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JESUS THE SON OF SIRACH.

It has been well observed by Mommsen that the foundation of Alexandria was as great an event in the history of the people of Israel as the conquest of Jerusalem. It must indeed have seemed to many Israelites more fraught with danger than with hope. Never before had Paganism presented itself to their nation in so attractive a guise. Would their religion exhibit sufficient power of resistance on a foreign soil? The fears, however, were groundless; at any rate, for a considerable time. The forms of Egyptian-Jewish literature might be foreign, but its themes were wholly national. Even in that highly original synthesis of Jewish, Platonic, and Stoic elements—the Book of Wisdom—the Jewish spirit is manifestly predominant. In Palestine there was also a Hellenic movement, though less vigorous and all-absorbing than in Egypt. Without a spontaneous manifestation of Jewish sympathy, Antiochus Epiphanes would never have made his abortive attempt to Hellenize Judæa. Girt round by a Greek population, the Palestinian Jews, in spite of Ezra's admirable organization, could not entirely resist the assaults of Hellenism. It is probable that not merely Greek language, but Greek philosophy, exerted a charm on some of the clearest Jewish intellects. But we are within the bounds of acknowledged fact in asserting that the ardour of Judæan piety, at least in the highest class, greatly cooled in the age subsequent to Ezra's, and in ascribing this to Greek influences. The High Priest Simeon II.[1] (B.C.

[1] The Mishna (*Pirke Aboth*, i. 2) ascribes this saying to Simeon the Righteous: "On three things the world standeth—revelation, worship, and the bestowal of kindnesses.

226–198), surnamed the Righteous (*i.e.*, the strict observer of the Law), of whom so glowing an account is given by Sirach (Chap. l.), is the chief exception to this degeneracy; yet he was powerless to stem the revolutionary current even within his own family. His cousin Joseph was the notorious farmer of the taxes of Palestine, who by his public and private immorality [1] sapped the very foundations of Jewish life, while two of Simeon's sons, Jason and Menelaus, became the traitorous High Priests who promoted the paganizing movement under Antiochus. It is well known that many critics refer the Book of Ecclesiastes to the period immediately preceding this great movement. The deep and almost philosophical character of the unknown author's meditations seems to be in harmony with this date. On the other hand, there is the well-ascertained fact that the Book of Sirach shews no trace of really philosophical thought: it is simply a new version of the more ordinary proverbial morality. It is to this book that the following pages are devoted. Nothing is more remarkable (and it ought to make us cautious how we infer dates from internal evidence) than the appearance of such a book at such a time.

The date of Sirach has been disputed, but without much reason. Sirach's grandson, who translated the book from Hebrew into Greek, informs us in the Prologue that he came to Egypt in the thirty-eighth year of King Euergetes. Now Euergetes II., who is here referred to, began to reign jointly with his brother Philometor in B.C. 170, so that the translator's arrival in Egypt falls within the year 132. The composition of the book may therefore be approximately dated

[1] See Josephus, *Antiquities*, xii. 4.

about fifty years earlier—say, 180. The name of the author in full was Jeshua (Jesus) the son of Sira (Sirach), but he may be called Sirach for shortness, this being the form of his family name in the Greek translation. He tells us himself that he was of Jerusalem; that from his youth up his desire was for wisdom; that he laboured earnestly in searching for her; and that the Lord gave him a tongue for his reward (Chap. l. 27; li.) We should, however, be wrong in inferring from the latter statement that Sirach was a markedly original writer. In metaphorical language he thus describes the nature of his work (Chap. xxxiii. 16)—

> I too, as the last, bestowed zeal,
> And as one who gleaneth after the vintage;
> By the blessing of the Lord I was the foremost,
> And as a grape-gatherer did I fill the wine-press.

Sirach, then, was a collector of proverbs, and he found that most of the current wise sayings had been already gathered. It is conceivable therefore that he may have incorporated older collections, though, if he has done so, he has at the same time modified the earlier work, and intermixed it with proverbs of his own. The most peculiar passage, both in tone and in contents, is the vivid personification of Divine Wisdom in Chapter xxiv. 1–22, which stands out strikingly from the rest, and has even been thought to present affinities to the Alexandrine school of interpretation. At the end of Chapter xliii. the gnomic style ceases. The writer seems to have felt that the taste for proverbs was declining, and so he appends a panegyric of "famous men" (Chaps. xliv.–l.), from Enoch to Simeon the Righteous, whose imposing appearance and beneficent rule is described with the enthusiasm of a contem-

porary. It is well worth the student's while to examine the contents of this roll of honour. A few corrections of the text may be noticed as a preliminary. At Chapter xlviii. 11*b*, the Greek has, "for we shall surely live (again)." But the Latin has, "nam nos vitâ vivimus tantum, post mortem autem non erit tale nomen nostrum." There is good reason in this instance, as we shall see presently, to prefer the reading of the Latin to that of the Greek. At Chapter l. 1, after "son of Onias," it is well to remove the abruptness of the transition by inserting from the Syriac, "was the greatest of his brethren and the crown of his people." At Chapter l. 26 (27), for "Samaria" we should probably read "Seir" (else how will there be three nations?), and for "foolish," "Amoritish" (with the Ethiopic version and Ewald, comp. Ezek. xvi. 3). Turning to the names of the heroes commemorated, it is startling to find no mention made of Moses and Ezra, the founder and the restorer of Jewish religion. Aaron, on the other hand, is celebrated in no fewer than eighteen verses. The omission of Ezra may be explained by the author's deficient sympathy with the students of Scripture (the *Sōfĕrīm*, or "scribes") whose type and leader was Ezra, and who seem to have held a doctrine of the continuity of inspiration, and the presence of the Inspiring Spirit with the Church, analogous to that of broader students of Christian theology, but not without its dangers both in Sirach's time and in our own. Sirach may be taken as a type of those less highly cultured but far from useless theologians who retard and hang upon the skirts of their more progressive brethren. The omission of Moses simply shews the completeness of the triumph of the restored Mosaic

law. The panegyric seems to have originally closed with the ancient liturgical formula in Verses 22–24. But the writer could not resist the temptation of giving a side-blow to the hated Samaritans (those "half-Jews," as Josephus the historian calls them), called forth perhaps by the dispute respecting the rival temples held at Alexandria before Ptolemy Philometor.[1] The last Chapter of all (Chap. li.) contains the aged author's final leave-taking. It is a prayer of touching sincerity and much biographical interest. The immediateness of the religious sentiment is certainly greater in this late "gatherer" than in many of the earlier proverb-writers.

Sirach is one of those "wise men" to whom so large a part was entrusted of the religious education of the Jewish people. The very fact that "wise men" still exist so long after the time of their prototype, Solomon, proves that their activity was an integral part of the Jewish national life. As I have said elsewhere, the better class of "wise men" gave an independent support to the nobler class of prophets. With their divinely ordained peremptory style, the prophets would never have succeeded in implanting a really vigorous religion had not the "wise men," with their more conciliatory and individualizing manner of teaching, supplemented their endeavours. The Babylonian exile introduced a great change into the habits of the "wise men," who became thenceforward not so much the consulting moral physicians of the people as writers on popular moral ethics. Such was Sirach. In his tone of thought, moreover, Sirach differs greatly from the "wise men" of old, even the best of whom speak as

[1] Josephus, *Antiquities*, xiii. 3, 4.

if they held rather loosely to the outward embodiment of religion. Sirach, however, recommends the punctual observance of rites and ceremonies, though he ranks the moral part of the law highest (Chap. xxxv.), and never loses an opportunity of denouncing anger, pride, and slothfulness, and commending the opposite virtues. He is anxiously orthodox, from his own point of view, which is the Sadducean, and not the Pharasaic. The doctrines of the Satan [1] and the Resurrection, which he probably regarded somewhat as we regard the "developments" of the Papal Church, he appears studiously to ignore—more especially the latter—and he thereby puts himself into direct opposition to the mass of the Jewish Church. For though not the invention (as M. Renan would have it) of the Maccabean period, there can be no doubt that the doctrine of the Resurrection became then for the first time an article of the popular creed. Instead of the "awakening to everlasting life" (Dan. xii. 2), it is the peaceful but hopeless life of the spirits in Sheól to which he resignedly looks forward.

> Weep for the dead, for he hath lost the light,
> And weep for the fool, for he wanteth understanding:
> Make little weeping for the dead, for he is at rest,
> But the life of the fool is worse than death.[2]

This, however orthodox (as former generations had counted orthodoxy), was rank Sadduceanism, and hence (for how otherwise to interpret the glosses of the Greek

[1] True, the Greek version of Sirach has, at xxi. 27, the words, "When the ungodly curseth the Satan, he curseth his own soul;" but "the Satan" may here be synonymous with the depraved will, the *yēṣer rā'* (this seems to have Talmudic authority). It is also possible however that the word in the original meant "opponent in a suit." Comp. Psa. cix. 6.

[2] Chap. xxii. 11. Comp. xvii. 27, 28, 30. Contrast the glowing language of the "Wisdom of Solomon," iii. 1–4.

and Syriac versions of xlviii. 11*b*[1] it is difficult to see) very early readers of Sirach, especially perhaps well-meaning but unscrupulous Christian readers, effected an entrance for their cherished beliefs by violence.

Another point on which Sirach is equally orthodox, or, as others doubtless called it, reactionary, is the connection between piety and temporal prosperity. He really seems to be no more troubled by doubts on this ancient doctrine—if the word may be used—than the author of the wonderfully beautiful, but in this respect naïvely simple, introduction to the Book of Proverbs (Prov. i.–ix.) This was strange indeed under his circumstances, and not altogether creditable; one may add that this of itself seems a sufficient justification of the exclusion of his book from the Canon. How striking and painful is the contrast between Josephus' vivid and truthful comparison of Judæa at this period to "a ship in a storm, tossed by the waves on both sides,"[2] and that proverb of Sirach, worthy, considering the times, of the "miserable comforters" of Job—

> The gift of the Lord remaineth with the godly,
> And his favour bringeth prosperity for ever.[3]

In short, Sirach represents the reconciliation between the practical ethics of the inspired "wise men" of old and the all-embracing demands of the Law. Himself only in a comparatively low sense inspired—for we

[1] *The* Syriac has, "Nevertheless, he dieth not, but liveth in life." The Greek version has been quoted in a previous page. Also the Latin, which probably corresponds most to the original. There was obviously a strong interest in uttering such a statement as "nam nos vitâ vivimus tantum," &c., though it accords with Sirach's language elsewhere.

[2] *Antiquities*, xii. 3, 3. By all means read the whole passage.

[3] Chap. xi. 17; comp. ii. 7, &c.; xvi. 6, &c.; xl. 13, 14. There are, however, passages in which Sirach betrays some little feeling of the practical difficulties of the older form of the doctrine of retribution; see xxxv. 18 [xxxii. 18].

should not hastily reject his claim to a "tongue" from above—he did nothing, on the ethical side, but repeat the old truths in their old forms, though one gladly admits that he shews a genuine and unassumed interest in the varieties of human character. But on the religious side he is really in a certain sense original, in so far as he combines the traditional "wisdom" with a sympathetic insight into the established forms of religion, such as the older "wise men" scarcely possessed. By Greek philosophy Sirach, as far as we can see, was wholly uninfluenced.

And yet Sirach cannot have been entirely unacquainted with Greek culture, in the more general sense of that word. He tells us himself that he had travelled and learned many things (Chap. xxxiv. 9–11); and from Chapter xxxix. 4 we may even infer that he had appeared at court, where probably his life was endangered by calumnious accusations (li. 6). There, perhaps, he acquired his taste for the Greek style of banquet, with its airy talk and accompaniment of music, a taste which seems to have inspired a piquant piece of advice to the kill-joys of his time, who insisted on talking business out of season (xxxii. 3–5)—

> Speak, O elder, with accurate knowledge, for it beseemeth thee,
> But be not a hindrance to music.[1]
> When playing is going on, do not pour out talk;
> And show not thyself inopportunely wise.
> A seal-ring of carbuncle set in gold,
> [Such is] a concert at a banquet of wine.

In a similar mood he writes (xiv. 14)—

> Defraud not thyself of a joyous day,
> And let not a share of a lawful pleasure escape thee.

[1] καὶ μὴ ἐμποδίσῃς μουσικά. So xlix. 1, ὡς μουσικὰ ἐν συμποσίῳ οἴνου. That Greek music was known in Palestine *very shortly afterwards* will be inferred by some at least of my readers from the Greek names of musical instruments in the Book of Daniel. How to escape this inference the present writer knoweth not.

But his tone is commonly more serious. Though no ascetic, he cautions his readers against the Bohemianism which had invaded Judæa, especially against consorting with the singing-girls (ix. 4), and draws a picture of the daughters of Israel (xlii. 9, 10) which forms a melancholy contrast with the Old Testament ideal. His prayer to be guarded from the infection of lust (xxiii. 4, 5) finds its commentary in the story already mentioned of Joseph the tax-farmer. He notes with observant eye the strife of classes. What bitter sights must have prompted a saying like this (xiii. 2, 3)—

> A burden that is too heavy for thee take not up,
> And have no fellowship with one that is stronger and richer than thyself:
> For what fellowship hath the kettle with the earthen pot?
> This will smite, and that will be broken.
> The rich man doth wrong, and *he* snorteth with anger,
> The poor man is wronged, and *he* entreateth withal.

And again (xiii. 18)—

> What peace hath the hyæna with the dog?
> And what peace hath the rich man with the poor?

He is painfully conscious of the deserved humiliation of his country, and the only ground which he can urge why God should interpose—be it mentioned to his credit, for it shows a deep religious sense—is the assured prophetic word (xxxvi. 15, 16 = 20, 21). Elsewhere he ascribes all the evil of his time to the neglect of the Law (xli. 8), which, by a very strong hyperbole, he even identifies with the personified Divine Wisdom (xxiv. 23).

Enough has been said of the contents; a few words are due to the outer form of the Son of Sirach's Wisdom. The work, as we have seen, was originally

written in Hebrew. St. Jerome assures us, in his Preface to Joshua, that he had seen it, and that it bore the title *M'shālīm*, or Proverbs. A page of fragments, gathered from the Talmuds and the Midrāshīm, is all that is now extant.[1] Five ancient versions are also accessible to us, viz., a Greek, two Syriac, an Arabic, and a Latin. One of the Syriac versions, in the Syro-Hexaplaric codex at Milan, still remains unpublished. The printed Syriac (probably) and the Greek (certainly) were made from the Hebrew. They are by no means always in agreement, but their very discrepancies sometimes enable us to argue back with the more certainty to the original text. Both contain not a few alterations of the text, apparently dictated by a regard for orthodox beliefs; and the same remark applies to the Latin version in the Vulgate, which is older than St. Jerome, and has peculiarities of its own. Whether made from the Hebrew, or from a very early form of the Greek, it is of great critical value from its antiquity, as it is held to belong, at latest, to the first century B.C. The Arabic is a servile copy of the Syriac.

The book was written for Palestine, and in Palestine it soon attained a high degree of popularity. As early as B.C. 90, we find it cited as *canonical* by Simeon ben Shetach, and he was a Pharisee. From its large use in the services of the Church it received the name Ecclesiasticus. Later on it half attracted but—owing to the corrupt state of the text—half repelled, the great Hellenist Camerarius, the friend of Melancthon, who published a separate edition of Sirach (the first) at Basle in 1551. We may infer from his preface that it

[1] The Hebrew fragments are given in full by Delitzsch, *Zur Geschichte der jüdischen Poesie*, p. 204; comp. p. 20, note 5.

was highly valued by the German reformers, but only from an educational point of view. Luther complains in strong language of the over-estimate of Sirach formed by many in his own day. "It is only a household book," he says, "and the world admires it as something precious, and sleepily passes by the great majestic word of Christ concerning the victory over death, sin, and hell." This utterance is the more remarkable as Luther, like our own reformers, allowed the Old Testament Apocrypha to stand between the two Testaments, where it still stands, to the undoubted injury of German religion.

No impartial literary critic will place the Wisdom of Jesus the Son of Sirach upon a level with the so-called Wisdom of Solomon. It is only from its greater fidelity to the Old Testament standard of religion, or at least to a portion of this standard, that it can claim a qualified superiority. A few exquisite gems it no doubt contains, such as (ix. 10)—

> Forsake not an old friend,
> For the new is not comparable to him:
> A new friend is as new wine,
> When it is old, thou wilt drink it with pleasure.

With this we may bracket the fine passage on the treatment of a friend's trespass (xix. 13–17). But "one swallow does not make a summer," and the chief value of the book is perhaps to exhibit the tenacity with which a portion of the later Jewish Church adhered to a not so much untrue as antiquated form of religious belief.

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