WISDOM OF BEN SIRA

Among the earliest of the deuterocanonical books of the OT, the Wisdom of Ben Sira, also known as the Book of Sirach, contains the most comprehensive sample of wisdom literature preserved in the Bible. This literature also includes the Books of Job, Proverbs, Qoheleth or Ecclesiastes, the Wisdom of Solomon, and several so-called Wisdom Psalms. The book offers moral, cultic, and ethical aphorisms, folk proverbs, psalms of praise and lament, theological and philosophical thoughts, homiletic urging, and pointed comments about life and customs of the day. Hence it has been popular with both Jews and Christians, leaving its impact on the proverbial literature of the West. The following points will be treated: author, date of composition, and canonicity; nature of the book and contents; and history of the text.

**Author, Date of Composition, and Canonicity.**
The Wisdom of Ben Sira is one of the few books of the OT to give the name of its author: “yešîlā’ [Greek: Ἰησοῦς, Jesus], son of Eleazar, son of sîra¯’ [Greek: Σήραχ, Sirach],” in Sir 50.27. Hence, the author is commonly known today as Ben (son of) Sira. The Latin title of the book is ECCLESIASTICUS. Ben Sira, a devoted student of the OT (see the prologue of the book) and a professional scribe, i.e., wise man (cf. 38.24–39.11), says of himself, “‘Not for myself only have I labored, but for all who seek instruction’” (33.18; see also 50.27). He lived in Jerusalem [as 50.27 of the Greek text tells us] but traveled widely, gaining much experience (34.10–12). He taught in what may be called an academy or school (51.23) where he imparted wisdom to young men, as we see from his frequent use of the Hebrew term bēnî, “my son” at the beginning of many of his aphorisms. Ben Sira wrote his book in Hebrew c. 180 B.C.; his grandson translated it into Greek sometime between 132 and 117 and then published it after 117 B.C. [see A. A. Di Lella in Skeleted it into Greek sometime between 132 and 117 B.C. [see A. A. Di Lella in Skelel]. Though it was written in Hebrew and certainly had a Palestinian origin and was employed in the ancient synagogue liturgy, the Deuterocanonical Wisdom of Ben Sira was omitted from the Jewish (hence also from the Protestant) Canon, most likely because of the sectarianism of the Pharisees who defined this canon c. A.D. 95.

**Nature of the Book and Contents.** The Wisdom of Ben Sira is a collection of poems praising Wisdom as well as a kind of handbook of moral theology. It shows us what pious Jews of the 2nd century B.C. believed and how they should behave. Since there is no particular order in the book (except for ch. 44–50, a section in Cairo Geniza Hebrew MS B [see below] entitled “Praise of the Ancestors of Old”), only a topical outline, with some unavoidable overlapping of certain subjects, can convey an adequate impression of its contents and scope.


A. Praise of Wisdom’s Author: 39.12–35; 42.15–43.33.


C. Prayer for God’s People: 36.1–22.


1. Wisdom applied to spiritual and personal life.
   d. Pride, folly, sin (in general)—3.26–28; 10.6–18; 11.6; 16.5–23; 20.2–31; 21.1–22.2; 18; 25.2; 27.12–15; 28; 33.5; 35.22–24; 41.10.
   e. Anger, malice, vengeance—1.22–24; 27.22–28.11.
   g. Other virtues and vices—4.20–31; 5.1–8; 7.1–15; 8.1–9; 9.11–10.5; 29; 11.7–22; 15.11–20; 18.15–29; 25.1, 7–11; 27.8–21; 34.1–8.

2. Wisdom applied to practical life.
   a. Parents—3.1–16; 7.27–28; 23.14; 41.17.
   c. Women (including wife and daughters)—7.19; 24–26; 9.1–9; 19.2–4; 22.3–5; 23; 22–26; 25.1, 8, 13–26.18, 20–27; 28.15; 33.20; 36.26–31; 40.19, 23; 42.6, 9–14.
   f. Poverty—10.30–11.6; 14; 13.18–14.2; 25.2–3.
From this outline one can see that Ben Sira discusses virtually every significant topic regarding religious and secular wisdom as well as the behavior expected of the faithful Jew. Some of the sage’s observations and aphorisms may appear to today’s reader as utterly pragmatic or self-serving rather than as spiritually enlightening:

Moderate eating ensures sound slumber and a clear mind next day on rising.

The distress of sleeplessness and of nausea and colic are with the glutton!

If you have eaten too much, get up to vomit and you will have relief. (Sir 31.20–21)

But Ben Sira’s statements are in keeping with what we read in other Wisdom authors. And for him this advice is practical wisdom both for the glutton and for the one who unintentionally eats too much. For other examples of such advice see Sir 9.1–9; 42.9–11; and Prv 23.29–35.

History of the Text. For centuries, the original Hebrew text of Ben Sira had been lost. Knowledge of the book came chiefly from two ancient versions translated directly from the Hebrew: the Greek (or the Septuagint) and the Syriac Peshitta from which all other versions were made. Then, from 1896 to 1900 and again in 1931, 1958, and 1960, portions of five different MSS (A, B, C, D, and E), containing more than two-thirds of the Hebrew text of the Wisdom of Ben Sira, were found among the vast materials recovered from the Geniza of the Karaites Synagogue in Old Cairo. In 1965 Y. Yadın published a fragmentary scroll that had been recovered from the ruins of Masada. In 1982 a sixth MS was discovered by A. Scheiber who had been examining the Cambridge collections of Geniza fragments; he mistakenly called it a leaf of MS D. Later the leaf was correctly identified and published by A. A. Di Lella (Bib 69 [1988] 226–238), who named it MS F. Despite the misgivings of a few scholars (e.g., D. S. Margoliouth, C. C. Torrey, and H. L. Ginsberg), the Geniza MSS—dating from the 9th to the 12th century—offer a text that is substantially genuine, even though it is disfigured by glosses, scribal errors, and occasional retranslations from the Peshitta. Among other reasons, because a 1st-century B.C. Hebrew fragment of Sir 6.20–31 found among the Dead Sea Scrolls of cave 2Q and the Masada scroll, also of the same date, basically match the wording of Geniza MSS A and B, respectively, some scholars believe that the basic text of the Geniza MSS was derived from exemplars that also date from the beginning of the Christian Era; for detailed evidence, see Di Lella in Skehan and Di Lella, The Wisdom of Ben Sira, ch. 8. The Greek version poses its own problems because there are two texts: the primary, represented by the uncials and many cursive; and the secondary, represented by Codex 248 but also by other cursive. The 248 text—reflected also in the Old Latin version and the Syro-Hexaplar—has some 150 distichs not found in the primary text; see R. Smend, Die Weisheit des Jesus Ben Sira erklärt, ixxi–cviii for further information.


[A. A. DI LELLA]

WISEMAN, NICHOLAS PATRICK

Cardinal, archbishop of Westminster; b. Seville, Spain, Aug. 3, 1802: d. London, Feb. 15, 1865. The family returned to Ireland after the death of Wiseman’s father (1804), and the boy was sent to school at Waterford, Ireland. In March 1810 he entered Ushaw College, Durham, and studied under the historian John LINGARD, who became his lifelong friend and counselor. In 1818 Wiseman was among the first students to attend the reopened English College in Rome, where he obtained a doctorate (1824), acquired a wide knowledge of the arts, and engaged in theological and linguistic researches. He published, in 1827, an exposition of a Syrian version of the Old Testament, Horae Syriacae, which won him an international reputation as an Oriental scholar and an appointment as professor in Oriental languages in the Roman University.

Catholic Revival. In 1828 Wiseman was named rector of the English College, Rome, a post in which he was called upon to act as the Roman representative of the English bishops. The arrival of George Spencer, a recent convert, as a student at the English College brought the OXFORD MOVEMENT to Wiseman’s attention and led him to believe that a Catholic revival in England was imminent. This belief was strengthened when John Henry NEWMAN, still an Anglican, and Richard Hurrell FROUDE visited him (1832). Wiseman abandoned academic pursuits to encourage this revival, although he was able to deliver an influential course of lectures on The Connection between Science and Revealed Religion (1835). In 1835 he visited London, where he gave a successful series of lectures on aspects of the Catholic faith, published as Lectures on the Principal Doctrines and Practices of the Catholic Church (1836). They received a favorable review from Newman in the British Critic, and they mark the beginning of the Catholic revival. Before returning to Rome, Wiseman helped to found the DUBLIN REVIEW (Wiseman Review 1961–1965) as a literary quarterly presenting the Catholic viewpoint.

Wiseman devoted his remaining years in Rome to the restoration of the English hierarchy. As a preliminary step Rome increased the number of vicariates apostolic from four to eight (1840). At the same time, Wiseman was named coadjutor bishop to the vicar apostolic of the central district of England and president of Oscott College, Birmingham. Before leaving Rome Wiseman wrote for the Dublin Review an article on the Donatists, which drew a parallel between Donatism and Anglicanism. This essay profoundly affected Newman, then reaching the crisis of his Anglican career. Observing the Oxford Movement from nearby Oscott, Wiseman entertained high hopes for England’s proximate conversion. He was oversanguine, because Newman delayed his conversion another four years, and the number of Anglicans who imitated Newman proved smaller than Wiseman had expected.

Restoration of English Hierarchy. At the request of the English bishops, Wiseman visited Rome in 1847 to present their case to the new Pope Pius IX (1846–78). Bishop ULLATHORNE soon replaced Wiseman, whom the Pope sent back to England to persuade the British government to resist Austria’s ambitions against the STATES OF THE CHURCH. This diplomatic venture resulted in the mission of Lord Minto to Rome. Upon the death of the vicar apostolic for London, Wiseman was named to the post (1848). In September 1850 the Holy See decreed the restoration of the hierarchy. Wiseman became a cardinal and archbishop of WESTMINSTER, the sole metropolitan see, with 12 suffragans.

English Protestants bitterly resented his new title, and the British press denounced the restored hierarchy as “the papal aggression.” Wiseman’s publication of a jubilant but tactlessly phrased pastoral letter, From out of the Flaminian Gate (October 7), excited the public to further demonstrations on Guy Fawkes’s Day, during which pope and cardinal were burned in effigy. The cardinal helped to calm fears by his published defense of the hierarchy, Appeal to the Reason and Good Feeling of the English People, but Protestants remained suspicious, as priests and laymen belonging to old Catholic families continued to assail Wiseman in signed and anonymous attacks. Wiseman was accused, not without foundation,