

INTRODUCTION

The discovery of Hebrew manuscripts of the Wisdom of Ben Sira in the Cairo Geniza initiated a century of study in which many interesting details especially about the text of this deuterocanonical book were brought to light. Nevertheless, there are still many unresolved questions regarding the text and its history, while important areas, such as structure and main theme, remain elusive. The present study wants to contribute to the self-understanding of the Jerusalemite sage and his relation to Wisdom and God.

The Wisdom of Ben Sira is unique among all books of the Old Testament because it gives the proper name and the purpose of the author in an epilogue (50,27-29) and because it employs the first person singular in a non-fictional way.¹ The author betrays a high degree of self-consciousness and unfeigned frankness.² Although being well known this phenomenon has hardly received any attention in the study of the Wisdom of Ben Sira: there are few articles and no monographs dealing with this important aspect of the book.

A purely thematic study of the authorial consciousness cannot be the goal of this study, because the requirements involved in such undertaking —taken for granted in the study of nearly every other Biblical book— are lacking in the case of the Wisdom of Ben Sira, viz. a critical text and a general understanding about the structure and main theme of the book. Prescinding from the questions of general structure and main theme, this study takes one specific text as a starting point, Sir 39,12-35.³ The reason for selecting this text is

¹ The use of the first person by Ben Sira is exceptional, but even though it appears realistic, its occurrence is not such that the book could be called an autobiography. Cf. M. Gilbert, "Siracide", *DBSup* XII 1389-1437, esp. 1404-1405.

² R. Smend, *Die Weisheit des Jesus Sirach erklärt* (Berlin 1906), xxxvi, n. 1; J. Haspecker, *Gottesfurcht bei Jesus Sirach. Ihre religiöse Struktur und ihre literarische und doktrinaire Bedeutung* (AnBib 30; Rome 1967) 87-93; J. Gammie, "The Sage in Sirach", in J.G. Gammie, L.G. Perdue (eds.), *The Sage in Israel and the Ancient Near East* (Winona Lake 1990) 355-372; esp. 370: "...self-conscious composer...".

³ For questions regarding the general structure see e.g. W. Fuß, *Tradition und Komposition im Buche Jesus Sirach* (maschinenschrift; Tübingen: 1963), cf. *TLZ* 88 [1963] coll. 948f; W. Roth, "On the Gnostic-Disursive Wisdom of Jesus Ben Sirach", *Semeia* 17 (1980) 59-80; J. Harvey, "Toward a Degree of Order in Ben Sira's Book", *ZAW* 105 (1993) 52-62; H.-W.

that many points of interest intersect in this pericope. First, it is an unmistakable instance where the enthusiasm and directness of the author spill over into the text, so that the text becomes almost autobiographical in 39,12.32. Here Ben Sira refers to the fact that the subject treated in this hymn is a favourite of his⁴ and that it was “from the beginning” among the notes which he used in compiling his book.⁵ Without stretching this personal remark too far, one could suspect that the matter which he discusses here, is part of the essence of his thinking and, as such, points to the motivation (על כן / διὰ τοῦτο) for his writing. Second, although much of the book has an almost inscrutable structure, the hymnic instruction of 39,12-35 is a clearly delimited literary unit: the refrain-like repetition of some verses from the beginning at the end clearly mark it out from the surrounding text, and also the hymnic quality (39,14-15) together with the self-conscious tone distinguish it from the surrounding context. Third, the hymnic instruction of 39,12-35 has an inclusion which significantly has its center of gravity in the expression בעתו (39,16b.33b). Here and elsewhere (cf. 33H,7-15) Ben Sira appears to have been able to formulate his wisdom in an adequate way only by reference to the temporal dimension and, and this seems indicative of an underlying sapiential insight into reality.⁶

Jüngling, “Der Bauplan des Buches Jesus Sirach”, in J. Hainz, H.-W. Jüngling, R. Sebott (eds), *Den Armen eine frohe Botschaft*. (Festschrift F. Kamphaus; Frankfurt a.M. 1977) 89-105; G. Sauer, “Gedanken über den thematischen Aufbau des Buches Ben Sira”, in N. Calduch-Benages, J. Vermeulen (eds), *Treasures of Wisdom* (BETL 143; Festschrift M. Gilbert; Leuven 1999) 51-61. For studies on the main theme see e.g. Haspecker, *Gottesfurcht*; G. von Rad, “Die Weisheit von Jesus Sirach”, *EvTh* 29 (1969) 113-133; Th. Middendorp, *Die Stellung Jesu Ben Siras zwischen Judentum und Hellenismus* (Leiden 1973); G.-L. Prato, *Il problema della teodicea in Ben Sira. Composizione dei contrari e richiamo alle origini*. (AnBib 65; Rome 1975); M. Löhr, *Bildung aus dem Glauben: Beiträge zum Verständniss der Lehrreden des Buches Jesus Sirach* (Dissertation; Bonn 1975); H. Stadelmann, *Ben Sira als Schriftgelehrter. Eine Untersuchung zum Berufsbild des vor-Makkabäischen Sofer unter Berücksichtigung seines Verhältnisses zu Priester-Propheten und Weisheitslehrertum* (WUNT 2,6; Tübingen 1981); G. Boccaccini, *Middle Judaism. Jewish Thought 300 B.C.E. to 200 C.E.* (Minneapolis 1991).

⁴ Haspecker, *Gottesfurcht bei Jesus Sirach*, 333: “...Lieblingsgedanken...”.

⁵ Haspecker (*Gottesfurcht bei Jesus Sirach*, 183, note 129) argues that it is uncertain whether 39,32 refers to 39,33-34 only or to the whole pericope, but the literary phenomenon of strict inclusion (39,16.33) seems to favour taking the pericope as a unity also in respect to the reference in 39,32. Cf. B. Mack, *Wisdom and the Hebrew Epic. Ben Sira's Hymn in Praise of the Fathers* (Chicago 1985) 100.

⁶ Cf. Prato, *Il problema della teodicea in Ben Sira*, 13-61.

Four, the hymnic instruction of 39,12-35 shows signs of a mixture of text-forms (additions in 39,20bc and transpositions involving 39,17.20), which allows us to take up the important issue of the textual tradition.

There are also contextual indications that Ben Sira intends to make fundamental statements in 39,12-35. Marböck has shown that the autobiographically coloured passage about the 'wise scribe',⁷ 38,24—39,11, provides a key for understanding both the author and the book.⁸ This passage functions as an introduction to the hymn of 39,12-35 and seems to have a more intimate connection with it than wisdom pericopes usually have with the new didactic units they introduce elsewhere in the book. In 38,34^c—39,11 Ben Sira glorifies the profession of the wise scribe by contrasting it with various other occupations (38,24-34^b). Having so expounded the excellence of his own profession, he shifts immediately to the hymnlike instruction as if to provide a demonstration.⁹

Both text and immediate context indicate that 39,12-35 is an important pericope in the book, but any analysis of a pericope in a book, of which the structure is still largely unknown, leads inevitably to other texts that have supposedly the same subject matter.¹⁰ The goodness of the work of God under the aspect of time is often paralleled to such texts as 16,24—17,14; 33,7-15 (=36G,7-15); 42,15—43,33. The self-awareness and the motivation of Ben Sira as an author, which are apparent in the hymn, are often paralleled to

⁷ R. Argall, *I Enoch and Sirach. A Comparative Literary and Conceptual Analysis of the Themes of Revelation, Creation and Judgment* (SBL Early Judaism and its Literature, 8; Atlanta 1995) 83-84, with reference to 44,4c (which is about David and Solomon, i.e. authors) and 11QPs^a 27,1. Argall proposes to understand כֹּסֵף as 'one who writes', an author; we prefer to employ the conventional terminology.

⁸ J. Marböck, *Weisheit im Wandel. Untersuchungen zur Weisheitstheologie bei Ben Sira* (BBB 37; Bonn 1971) 175; J. Marböck, "Sir 38,24-39,11: Der schriftgelehrte Weise. Ein Beitrag zu Gestalt und Werk Ben Siras", in: M. Gilbert (ed.), *La sagesse dans l'Ancien Testament*. (BETL 51; Leuven 1990) 293-294.

⁹ G. Box - W. Oesterley, *The Book of Sirach*, in: R.H. Charles et al. (eds.), *The Apocrypha and Pseudepigrapha of the Old Testament in English with Introductions and Critical and Explanatory Notes to the Several Books*. (Vol 1; Oxford 1913 [1978]), 457: "It may be intended to serve as a specimen of such 'wisdom'—an example of Sopheric teaching."

¹⁰ M. Gilbert, "Comment lire les écrits sapientiaux de l'Ancien Testament", in: M. Gilbert, J. L'Hour, J. Scharbert, *Morale et Ancien Testament*. (Lex Spiritus Vitae 1; Louvain 1976), 155f. P. Beentjes, "Recent Publications on the Wisdom of Jesus Sira (Ecclesiasticus)", *Bijdragen* 43 (1982) 188-198.

24,30-33(34); 33,16-19 (= 36G,16^a + 30G,25-27); 50,27-29 and 51,13-30, An exegesis of all these pericopes with a subsequent conclusion easily could be construed as circular argumentation, which would find as a unifying perspective the guiding principle which led to the choice of texts in the first place. To avoid this, it seems better to approach the theme by focusing attention on one central pericope, 39,12-35, and to let its vocabulary and word clusters dictate what other texts have to be reckoned with in order to elucidate this hymn. Many of the above pericopes are likely to qualify for analysis, but given the lack of a clear structure, methodological concentration on one important pericope is preferable.

This method bears, at least in a general way, on the division of the work. After some preliminary questions (chapter 1) regarding textual criticism, structure, and literary form, the immediate literary context of 39,12-35 will be studied (chapter 2). The role of the protagonists, the sage and his disciples will be investigated next (chapter 3). This investigation takes its starting points from the framing verses of the hymn, 39,12.32 where the author speaks in the first person singular, and from 39,13-15 where the disciples are addressed. Since first person singular statements permeate the entire book and seem to have an important (structural) function for the whole, some keywords regarding the sage will be studied in detail (chapter 4). Finally, the teaching of the hymn will be studied in order to obtain insight into how the author was able to affirm in hymnic format the goodness of creation by emphasizing the work of God (chapter 5).