ECCLESIASTICUS

The title commonly applied to the Latin translation (from the Greek version) of the Wisdom of Ben Sira, also known as SIRACH. The word Ecclesiasticus, like ἔκκλησιακὴς of Codex 248, a witness to the Greek II form of the book, is an adjective. But from the 3d century A.D. the Latin word came to be used also as a proper noun—St. Cyprian (d. 258) cites Sirach in this fashion: Apud Salomonem in Ecclesiastico, or simply In Ecclesiastico [Corpus scriptorum ecclesiasticorum latinorum 3 (Vienna 1868) 110, 154, 176, 177, 178, 181]. In the Vulgate tradition this same peculiarity is found; one manuscript begins ecclesiastici liber incipit, and the editions have either incipit liber ecclesiastici or simply Ecclesiasticus, whereas other manuscripts contain the more logical incipit liber ecclesiasticus. The best witnesses of the Vulgate, however, read liber Hiesu filii Sirach, a title more in keeping with most Greek manuscripts. The word Ecclesiasticus—either as an adjective modifying liber (expressed or understood), or worse still as a proper noun—cannot be satisfactorily accounted for. Perhaps because the book was so often read in the liturgy, it came to be considered the Church book par excellence; or because it is the most important of the Deuterocanonical books that were rejected from the Jewish canon. The Wisdom of Ben Sira came to be known as the ‘Churchly’ book—one accepted by the Church but not by the Jews.

Bibliography: Sapientia Salomonis, Liber Hiesu filii Sirach (Biblia sacra iuxta latinam vulgatam versionem 12; Rome 1964), a critical ed.

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