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Sirach's Judgment of Women.

BY PROFESSOR THE REV. A. B. DAVIDSON, D.D., LL.D., EDINBURGH.

THE judgment of Jesus-ben-Sira (Ecclesiasticus) regarding women is popularly supposed to be very damnatory. This opinion is scarcely justified. Sirach believes that there are bad women and good women, and if the badness of a bad woman be something as bad as can be, the goodness of a good woman is something superlatively good. When Sirach speaks of good and bad women he has chiefly in view married women, though he occasionally speaks of 'daughters,' *i.e.* young women. Some passages, speaking of the badness of women, may be quoted, and then some that speak of good women. They pretty well balance one another.

Sirach recognises that woman is an element of danger in life, and frequently warns men against being thoughtlessly attracted by her beauty—

'Give not thy soul unto a woman . . . Turn away thine eyes from a beautiful woman, and gaze not on another's beauty; by the beauty of a woman have many been led astray' (ix. 2, 8).

It is possible that here the 'strange woman' of

Proverbs may be meant, *i.e.* the wife of another (comp. xli. 20-22). Similarly—

'Look not on everybody in regard of beauty, and sit not in the midst of women; for from garments cometh a moth, and from a woman a woman's wickedness' (xlii. 12).

In particular, men are warned against consorting with singing girls, whose morals were probably loose (ix. 4). But far from thinking that all the evil in the world is in the heart of women, the author prays in regard to himself: 'O Lord, Father and God of my life, give me not lifting up of eyes (wantonness), and turn away concupiscence from me. Let not greediness and chambering overtake me; and give me not over to a shameless mind' (xxiii. 4, 5).

Sirach has much sympathy for a man who is the father of girls, and knows his anxieties. Like the authors of Proverbs, he is an advocate for bringing up young people under rigid discipline—

'Cocker thy child and he shall make thee afraid; Play with him and he will grieve thee' (xxx. 9-13).

To girls a father must show some austerity—

'Hast thou daughters, give good heed to their body,
And make not thy face cheerful to them.
Give thy daughter in marriage, . . .
And give her to a man of understanding' (vii. 24, 25).
'Keep strict watch on a headstrong daughter,
Lest she find liberty for herself and use it' (xxvi. 10-22 ;
cf. xxii. 3 seq.).

Girls, indeed, are the occasion of much anxiety—

'A daughter is a secret cause of watchfulness to a father,
and the care for her putteth away sleep' (xlii. 9).

Every evil possibility is conjured up: she may commit folly in her father's house and bring disgrace on him; or she may remain on his hands till she is *passé*; or if married, her marriage may turn out in various ways an unhappy one. The last case would be unfortunate not only for her, but for the father; for with the laws of divorce then prevailing he might have her returned on his hands.

But for the most part in Sirach, 'woman' is equivalent to 'wife.' And then as now, there were many varieties of a bad wife. She might be drunken (xxvi. 8), or have a 'tongue,' a terrible burden, particularly to a taciturn man: 'As the going up a sandy way is to the feet of the aged, so is a wife full of words to a quiet man' (xxv. 20); 'a silent woman is a gift of the Lord' (xxvi. 14; cf. 1 Pet. iii. 4). Or she might be given to picking and stealing and making away with a man's things, obliging him to have recourse to lock and key (xlii. 6); or she might be jealous, a thing which an honest man felt to be the most unbearable of all forms of slander (xxvi. 6). But Sirach is quite as severe on senseless jealousy on the part of a husband, which, he says, is often the thing that puts evil in a woman's head (ix. 1).

Sirach's typical bad woman is the unfaithful wife. The picture of the adulteress—whose sin is threefold, against the Most High, against her husband, and against his family—is painted in deep colours (xxiii. 22-26), but the companion picture of the man who similarly sins (vers. 16-21) is no less dark, and to it is added the frightful trait: 'He will not leave off till he die'; and nothing is so loathsome to Sirach as the aged libertine (xxv. 2). Perhaps the severest passage occurs in ch. xxv. 13-26—

'Give me any plague but the plague of the heart,
And any wickedness but the wickedness of a woman;
Any calamity but a calamity from them that hate me,
And any vengeance but the vengeance of enemies.

There is no poison above the poison of a serpent,
And there is no wrath above the wrath of an enemy.
I had rather dwell with a lion and a dragon
Than keep house with a wicked woman.
Her husband shall sit at meat among his neighbours,
And when he heareth it he sigheth bitterly.
All badness is but little to the badness of a woman,—
Let the portion of a sinner fall on her!

Here Sirach seems to have in view just a randy, for he speaks of her putting on a face like a bear. And in order to round off he recalls the history of Eve—

'From a woman was the beginning of sin,
And because of her we all die.'

So St. Paul (2 Cor. xi. 3). In other passages Sirach speaks of death as a destiny imposed on man from the beginning (xiv. 17). From such a woman as is described above there is no deliverance but by divorce (xxv. 26). The author, however, deprecates having recourse to this thoughtlessly (vii. 26), and laments that many a good woman is unjustly treated: 'A third person's tongue hath cast out brave women, and deprived them of their labours' (xxviii. 15).

With all antiquity, Sirach is jealous for the superiority of man over woman, and has old-fashioned ideas about it—

'There is anger and impudence and great reproach
If a woman maintain her husband' (xxv. 22).

Similarly in the nauseous epigrams of Martial—

'Uxorem quare locupletem ducere nolim
Quæritis? uxori *nubere* nolo meæ.'

This is neat but superficial. Who does not perceive that our modern manner, whereby a good woman bestows herself and her wealth upon a man who has nothing and does nothing, is the loftiest possible tribute to the superiority of man *per se*.

It is time to look at the other side of the shield. And deserving of notice are all those passages where, in magnifying the honour due to parents, Sirach dwells on the love and self-sacrifice of a mother, e.g. vii. 27. Only the love of the Most High can exceed that of a mother (iv. 10; cf. iii. 2, 4, 9, 11, 16). In a pretty passage in praise of Wisdom, and the joy she proves to him who consorts with her, it is said: 'As a mother shall she meet him, and receive him as a wife married in her youth' (xv. 1). A man's affection for 'a wife of youth' is indissoluble, and to a prophet it is the analogue of God's love to Israel (Isa. liv. 6).

Again, Wisdom—the moral order of the world—is introduced saying: ‘In three things I was beautified . . . in a woman and her husband that walk together in agreement’ (xxv. 1). And the author says: ‘There be nine things that I have counted happy . . . happy is he that dwelleth with a wife of understanding’ (xxv. 8). And again: ‘Forego not a wise and good wife, for her grace is above gold’ (vii. 19). The fullest portrait stands in ch. xxvi. 13–17—

‘The grace (charm) of a wife will delight a husband,
And her discretion will fatten his bones,
A silent woman is a gift of the Lord,
And there is nothing so much worth as a well-instructed
soul.
A shamefast woman is grace upon grace.
As the sun when it arises in the highest places of the Lord,
So is the beauty of a good wife in the fair order of a
man’s house.
As the lamp that shineth upon the holy candlestick,
So is the beauty of the face on a comely stature.’

Others render the last words, ‘in ripe age.’
Less flowery—

‘Happy is the husband of a good wife,
And the number of his days shall be twofold. . . .
Whether a man be rich or poor,’ etc. (xxvi. 1–4).

Sirach, indeed, cannot find words to express himself in regard to good women—

‘The beauty of a woman cheereth the countenance,
And a man desireth nothing so much;
If there is on her tongue mercy and meekness,
Her husband is not like the sons of men—

he is godlike in his felicity (xxxvi. 22). The wretch who ‘hath no wife will mourn as he wandereth up and down.’ He is a bird without a nest, and as he goes about seeking for a lodging, people will readily take him for a footpad.

Sirach has nothing distinctive in him. He is of the same school as the authors of Proverbs, but an inferior artist who lays on thicker colours. The conclusion of the whole matter appears to be this: A man’s most-blessed possession is the fear of the Lord, and next to that is the companionship of a brave woman (xl. 19, 23, 26).

Hebrew Prophecy and Modern Criticism.

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IX.

‘He was wounded for our transgressions, He was bruised for our iniquities: the chastisement of our peace was upon Him; and with His stripes we are healed.’—ISA. liii. 5.

I ENDEAVOURED in my last two papers to trace briefly the conception of the Messiah, as it gradually took shape among the Jewish people. But there is one aspect of the Messiah from the Christian point of view, and that perhaps the most important of all, which I have hitherto left untouched, the innocent victim suffering for the sins of the world. Was this also foretold by the prophets? Christians have from the earliest times confidently answered ‘Yes.’ The Jews have, speaking generally, answered ‘No.’ Of course, it is well known that we do find in the Talmud, and elsewhere in Jewish literature, instances of a belief in a suffering Messiah; but whatever be the true explanation of this fact,¹ the belief itself can hardly be considered as forming part of the generally accepted Messianic doctrine, at least as it existed in the time of Christ. At most it falls very short of the Christian idea of

the great atoning sacrifice. Now, how far, or in what sense, does this idea find a place in the prediction of the Jewish prophets? This question I will now try to answer. But it is only possible to do so fairly and honestly by an impartial examination of those passages which have been understood to foretell the sufferings of Christ. In the short limits at my disposal, I can only deal with very few of these. But I think they will be enough to establish some general conclusions, and will serve as an example of a method of exegesis capable of a much wider application.

But there is a larger question which is really involved in the immediate subject of our inquiry, and cannot wisely be separated from it, the belief of the Jews concerning the divine purpose of suffering. There was a time when they believed that suffering was inflicted by God merely as a punishment for sin. A man’s or a nation’s sinful-

¹ See Essay on this subject in Cheyne’s *Isaiah*.