

August 24, 2003
St. Eutychios the Martyr

Father Pat's Pastoral Ponderings

Joshua ben Sirach, the author of the Book of Ecclesiasticus, lived and wrote in the early second century before Christ. Thus he was among the last authors of the Old Testament. Although he composed his work in Hebrew, most of the original text is now preserved only in fragments, the largest (containing 39:27-44:17) being found at Masada in 1964. For the past two thousand years, however, the Christian Church has preserved the entire Greek translation of Ecclesiasticus that was made by his grandson in Egypt sometime after 132 B.C.

Ben Sirach represents Israel's older, more conservative pursuit of wisdom. That is to say, he especially cherishes the time-tested truths of experience, the practical lessons derived from antiquity through tradition. Thus, he is not given to theoretical speculations, the bold probing of problems of the sort we find in Qoheleth and Job. He is not much disposed to search out matters above his abilities (3:21) or engage in unwarranted curiosities (3:23). Often enough, he believes, such pursuits are largely pretentious (3:25).

For this reason, perhaps, Ben Sirach has sometimes been regarded as excessively pessimistic about human abilities. For example, Herman Melville, himself hardly an optimist, remarked, "And, now that I think of it, how well did those learned doctors who rejected for us this whole book of Sirach. I never read anything so calculated to destroy man's confidence in man" (The Confidence Man, Chapter 45). Well, speaking for myself, I could mention of any number of books that accomplish this task far more effectively. Moby Dick comes to mind.

While Ben Sirach entertains no great hopes for men without God's grace, it is not the case that his attitude toward things human is cramped and narrow. Indeed, the very opposite is true. For starts, he clearly loves literature and is well versed in that of his nation, particularly the Torah and the Wisdom books. In addition, Ben Sirach has traveled widely and appreciates the personal enrichment available to the traveler (34:9-11). He especially values the scientific skills of medicine (38:1-8; contrast 2 Chronicles 16:12). His hymns (42:15-43:33), in addition, testify to both his regard for the wonders of nature and his personal abilities as a poet. Ben

Sirach has lived a long time and reflected wisely on the varying fortunes of human life (51:13-22), but he is no pessimist.

While the perspective on wisdom in Ecclesiasticus closely follows Israel's older approach, which is characteristic of the Book of Proverbs, two differences are usefully noted.

First, Proverbs is essentially a compilation, in that it preserves its wisdom sayings in traditional forms derived from a variety of ancient sources. In Ecclesiasticus, by contrast, the wisdom sayings are distilled through the personal reflections and literary craft of a single teacher and writer. Thus, in Ben Sirach's portrayal of the ideal rabbinical sage (38:24-39:11), he may as well be giving us a description of himself. When he instructs the young man coming to the service of God to prepare his soul for temptation and adversity (2:1-5), he understands from experience whereof he speaks.

Second, Ben Sirach's perspective on wisdom, by reason of its extensive recourse to biography, is less abstract than that of Proverbs. That earlier book consisted mainly of apothegms that had already been employed for a long time in a thousand different contexts; well before they reached their literary form in the Book of Proverbs, those maxims had become general, universalized as it were, having lost the personal qualities they may have carried in their original contexts. Thus, there is nothing personal in Proverbs, in the sense of biographical. There is nothing comparable to Ben Sirach's "praise of famous men" which is one of the most remarkable and endearing parts of Ecclesiasticus (44:1-49:16).

In this lengthy section Ben Sirach, setting in review the revelation of God's wisdom in the lives of great men over an extended historical span, from Adam to Nehemiah, gives praise to God for that revelation. Even as he speaks of "praising famous men," it is really God who is given the glory: "The Lord has wrought great glory by them through His great power from the beginning" (44:2).

And this, surely, is the answer to be made to critics like Melville, who regard man as God's rival and imagine that God's glory must work to man's diminishment. Ben Sirach would have found that attitude rather strange, even a bit inhuman.

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