, in addition to prudence, is the best means a man has to ward off disgrace and to gain honor. Camp points out that there is a particular correspondence between this value system of honor and disgrace on the one hand, and how women are expected to behave on the other. This is true also for Ben Sira, so that for him women in the household of the wise are among the greatest risk factors for the life of honor the paterfamilias desires.

Ben Sira on Real Women

Overview

No other work of wisdom literature in the Bible devotes as many verses to women as the book of Jesus Sirach. Even within the book itself, no other group receives the Wisdom Teacher's attention as often as women. Only what he says about good and bad friends compares quantitatively to his words about women. With a few exceptions, Ben Sira speaks about women only when behavior toward them in specific situations is at issue. Thus, he does not address women directly. Instead, corresponding to his addressees (see above), he seeks to induce Jewish men of his social milieu to embrace what in his view is wise behavior toward diverse groups of women. He does so not only in terms of warnings or admonitions, prohibitions, and commandments, but also in terms of maxims and phrases that reflect men's experiences with different women.

Ben Sira mentions the following women or groups of women: one's own mother, the widow, the mistress of the household, the wife and, by extension, the adulterous woman, the daughter, and various strange women, that is, women who do not belong to the household of the wise. For Ben Sira, the house is the preferred place for women to stay and work. He therefore hardly takes note of women in public life, including the women who have to make a living outside the household.

The roles Ben Sira ascribes to women basically fall into four groups. First, there are the women who may lead the wise man off his road to wisdom; he ought to avoid them. "Foreign women"¹ above all belong to this group. Secondly, there are those who may become dangerous yet also helpful to him as he journeys toward the fear of God and wisdom. Particularly wives belong to this group. The third group are women to whom the man has God-given commitments such as widows and his own mother. A special group is the fourth: daughters who continuously cause the wise man worries. It is clear that with the exception of the third group all women are judged from the perspective of whether they are harmful or useful to the wise man. If they are harmful, he has to avoid or control them; if they are useful, he has to seek them. Thus, women appear almost only "in their connection with or in the perspective of men, never independently" (Schroer 1996, 98). But it is better not to draw sweeping conclusions, for Ben Sira views nearly all social groups, including various groups of men, from his perspective (such as

1. The German expression *fremde Frau* cannot be translated as "strange woman" in this context. The meaning of "strange" as "someone I do not know" or "have never met" is not intended here. It is much more "someone who is not of us, of our morality, ethos, community-spirit, religion" but is "other" in a possibly dangerous yet seductive, undermining manner. The translation "foreign" was chosen over "alien" to exclude the notion of someone being "from another place or country" even though a "foreign woman" may well be from such a location. The word "foreign" signals a warning: "be aware of her!" [Translator's note.]

friends, advisers, medical doctors, the powerful, laborers, merchants, etc.) and judges them as well according to the harm or usefulness, the honor or disgrace they can bring to the wise man.

Mothers and Widows

The introductory chapters in Sirach about Wisdom and the fear of God are followed by the first concrete instruction in 3:1-16, a didactic poem that gives a new interpretation of the Decalogue's commandment to honor one's parents and makes use of the concept of honor and disgrace. Ben Sira here demands that the son has to honor both father and mother. If he honors his parents up to their old age, he himself will have favor with God; if he curses or disrespects them, he will be in disgrace.

However, the obligation to honor the father in 3:1-16 predominates by its sheer quantity, and where honoring both parents is called for in parallel fashion the father is always mentioned first. The same is true for all other passages where Ben Sira speaks of the mother (7:27-28; 23:14; 41:17).

Next to mothers, the wise man is unambiguously obliged to behave exclusively in favor of the well-being of only one other group of women. These are widows, women who, next to orphans, had the fewest rights in ancient society, that is, the smallest chance to demand their rights. Indeed, the wise man can expect to be rewarded for correct behavior (4:10) and to be punished if he disregards a widow's rights (35:17-22), but this form of motivation is in line with that of wisdom literature in general. In both places, reward and punishment are up to God, which suggests that such supportive acts toward widows and orphans can hardly count on receiving recognition from human beings.

"Foreign" Women and Men's Sexuality

Whereas the wise man is to care for his own mother and for widows, he had better get as far away as possible from "foreign" women because they will not bring him honor. On the contrary, they will prove to be his undoing and steer him off the road to wisdom. The *topos* of the "foreign woman" together with that of the "loose woman" is typical of wisdom literature. The most extensive text about the "foreign woman" is Proverbs 7. According to Christl Maier (1996, 189ff.), that text already uses this *topos* to refer not only to a woman from a foreign country — as Nehemiah still does — but quite generally to a woman who is a stranger, foreign to the man. Ben Sira is interested in "foreign women" in the latter sense only. For him all women are foreign who do not belong to one's household and to whom one has no commitments whatsoever. The wise man needs to be wary of them.

It is to this rather heterogeneous group of women that Ben Sira devotes the longest passage (9:1-9). He begins it — surprisingly — by admonishing the husband not to be jealous over his wife so that she does not learn anything from his jealousy to do evil against him. The next verse warns generally against selling oneself to a woman; only then begin the actual admonitions about the foreign women. Verse 3 and its reference to the “foreign woman” could be a kind of heading for the categories of women in the following verses: women who play stringed instruments (v. 4), virgins (v. 5), prostitutes (v. 6), graceful or shapely women (v. 8), and another man’s wife (v. 9).² For Ben Sira and Proverbs 7, to be wary of these women means to avoid sexual contact with them. But unlike Proverbs 7, where the woman is portrayed as a seductress and the man as the naïve victim, Ben Sira knows that a man is responsible for his action himself. But he does not think of himself as someone who would seduce a woman; rather, he is highly afraid that he might lose control over himself and his body (cf. Camp 1991, 20). Passages such as Sirach 23:16-21 (cf. also 23:2-6) show that the blame for a man losing control over his desires is not put on women or on the foreign women alone; they describe the behavior of an unchaste and adulterous man and how he justifies himself. Nowhere is a woman held responsible for this.

But how does the wife come to be at the opening of this poem about the foreign women? Very different answers have been proposed. One has to consider that the catchword “wife” in verses 1 and 9 frames the poem. In addition, these two verses do not really fit into the rest of the poem. After the concluding words about the dangers of female beauty in verse 8cd, verse 9 looks like an afterthought. Therefore I assume that Ben Sira added those two verses to an already existing poem in order to alert men who go after “foreign women” to a further consequence: by their behavior they will evoke their wife’s jealousy, who will do the same wicked thing their husband did and get involved with a strange man at a banquet.

Daughters

There is no hint anywhere in Sirach that a father derives an advantage or use from the existence of a daughter. What is said in 22:3b applies to all daughters, including the wise and judicious ones: “A daughter means loss” to the father. In fact, the father gets nothing back from what he has invested in her. If she is sensible (22:4a), she finds herself a man and makes him the heir of her dowry (*klēronomēsei* is subject to different interpretations), but for the family of origin her sensibility and money are lost. If, however, in contrast her behavior is shameful and sulky (22:4b

2. I follow the Greek text of Ben Sira. The Hebrew manuscripts add two lines about prostitutes between verses 3 and 4 and differ from the Greek version in verse 7.

and 5), her father is responsible for her even after she is married because if her husband sends her away on account of her behavior her father has to take her back into his home and care for her.

Sirach 42:9-12 goes yet one step further. Here Ben Sira tersely describes a daughter basically as a problem. A father has continuously to worry about her (vv. 9-10):³ “in her youth, for fear she may remain unmarried (literally ‘wither’), and having married, for fear she may be hated; in virginity, for fear that she may be seduced and become pregnant in her father’s house, being with a husband, for fear that she may be unfaithful, and having married, for fear she may be barren” (author’s translation).

All these paternal fears are concerned with the possibility of his daughter disgracing him in the eyes of the public and burdening his wallet for the rest of his life. Verses 11-12 make radical suggestions about how in his own house a father can reduce the risk of his daughter giving him a bad name. In a nutshell: keep her under lock and key so that she will not come into contact with men and foreign women.

Given such an outlook — surely it was not Ben Sira’s alone — it is almost understandable that fathers preferred sons. Of course, sons could also cause headaches, but a good son always benefited the father; he could be proud of him (30:1-6) since the son remained in the household, continued his father’s profession, and cared for him in his old age. Indeed, a father needs to discipline his son physically to prevent him from going astray (30:1, 2, 6-13), but he also teaches him his ways. The son is usually aware of his father’s love. A daughter, however, is of no benefit to her father; therefore he keeps her at a distance. She is spared physical chastisement, but the father has no vital positive interest in her.

The texts concerning daughters discussed above clearly show their androcentric or patriarchal perspective but are still free of misogyny. It is in the following two verses (42:13-14) that Ben Sira appears to let go of his restraint and shows his true position on women: “¹³ For out of clothes comes the moth, and out of woman comes woman’s wickedness. ^{14a} Better a man’s wickedness than a well-doing woman ^{14b} and a daughter.” Verse 14a is the absolute epitome of misogyny in Sirach. Unfortunately the Hebrew text of 14b is corrupt, so that scholars argue about its meaning. Sauer (1981) confirms the presence of misogyny in 14a when he translates it as follows: “and a daughter causes more dismay than any and all disgrace.” Trenchard (1982) makes the same point in his translation: “And a daughter causes fear regarding disgrace more than a son.” Slightly different, the New American Bible writes: “and (better) a frightened daughter than any disgrace.” The translation of Skehan and DiLella (1987) moves in the same direction, but with a stronger positive focus: “but better a religious daughter than a shameless son.” Of

3. I essentially stay with the Greek text of verses 9 and 10 because the Hebrew manuscripts B and M provide only an incomplete or corrupted text.

course, were these last two translations to correspond to the original meaning, they would put the misogynist epitome of 14a into perspective, perhaps even ironically abolish it. Can we confidently believe that this is what Ben Sira meant? Still, we have to consider that verse 14a directly contradicts much of what he has to say about the good wife.

The Good and the Bad Wife

Ben Sira has more to say about wives than about anything else. He basically divides them into good and bad wives. A good wife is wise, graceful, of help and support to her husband; a bad one is morally wicked and spiteful, and causes her husband grief and suffering. Ben Sira talks about no other category of women in such polar opposite words as he does wives. This becomes apparent in how he uses the Hebrew and Greek noun for “evil, wickedness,” which comes close to being the key word of chapters 25–26. Neither mother and widow nor — amazingly — the foreign woman is represented by that noun. At most, daughters are associated with the wickedness of women (42:13-14), but Ben Sira draws back from characterizing them as “bad, wicked” (cf. 22:3-5).

What Ben Sira has to say about wives is found especially in chapters 25–26. Unlike previous studies, I view 25:1–26:18 as a formal and material unit that Ben Sira carefully composed by borrowing from older materials.⁴ He introduces the unit with three groups of numerical proverbs, of which the first and last speak positively of wives. The main part (25:13–26:18) begins quite unexpectedly with a tirade against the bad wife and does not abate until 25:26. Verses 13-15 and their sweeping judgment of women’s spitefulness serve as a heading, followed by four verses (16-19) that describe the effects of a wife’s spitefulness on the husband but do not spell out concretely what this spitefulness amounts to. In verses 20-22 we learn something about the garrulous wife, the wife whose beauty is desirable, and the rich wife who supports her husband (cf. Camp 1991). Finally, verse 23 summarizes the negative effects wives such as those mentioned in verses 16-22 have on their husbands.

Even though formally quite disparate, all these statements seek to persuade young men to be careful when choosing a wife. To reinforce that being careless in this important matter can have serious consequences, verse 24 recalls the narrative of man’s fall. This is the first instance in Scripture where the first woman (Eve) is blamed for the Fall and, consequently, for the death of the human being. However, the allusion does not serve as a warning against women in general, but — as the context shows — as a warning against evil wives (cf. Levison 1985).

4. The following section, 26:19-27, however, is clearly a secondary elaboration found only in two Greek manuscripts.

Without transition, Ben Sira contrasts the bad wife with the good one in 26:1. If the bad wife does nothing but harm, the good and strong (“manly” in Greek) wife brings only fortune. She doubles her husband’s lifetime (v. 1); she “fattens his bones,” that is to say, she causes him to prosper (vv. 2a, 3a), and is his joy (vv. 2b, 4); and “she is one of YHWH’s gifts to those who fear him” (v. 3b). This verse surprises for it says, contrary to the impression created by the context, that it is the man who through his life and actions determines in large measure himself whether he gets a good or a bad wife. If he fears YHWH he can be sure that he will be given a good wife. Verse 3 is not accidentally in this position, nor does it say something about wives that can safely be ignored. The verse is set at the very center of the main part (25:13–26:18)⁵ and takes up the second theme in Sirach next to that of wisdom, namely, “the fear of YHWH.”

In 26:5-12 Ben Sira once again collects diverse sayings about women who make their husbands unhappy, wives who are jealous, wicked, drunken, and unchaste. Those verses warn particularly forcefully against the unchaste and shameless woman. (Here I follow the Syriac version, which, unlike the Greek version, speaks of “woman” rather than of “daughter” in verse 13; the Hebrew version is missing.) The warning’s truly obscene climax is in verse 12. It is hardly surprising that Ben Sira changes topics one more time and concludes his tract about wives with praise of the good wife: she is graceful, lovable, wise, taciturn, well bred, modest, and beautiful. According to Ben Sira, all these characteristics also apply to the wise man. Controlling one’s tongue is of special value to him, so much so that he can even beg for a seal to close his lips (22:27). Only beauty appears to be reserved for the wife. In the final three verses (16-18) she not only is compared to objects in the temple — the light on the sacred lampstand and the golden pillar on its silver base — but the real beauty of a woman is made manifest only in “the holiest of holies of the temple” — a daring metaphor in verse 16 for the innermost chamber of the house.

As we have seen, Sirach 25–26 begins and ends with statements about the good wife. Two large blocks gather statements about the bad wife, interrupted by four verses on the good wife, of which 26:3 is not only the formal but also the material center in the main part. It can hardly be disputed that Ben Sira himself shared at least some of what is said about the bad wife. But the composition of chapters 25–26, as we have just described it, and the conception of the “good wife–bad wife” antithesis might suggest that Ben Sira had more in mind than simply gathering positive and negative presuppositions about wives. Analogous to the book of Proverbs, he also ties the good wife very closely to Wisdom personified as well as to YHWH. The bad wife, in contrast, he ties closely to foolishness and to the road that leads to perdition (on Proverbs, cf. Camp 1985 and Schroer 1991). According to this scheme, the good wife would be concretely experienced wisdom and the bad wife concretely experienced foolishness.

5. I count seventeen distichs before and seventeen after this verse.

Ben Sira and the Personified Divine Wisdom

Ben Sira refers to Proverbs regarding the construction of his sapiential writing and also adopts the Wisdom figure as well as her conceptualization. Both writings represent Wisdom personified as a woman inviting guests to a meal, serving everyone who seeks her out with food and drink of insight and wisdom (Prov 9:1-6; Sir 15:2-3; 24:19-21), but Ben Sira also ascribes to Wisdom prophetic features when she warns in harsh words against rejecting or abandoning her (Prov 1:22-33; Sir 4:19). In addition to many of these similarities, however, there are also several differences between the two books. First, there is a noticeable increase in the number of texts concerning personified divine Wisdom. Whereas Proverbs has only two sections dealing with wisdom, Sirach has six. Furthermore, Sirach relates wisdom not only to God and to human beings but also to other entities: to the fear of YHWH, to the Torah and the commandments, to the temple and therefore especially to Israel. Many exegetes believe that the universalism of wisdom in Proverbs seems to have given way to a particularism in Sirach. In the following, I shall address all sections dealing with personified divine Wisdom (except Sir 51:13-30).

Wisdom and the Fear of God

The wisdom of Ben Sira starts with a poem about wisdom and the fear of God (1:1-27). It gives an initial clue of how Ben Sira understands wisdom and who receives it. "All wisdom comes from the Lord," he says (1:1), and then develops and substantiates this thesis in the poem's first part (1:1-10). This way he immediately distances himself from all those who reject Jewish wisdom and Jewish religious tradition and turn to Greek-Hellenistic wisdom teachings instead. But that does not mean that he himself rejects non-Jewish wisdom teachings. YHWH has given wisdom to all living creatures (1:9c-10a); all wisdom, and therefore also Greek-Hellenistic wisdom teachings, comes from YHWH. However, according to verse 10b, that is true only to a certain extent, for God gives full wisdom only to those who fear him. This leads into the poem's second part (vv. 11-13), which focuses, rather than on wisdom, on "the fear of the Lord" and the goods it offers. Part III (vv. 14-20) connects and almost identifies "wisdom" and "the fear of the Lord" with one another: the fear of the Lord is the beginning, fullness, crown, and root of wisdom. In this part Ben Sira joins a wide range of motifs with wisdom that he takes up again in subsequent chapters. Among these motifs are "dwelling," "house" and "nest," "tree," and "provider of nourishment" together with the associated metaphors: "fruits," "roots," "crown," "branches," and "to flourish." Part IV (vv. 21-25) reflects briefly on the sin-resisting power of the fear of the Lord, after which Ben Sira concludes the poem in verses 26-27. Once again he joins wisdom with the fear of the Lord (v. 27), but in verse 26 also with keeping the commandments:

If you desire wisdom, keep the commandments,
and the Lord will furnish her abundantly to you.

This formulation literally restates verse 10b; there wisdom is given to those who fear YHWH, here to those who keep the commandments. We can only draw the conclusion that YHWH gives the fullness of wisdom only to those who fear him — who are the ones who keep the commandments.

Wisdom Who, Like God, Acts and Teaches

The next poem (4:11-19) paints a quite different picture of Wisdom. From the outset Wisdom is clearly personified as a self-assured woman teacher in the tradition of Proverbs 8:4-21, 32-36, and Proverbs 1:22-33. In Sirach 4:15-19 Wisdom even speaks to her disciples herself; this occurs only one more time in Sirach (chapter 24). Wisdom's speech not only describes the promises that await the seekers of Wisdom but also for the first time names her rough sides. According to verses 16-17, Wisdom disguises herself and tests the seekers of wisdom with temptations, a most unusual conception, given that only God puts people to the test (e.g., Gen 22). In Sirach 4:19 she threatens those who stray away from her with harsh punishments, a behavior the First Testament generally ascribes also only to God. Even apart from Wisdom's first-person speech, the closeness of Wisdom and YHWH is striking, such as in verse 14: "Those who serve her minister to the Holy One." Thus, the liturgical service in the temple is to be seen as equivalent to the liturgical service of Wisdom. In contrast to the first poem, wisdom is neither subordinate to YHWH nor brought into relation with the fear of the Lord and keeping the commandments.

The third Wisdom poem (6:18-37) stresses the initial effort demanded of those who seek Wisdom. As in 4:11-19, Ben Sira again calls attention to the rough side of Wisdom. Those who seek her should willingly put their feet into Wisdom's fetters and their necks into her collar. In the end they will rest and the fetters, the yoke, the collar, and the bonds will turn into costly robes. In this poem once again the closeness of YHWH and Wisdom is apparent: according to Deuteronomy 6:5, humans are to love God with all their soul and all their might; in Sirach 6:26 they are to approach Wisdom in the same way and heed her ways. Also, the peaceful rest that Wisdom eventually grants to those who seek her with all their might is said to be a special gift from God in Deuteronomy 12:9-10. Unlike the second poem (Sir 4:11-19), this one reverts back to the first poem by affirming in the last verse (6:37) that wisdom is given only to those who direct their mind to the fear of God and constantly meditate upon God's commandments.

The fourth Wisdom poem (14:20–15:10) resembles the third in how it structures the movement from "searching for Wisdom" to "Wisdom coming to meet the searcher" but has a different character otherwise. It consists of three parts: part

I (14:20–15:1) describes the active search for Wisdom, part II (15:2–6) shows how in reaction to this search Wisdom comes to meet the searcher, and part III (15:7–10) asserts that Wisdom will avoid the sinful. Right at its beginning in 14:20, this poem clearly alludes to Psalm 1, except that the place of the Torah is now taken by Wisdom, on which human beings/men are to meditate. In Sirach 14:22 this rather contemplative approach to Wisdom already begins to change. Now the man has to stalk her, lie in wait for her, and spy on her through door and window so that he may derive profit from her. At the same time, the image of Wisdom also changes. Not until now is she personified, namely, as a woman the man must court. The man's spying at her window, however, should not be pushed too far. According to Proverbs 8:34, Wisdom herself invites people to watch daily at her gates and wait beside her doors. Of course, that is possible only if the seekers of Wisdom settle in her direct vicinity. Yet again the picture changes in Sirach 14:26–27. As he already did in 1:1–27, Ben Sira now depicts Wisdom as a shady tree. The first part of the poem then surprisingly concludes with a reference to the fear of YHWH and — for the first time — to the Torah and not only to the commandments: they who fear YHWH (and that means nothing else but to follow the Torah) will conduct themselves like the blessed man in the preceding verses, and in doing so they will enter upon the road to wisdom.

The second part of this Wisdom poem (15:2–6) describes in detail how Wisdom comes to the seeker. She comes like a mother or a young bride; she feeds him with the bread of learning and gives him the water of understanding to drink; she supports him and will exalt him, open his mouth so that finally he will find joy and exultation and receive everlasting honor from her. Strikingly, this explicit comparison of Wisdom with two female figures, a mother and a young bride, occurs only here in Sirach, confirming his generally positive view of mothers and wives. The image of Wisdom as the hostess of a banquet (v. 3) is borrowed from Proverbs 9:1–6 and does not displace the images of mother and wife. Even Sirach 15:4a still alludes to the wife's action, but is now fused with YHWH's. According to Sirach 36:24, the wife is not only a helper to her husband — possibly an allusion to Genesis 2:20 — but also a safe stronghold and a supporting pillar. These are metaphors that otherwise describe YHWH's support (e.g., Ps 18:1–3 and 19; Ps 23). What appears to be implied in Sirach 15:2–4a, namely, the identification of Wisdom and YHWH, becomes quite apparent beginning with verse 4b. Only they who trust in YHWH will not be put to shame (e.g., Ps 22:5); only YHWH can exalt and open lips in the midst of the congregation (e.g., Ps 51:17 [Eng. 15]); only YHWH can give an everlasting name (e.g., Isa 56:5). Wisdom seems to be YHWH himself.

*Personified Divine Wisdom and Her Relation
to the Temple, to Israel, and to the Torah*

The first part of Sirach reaches its climax and completion in Sirach 24:1-22 and the following verses 23-34. Like Proverbs 8, this poem is a hymn in which — as had been announced in Sirach 24:1-2 — Wisdom praises and recommends herself (Sir 24:3-22). Wisdom's speech can be divided into four sections. In part I (vv. 3-7), Wisdom tells of her divine origin, cosmic activity, and search for a place where she can come to rest. In part II (vv. 8-12) she finally finds that place in Israel, in the temple on Mount Zion. In part III (vv. 13-17), employing beautiful tree-metaphors, she describes how she spreads out from the temple all over Israel in order to invite, in part IV (vv. 19-22), all who like to eat of her fruits. Verses 18 and 24 are later additions.

Despite her impressive cosmic activity (vv. 3-7), Wisdom is clearly subordinated to YHWH in this poem. As in 1:1-27, she is YHWH's creature; she obeys his commands (vv. 8-9) and serves him in the temple (v. 10). In verses 13-22, Ben Sira again takes up the motif of "the tree that provides nourishment and shade" from 1:1-27. As Silvia Schroer has shown (1987, 218-21), this motif — which probably also is behind Sirach 14:20-15:10 — can be traced back to Egyptian traditions of tree goddesses. The tree goddess provides shade and thereby protects against the scorching sun but, above all, gives food and drink and sometimes even offers her breast to the thirsty. An atmosphere of fullness, life, and love surrounds Wisdom. It is probably no coincidence that these images are reminiscent of the imagery of love in the Song of Songs (4:12-5:1 and elsewhere). This is also where the comparison of Wisdom with sweet-smelling and costly fragrances (Sir 24:15) belongs, which Ben Sira connects in verse 15b with the fragrances used in the liturgical service in the temple. This way, he refers back to Wisdom's place of rest in the temple and her liturgical service there (vv. 8-11). In her speech Wisdom therefore commends herself not only as a nourishing mother and a great lover, but also as a liturgist and priest.

According to 24:3-22, Wisdom is present in its fullness only in Israel and in the temple; it is not surprising then that in verse 23 the Torah of Moses is mentioned, which regulates the life of pious Jews as well as the temple service. What is new is the explicit identification of Wisdom and Torah: "All this [what has thus far been said about Wisdom] is the book of the covenant, of the Most High God, the law [i.e., Torah] that Moses commanded us as a heritage for the gatherings of Jacob."

What at first looks like a restriction of the universal wisdom that is given to all — a move manifest already in verses 3-22 — broadens out again in the next verses (vv. 25-27) where the Torah is compared to the four rivers of Paradise: Pishon, Tigris, Euphrates, and Gihon, as well as to the Jordan and the Nile. I interpret the relation between Wisdom and Torah in Ben Sira similarly to Johannes Marböck, who follows Gerhard von Rad (von Rad, quoted in Marböck 1995, 57; Schroer 1996 differs in her interpretation): "Wisdom is not overshadowed by the Torah; the re-

verse is true: Ben Sira seeks to legitimate and interpret the Torah from the perspective of Wisdom. Thus, the Torah becomes part of God's universal wisdom which he founded in creation. Ben Sira's further reflections on the Torah and the commandments also suggest such a broad and in no way exclusive understanding of the Torah as Wisdom. For example, such typically Israelite commandments concerning Sabbath, food, and purity are missing in his book, as is any form of polemic against idolatry" (Marböck 1995, 16).

Summary and Conclusion

Personified Divine Wisdom and Wives

Numerous references in the book of Jesus Sirach suggest a special connection between divine Wisdom, which is represented as a woman, and wives, especially good wives. Chapters 24–26 and the end of chapter 23 are particularly significant: Wisdom's high praise of herself in chapter 24 is thereby surrounded by texts on wives. That cannot be coincidental. In 23:22–27 the bad, adulterous wife — whose counterpart in the previous section, by the way, is the adulterous man — is threatened that her children, offspring of an illegitimate liaison (v. 22), will not put down roots and their branches will bring forth no fruit. The very same arguments reappear in 24:12–19 where they are applied to Wisdom herself; here they are developed in a positive way. The adulterous woman becomes the counterimage to Wisdom. Chapters 25–26 enlarge on that image, but Sirach 26 breaks it by the presentation of the good wife. She is given to a man who fears YHWH in verse 3, just as Wisdom is given to the one who fears YHWH in 1:10. The good and strong ("manly" in Greek) wife brings her husband good fortune so that he can live his years in peace (i.e., only in Greek manuscripts). Wisdom rewards her disciples in similar fashion (cf. esp. 1:17–20). The objects in the "temple" that Ben Sira compares to the body of the good wife (26:16–18) clearly bring to mind what he has said about Wisdom as a liturgist in the temple (24:10 and 15). Another commonality between Wisdom and the good wife is the supportive and helping function for the man (15:4 wisdom, 36:24 wife), both offering him a protective nest (14:26 wisdom, 36:25 wife).

Of course, Ben Sira does not say that divine Wisdom and the good wife are identical, but it does seem that the good wife, as well as the temple and the Torah, represents divine Wisdom in a special way. On the other hand, the bad wife represents the very negation of wisdom; she represents the way of perdition that Ben Sira, unlike the book of Proverbs, no longer calls folly. Sirach 26:3 offers an inverse argument: the bad wife will be given to the man who does not fear YHWH. However, Ben Sira is less concerned than his sources with warning men against "taking" a bad wife or, if they are burdened with one, taking them in hand appropriately.

Instead, with his attractive images of women and of wisdom, he seeks above all to make the way of the fear of the Lord attractive and desirable to the young men of his society. At the same time, he knows that positive motivation alone is not enough. Consequently, he paints a horror picture of the bad wife who awaits all who do not walk the way of the fear of God.

In my view, Ben Sira can no longer generally be judged a “woman-hater,” because his misogynist statements should not be looked at in isolation but should be set into the wider context of his sapiential writing. The perception that he generally rejects and denounces women cannot be sustained persuasively (contra Trenchard 1982). The text of 42:14b, which thus far has not been reliably reconstructed, should rather be read as an ironic crack at the blanket judgment of 42:14a.

Nevertheless, what Ben Sira has to say about women, whether good or bad, is shaped by the patriarchal, respectively androcentric, perspective that perceives women essentially as beings meant for men or, in our context, as those who impede or advance men’s motivation to seek Wisdom. It would require clarification how my hypothesis of the antithetical conception of the bad and the good wife and their relation to Wisdom fits into Ben Sira’s obviously important honor-shame scheme (cf. Camp 1991), for instance. But since we have made only a beginning in the interpretation of Ben Sira’s pericopes on women, he might well hold more surprises.

Personified Wisdom and Her Relation to YHWH

Contrary to what might be expected, divine Wisdom represented as a woman is burdened with remarkably few gender-role clichés. She has her rough and soft sides, and is active and passive; she nourishes and protects, on the one hand, but she is also a prophet who warns and is a teacher of hard lessons. Even though the book is addressed to men, divine Wisdom is attractive not only for them but in the same way also for women. The relation of Wisdom to YHWH, however, is difficult. On the one hand, she is clearly subordinate to him (1:1-27; 24); on the other, she cannot be differentiated from him and his actions (4:11-19; 6:19-37; 14:20–15:10). Her position is made more complicated when Ben Sira connects her with “the fear of God or YHWH” and “Torah.” In any case, the statement that Wisdom is identified with the Torah and is consequently restricted to Israel cuts down the problem disproportionately. More attention than before has to be paid to her relation to concrete women.

I suspect that the ambivalence in how Ben Sira sees the relation between personified Wisdom and YHWH has to do with his understanding of God. On the one hand, he has recognized the deficits of a monotheism that is determined by a male YHWH and has tried to solve them with the introduction of the figure of

Wisdom as the book of Proverbs had done before. On the other hand, he was not able to let go of the monotheism but was not yet in a position to see Wisdom as an aspect within God instead of as a second deity next to him whenever she acts as a woman. To avoid this impression, Ben Sira had to subordinate Wisdom clearly as one of God's creatures. But ultimately, for Ben Sira as for the book of Proverbs too, God is "the God of Israel in the image of a woman" (Schroer 1991, 167). Whoever finds her finds life to the full and thus finds God himself.

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