

## Wisdom of Life as Way of Life: The Wisdom of Jesus Sirach as a Case in Point

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### ABSTRACT

*After a general introduction to the idea of Biblical Wisdom as wisdom of life, the present contribution will introduce three crucial concepts thereof: "righteousness," "fear of the Lord" and "blessing." These concepts will be dealt with in the context of both an immanent and transcendent orientation of Biblical wisdom. Thereafter, and against the background of the book Ecclesiasticus or The Wisdom of Jesus Son of Sirach, this Biblical wisdom will be concretely illustrated. As wisdom pertains to many aspects of daily human life, the text will be presented on the basis of a florilegium of a number of pericopes which are related to the varying facets of human life in its search for meaning and happiness.*

It is a real joy to be invited to write a contribution in honour of a scholar like H. Van Rooy. Actually writing it, however, is a challenge: meeting the standards of Herrie's research is no easy task. Therefore, I decided, for once, not to address the technical area of textual criticism but focus instead on intrinsic Biblical wisdom as a source of wisdom of life. The following pages are an invitation to reflect on life itself because, indeed, the celebrated scholar can surely look back gratefully not only on a rich career but equally on a blessed life.

### A BIBLICAL WISDOM AS THE WISDOM OF LIFE

To talk of biblical wisdom is actually to talk of the wisdom of life. After all, the Old Testament wisdom literature is oriented, first and foremost, towards the realisation of a meaningful life. This wisdom of life, then, is very closely connected to a certain "way of life," namely living life in the way that a wise person would. The life that draws its power from wisdom is based on insight into the order of life. Therefore, it respects the order of creation, an order that God, in overcoming chaos, purposely inserted into creation. Recognising and respecting this order of creation in all its aspects constitutes the core of the way of life that the OT wisdom literature advocates.<sup>1</sup> It has its origin in, and is

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<sup>1</sup> For a selection of literature concerning OT wisdom in general, see Martin Noth, "Die Bewährung von Salomos 'Göttlicher Weisheit,'" in *Wisdom in Israel and in the Ancient Near East*. FS Harold H. Rowley (ed. Martin Noth and Thomas D. Winton; VTSup 3; Leiden: Brill, 1955) 225-237; Walther Zimmerli, "The Place and the Limit of Wisdom in the Framework of the Old Testament Theology," *SJT* 17 (1963): 146-158; Gerhard von Rad, *Weisheit in Israel* (Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener, 1970);

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Othmar Keel, *Die Weisheit spielt vor Gott* (Freiburg: Universitätsverlag Freiburg, 1974); Roger N. Whybray, *The Intellectual Tradition in the Old Testament* (BZAW 135; Berlin: De Gruyter, 1974); James L. Crenshaw, ed., *Studies in Ancient Israelite Wisdom*, (New York: Ktav, 1976); Roland E. Murphy, "Wisdom Theses," in *Wisdom and Knowledge* (ed. Joseph Armenti; Philadelphia: Villanova, 1976); Roland E. Murphy, "Wisdom: Theses and Hypotheses," in *Israelite Wisdom: Theological and Literary Essays*. FS Samuel Terrien (ed. John G. Gammie e.a.; Missoula: Scholars Press, 1978) 35-42; Maurice Gilbert, ed., *La sagesse de l'Ancien Testament* (BETL 51; 2nd ed.; Leuven: Peeters, 1990); Max Küchler, *Frühjüdische Weisheitstraditionen* (OBO 26; Freiburg: Universitätsverlag, 1979); Donn Morgan, *Wisdom in the Old Testament Traditions* (Atlanta: John Knox, 1981); Joseph Blenkinsopp, *Wisdom and Law in the Old Testament* (Oxford: OUP, 1983); Dianne Bergant, *What Are They Saying About Wisdom Literature?* (New York: Paulist Press, 1984); James L. Crenshaw, "The Wisdom Literature," in *The Hebrew Bible and Its Modern Interpreters* (ed. Douglas Knight and Gene Tucker; Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1985), 369–407; James L. Crenshaw, "Education in Ancient Israel," *JBL* 104 (1985): 601–615; Roland E. Murphy, "Wisdom and Creation," *JBL* 104 (1985): 3–11; Ronald E. Clements, *Wisdom for a Changing World: Wisdom in O.T. Theology* (Berkeley: Bibal Press, 1990); John G. Gammie and Leo Perdue, eds., *The Sage in Israel and the Ancient Near East* (Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 1990); Roland E. Murphy, *The Tree of Life: An Exploration of Biblical Wisdom Literature* (New York: Doubleday, 1990); Franz-Joseph Steiert, *Die Weisheit Israels: ein Fremdkörper im A.T.?* (Freiburg: Herder, 1990); René Lebrun, ed., *Sagesses de l'Orient ancien et chrétien* (Paris: Beauchesne, 1993); Leo Perdue, *Wisdom and Creation: The Theology of Wisdom and Literature* (Nashville: Wipf & Stock, 1994); Stuart Weeks, *Early Israelite Wisdom* (Oxford: OUP, 1994); Jutta Hausmann, *Studien zum Menschenbild der älteren Weisheit* (Tübingen: Mohr, 1995); Jacques Trublet, *La Sagesse biblique: De l'Ancien au Nouveau Testament* (LD 160; Paris: Cerf, 1995); Anja A. Diesel, Reinhard G. Lehmann and Echart Otto, eds., "Jedes Ding hat seine Zeit...": *Studien zur israelitischen und altorientalischen Weisheit* (BZAW 241; Berlin: De Gruyter, 1996); Dianne Bergant, *Israel's Wisdom Literature: A Liberation–Critical Reading on the Old Testament* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1997); Thomas Krüger, *Kritische Weisheit: Studien zur weisheitlichen Traditionskritik im Alten Testament* (Zurich: Pano Verlag, 1997); Otto Kaiser, *Gottes und der Menschen Weisheit: Gesammelte Aufsätze* (BZAW 261; Berlin: De Gruyter, 1998); Adolphe Gesché and Paul Scolas, eds., *La sagesse, une chance pour l'espérance?* (Paris: Cerf, 1998); Stephen Barton, ed., *Where Shall Wisdom Be Found?* (Edinburgh: Bloomsbury, 1999); Anthony R. Ceresko, *Introduction to Old Testament Wisdom: A Spirituality of Liberation* (Maryknoll N.Y.: Orbis, 1999); Richard Kalmin, *The Sage in Jewish Society of Late Antiquity* (London: Routledge, 1999); Eckart Otto, "Woher weiß der Mensch um Gut und Böse? Philosophische Annäherungen der ägyptischen und biblischen Weisheit an ein Grundproblem der Ethik," in *Recht und Ethos im Alten Testament: Gestalt und Wirkung* (ed. Stefan Beyerle, Günter Mayer, and Hans Strauß; Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener, 1999), 207–231; François Mies, ed., *Toute la sagesse du monde* (Namur–Brussels: PU Namur, 1999); Hermann von Lipp, "Jüdische Weisheit und griechische Tugendlehre," in *Weisheit, Ethos und Gebot: Weisheits- und Dekalogtraditionen in der Bibel und im frühen Judentum* (ed. Henning G. von Reventlow; BTSt 43; Neukirchen–

directed towards, respect for and faith in God. The way of life of the wise people of the OT is, in other words, attuned to God.

The above may give the immediate impression that this concerns a difficult and lofty affair, which is probably far removed from daily life and falls to those who are out of touch with real life and who have the time and inclination to ponder God’s word and ways in solitude. However, nothing could be further from the truth. Those who take the trouble to read the OT wisdom literature—and actually it is no trouble but rather a pleasure because it contains pearls of biblical poetry—will very quickly see that it is not about distant, high ideals. It is about anything but a life-renouncing horizon for eccentric piety.

The core of the wisdom literature is the quest for the realisation of a meaningful life and society, for a blessed, “full” life, supported by a God who is both its origin and its goal.<sup>2</sup> It concerns a way of life characterised by deep trust, but at the same time by a clear perception of human vulnerability and contingency. This awareness, however, does not constitute an excuse for discouragement and resignation. On the contrary, it constitutes a stimulus and a call to make the very best of this life, here and now, with and despite all its limitations. Attuning this life to a God who is love and goodness seeks to raise limited human existence above the banality and mediocrity that are all too often, and too soon, part of it.

In other words, OT wisdom strives, to use a contemporary expression, for “quality of life,” which is distinct from pure hedonistic satisfaction of all possible desires, as it essentially seeks to enjoy the blessing of God in this life and, in this context, to bring about a little piece of heaven in the here and now.

## **B BIBLICAL WISDOM OF LIFE “CROSSED”**

Thus, if the OT wisdom literature is particularly concerned with life itself, then it is obvious that it must also have something to say about the various aspects of this life. It concerns, as has been mentioned already, not just a number of recommendations to live piously, but indeed the concrete realisation of a

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Vluyn: Neukirchener, 2001), 29–60. See also, for a survey of the research: Claus Westermann, *Forschungsgeschichte zur Weisheitsliteratur 1950–1990* (Stuttgart: Calwer, 1991) and for a bibliography, Peter Enns, *Poetry and Wisdom* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1997).

<sup>2</sup> In this regard, see also, Bénédicte Lemmelijn, “Verhalen: van mensen voor mensen, over een God die geen mens ooit vatten kan,” in *Toekomst voor verhalen en rituelen? Op het snijpunt van bijbel en geloofscommunicatie* (ed. Paul Kevers and Joke Maex; Leuven: Acco, 2005), 61–74, particularly pp. 64–65 and 73–74 as well as Hans Ausloos and Bénédicte Lemmelijn, *The Book of Life: Biblical Answers to Existential Questions*, (Grand Rapids, Mich., Cambridge: Eerdmans 2010), 255–256. Cf. Also Hans Ausloos and Bénédicte Lemmelijn, *De Bijbel, een (g)oude(n) gids: Bijbelse antwoorden op menselijke vragen* (4th ed.; Leuven: Acco, 2012), 191–192.

blessed, human life in all its facets. Ultimately, the point is the fulfilment of “full” life under God’s blessing.

When one reflects about this fact more carefully, I think one can discern, in the “ideal life” described, two poles in the OT wisdom literature. In a manner analogous to the well-known idea that sees, in the Christian sign of the cross, a horizontal and a vertical axis, one could say that wisdom also has a horizontal and a vertical axis, very clearly distinct and yet inseparably bound.

On the horizontal plane, one could place the immanence of human existence. In OT wisdom, one indisputably sees in it a clear understanding of human contingency and imperfection. Vertically, on the other hand, this interest is crossed by an attentiveness to transcendence, namely, to the divine reality that transcends the human. In the OT wisdom literature, two particular and very important theological concepts are attached to both of these aspects respectively.

## 1 Righteousness

Connected with the horizontal dimension, which aims at the fulfilment of the contingent, fragile human life, is the key idea of “righteousness” (צדקה – *tsedaqah*). The wise person, who tries to live according to God’s order, lives in righteousness and is also called “righteous” (צדיק – *tsadiq*).<sup>3</sup> This is about far

<sup>3</sup> For more background surrounding the concepts of “righteousness”/“the righteous” in its different interpretations, see, among others, Klaus Koch, “SDQ im Alten Testament,” (Ph.D. diss., University of Heidelberg, 1953); Jerome P. Justesen, “On the Meaning of SADAQ,” *AUSS* 2 (1964): 53–61; Alfred Jepsen, “Sdq und sdqh im Alten Testament,” in *Gottes Wort und Gottes Land* (ed. Henning Graf von Reventlow; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1965), 78–99; Hans H. Schmid, *Gerechtigkeit als Weltordnung* (Tübingen: Mohr, 1968); Henning G. von Reventlow, *Rechtfertigung im Horizont des Alten Testaments* (BEvT 58; Munich: Kaiser, 1971); Jože Krašovec, *La justice (SDQ) de Dieu dans le Bible Hebraïque et l’interprétation juive et chrétienne* (OBO 76; Freiburg: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1988); Rüdiger Lux, “Denn es ist kein Mensch so gerecht auf Erden, daß er nur Gutes tue...’: Recht und Gerechtigkeit aus der Sicht des Predigers Salomo,” *ZTK* 94 (1997): 263–287; Klaus Baltzer and Thomas Krüger, “Die Erfahrung Hiobs: «Konnektive» und «distributive» Gerechtigkeit nach dem Hiob-Buch,” in *Problems in Biblical Theology* (ed. Henry Sun et al.; Grand Rapids, Mich.: Wipf & Stock, 1997), 27–37; Gérard Verkinère, *La justice dans l’Ancien Testament* (CaE 105; Paris: Cerf, 1998); Moshe Ish-Horowicz, “Righteousness (Tsedek) in the Bible and Its Rabbinic Interpretations,” in *Interpretation of the Bible* (ed. Jože Krašovec; Ljubljana: Sheffield Academic Press, 1998), 577–587; Bernd Janowski, *Die rettende Gerechtigkeit: Beiträge zur Theologie des Alten Testaments* (Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener, 1999); Jörg Jeremias, ed., *Gerechtigkeit und Leben im hellenistischen Zeitalter* (BZAW 296; Berlin: De Gruyter, 2001); Silvia Schroer, “Die Gerechtigkeit der Sophia: Biblische Weisheitstraditionen und feministische Diskurse,” *TZ* 57 (2001): 281–290; Bernd Janowski, “Die Frucht

more than what we today mean by "justice" as objective and distributive fairness. Righteousness has first and foremost to do with the differentiation between good and evil. In the wisdom literature, the obvious teacher is life experience itself, precisely because this life experience is also the source of social mores and laws. After all, they are the result of the collective life experience of a community. This is exactly what is considered to be "wisdom." In this respect, wisdom is thus the practical knowledge of the laws of life and the world which leads a person to the correct social comportment.

In this way, righteousness is directly associated with the "order" that God intended for creation.<sup>4</sup> Righteousness and wisdom are, therefore, two very closely connected concepts, which nevertheless remain distinct. After all, one could say, on the one hand, that wisdom makes it possible to act righteously. On the other hand, wisdom itself is an expression of "living righteously." Thus, righteousness also makes wisdom possible, and vice versa.

The person who lives in the context of this "order" of righteousness is "the righteous one." He is a person who lives honestly and correctly, and who is also, as a result, successful in life. Thus, righteousness is also a goal in the OT wisdom literature precisely because, associated with the practice of and striving for righteousness, virtue and goodness, it entails the achievement of prosperity, a position of respect, and a good name. In this regard, righteousness is even the condition of prosperity and social success.

Against this background, one can conclude that the "righteous" person is he who lives according to the "order." In this respect, the "righteous" person attunes his entire life to God and tries in his own life as well as with regard to his fellow man, to create chances to flourish and in the deepest sense, to "live." He does this in order to bring this "living," here and now, to its fulfilment.

## 2 "Fear of God" or "Respect for the Lord"

When one takes the aforementioned vertical axis of the divine or the transcendent one into account, one observes that the wisdom literature now brings another important theological concept to the fore. After all, inseparably connected to the orientation towards righteousness in daily life is the motivation for and source of that wisdom that seeks to attune the human, fragile reality to the divine order. This motivation and source can be traced back to its origin in the "fear of God."<sup>5</sup> The "fear of God" has nothing to do – at least not in the first

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der Gerechtigkeit: Psalm 72 und die jüdische Königsideologie," in *"Mein Sohn bist du" (Ps 2,7): Studien zu den Königpsalmen* (ed. Eckart Otto and Erich Zenger; SBS 192; Stuttgart: Katholisches Bibelwerk, 2002), 94–134.

<sup>4</sup> See, in particular, Schmid, *Gerechtigkeit*.

<sup>5</sup> For a selection of classic exegetical studies on the "Fear of God" or the "Respect for the Lord" in its different scholarly interpretations, see Hendrik A. Brongers, *La*

place – with trembling in fear of some distant, towering, merciless deity who capriciously rules over and disposes of people. It also has absolutely nothing to do with fear of punishment for sinful behaviour. The Dutch *Nieuwe Bijbelvertaling* (New Bible Translation) appropriately renders it in a more contemporary way as “respect for the Lord.”<sup>6</sup> In this contribution, and against this background, we shall therefore use the term “respect for the Lord” rather than “fear of God.”<sup>7</sup> The so-called “fear of God” or “respect for the Lord” opens up the horizontal dimension to an immediate commitment to God in respect and fidelity, within, for example, the context of the OT covenant theology and especially in compliance with the “order” (natural and social) that God placed in creation. If one thus proposes that human life must, out of “respect for God,” attune itself to God himself, the question naturally arises as to how this God can be known. In this regard, reference is often made to his Word, which is to be found for example in the Torah (e.g. Sir 24:23–29; Prov 3:1). If one then considers that the Torah, as well as the prophetic books and the other biblical writings, repeatedly aims to attune human existence to God and tries to realise this in life itself, then this completes the circle. God meets the human being in life itself, namely in that specific life that turns to the good in everything and helps the life around it to grow beyond itself, through sharing human and almost tangibly “divine” love. Once again, it seems, therefore, that the transcendent aspect is directly connected to the immanent. Biblical wisdom calls us to live a life blessed by God.

### 3 The “Blessing” of the Most High

Should it be any wonder then that the concepts of “righteousness” and “respect for the Lord” are, in the texts, very closely related to the idea of the “blessing

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*crainte du Seigneur* (OtSt 5; Leiden: Brill, 1948); Robert H. Pfeiffer, “The Fear of God,” *IEJ* 5 (1955): 41–48; Joachim Becker, *Gottesfurcht im Alten Testament* (AnBib 25; Rome: Pontificio Instituto Biblico, 1965); Louis Derousseaux, *La crainte de Dieu dans l’Ancien Testament* (LD 63; Paris: Cerf, 1970); Michael L. Barré “‘Fear of God’ and the World View of Wisdom,” *BTB* 11 (1981): 41–43; Alexander A. Di Lella, “Fear of the Lord as Wisdom,” in *The Book of Ben Sira in Modern Research: Proceedings of the First International Ben Sira Conference, 28–31 July 1996, Soesterberg, Netherlands* (ed. Pancratius C. Beentjes; BZAW 255; Berlin: De Gruyter, 1997), 113–133; Alexander A. Di Lella, “Fear of the Lord and Belief and Hope in the Lord Amid Trials, Sirach 2:1–18,” in *Wisdom, You Are My Sister*. FS Roland E. Murphy (ed. Michael L. Barré; CBQMS 29; Washington D.C.: Catholic Biblical Association of America, 1997) 188–204; Alexander A. Fischer, *Skepsis oder Furcht Gottes? Studien zur Komposition und Theologie des Buches Kohelet* (BZAW 247; Berlin: De Gruyter, 1997).

<sup>6</sup> The expression used in Dutch is “ontzag voor de Heer.”

<sup>7</sup> Nevertheless, note that where we refer directly to English translations of the Bible in this contribution, these will still use “fear of God.”

of God."<sup>8</sup> In OT wisdom, the God-fearing or righteous person obtains "the blessing of God on all his ways." However, here again, it must be stressed that this "blessing" of God is not some spiritual or woolly reality. Rather, the OT "blessing" is expressed in a very immanent and tangible way in the daily life of the "righteous" person, who is "blessed" with a long and healthy life with a loving and caring wife by his side. He enjoys the company of countless children who respect their parents. He experiences (economic) success in his work and prosperity in daily life (e.g. Prov 3:10; 16:3).

Old Testament wisdom is anything but averse to any comfort, precisely because this is seen to be an outward sign of God's blessing.<sup>9</sup> What is perhaps a little surprising for Christians, who in a specific interpretation of the tradition have preached poverty as almost an ideal, is the fact that biblical wisdom nowhere criticises or repudiates the search for happiness or fulfilment—including its material aspects. Rather, this quest is accepted as a fact. And after all, this is not altogether strange. Surprising though it may be, one sees that the

<sup>8</sup> The literature concerning God's "blessing" is almost inexhaustible. Within the scope of this contribution and its context, we recommend only a few authoritative studies in this regard: Johannes Hempel, *Die israelitische Anschauungen von Segen und Fluch im Lichte altorientalischer Parallelen* (BZAW 81; Berlin: De Gruyter, 1961), esp. 30–113; Jacques Guillet, "Le langage spontané de la bénédiction dans l'Ancien Testament," *RSR* 57 (1969): 163–204; Gerhard Wehmeier, *Der Segen im Alten Testament* (Basel: Friedrich Reinhardt Kommissionsverlag, 1970); Dieter Vetter, *Jahwes Mitsein als Ausdruck des Segens* (Stuttgart: Calwer, 1971); Josef Scharbert, "Die Geschichte des Barûk-formel," *BZ* 17 (1973): 1–28; Franz J. Helfmeyer, "Segen und Erwählung," *BZ* 18 (1974): 208–223; Bernard Couroyer, "BRK et les formules égyptiennes de salutation," *RB* 85 (1978): 575–585; Claus Westermann, *Der Segen in der Bibel und im Handeln der Kirche* (Gütersloh: Chr. Kaiser, 1981); Christopher W. Mitchell, "The Meaning and Significance of BRK, 'to Bless,' in the Old Testament," (Ph.D. diss., University of Wisconsin, 1983); Christopher W. Mitchell, *The Meaning of BRK, "to Bless," in the Old Testament* (SBLDS 95; Atlanta Ga., 1987); Nachman Levine, "The Curse and the Blessing: Narrative Discourse Syntax and Literary Form," *JSOT* 27 (2002): 189–199; and Lois C. Dubin, "Who's Blessing Whom? Transcendence, Agency, and Gender in Jewish Prayer," *CrCu* 52 (2002): 165–177.

<sup>9</sup> In this regard, see, for example, Roelf Haan, *Economie van de eerbied: Kanttekeningen bij het bijbelse spreken over geld en goed* (Delft: Meinema, 1985); Barry J. Gordon, *The Economic Problem in Biblical and Patristic Thought* (Leiden: Brill, 1989); Craig L. Blomberg, *Neither Poverty nor Riches: A Biblical Theology of Material Possessions* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1999); Maurice Gilbert, "Riches et pauvres: Réflexions des sages de la Bible," in *Bible et économie: Servir Dieu ou l'argent* (ed. Françoise Mies; Namur and Brussels: Lessius, 2003), 11–40; Otto Kaiser, "Arm und Reich bei Jesus Sirach," in *Theologie und Kirchenleitung* (ed. Hermann Deuser, Gesche Linde and Sigurd Rink; MTS 75; Marburg: Elwert, 2003), 144–160 and Ulrich Berges, "'Kan er vrede zijn tussen een rijke en een arme?' (Sir 13,18): Armoede en rijkdom in de wijsheidsliteratuur," *TvT* 44 (2004): 14–27.

"reward" for "righteous" behaviour is tangible. However, the effort for which this material favour is granted is also very "worldly" and tangible, anything but spiritual, and sometimes even prosaically "ordinary." In this "righteous" life out of "respect for the Lord," it does not entail first and foremost lots of intense prayer, or solitary meditation. Indeed, quite to the contrary, albeit with an inner connectedness to God, it is about a daily effort and willingness to help, about caring for children and one's fellow human beings, and being attentive to them, and about an attitude to life that in humility and modesty dares to be self-effacing before others. When Paul, much later in Gal 5:22–23, states that a life inspired by the Spirit leads to "love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control," he in fact closely resembles certain tendencies in the OT wisdom literature.<sup>10</sup> In a concrete example, we likewise read in Sir 1:27: "fidelity and humility are his delight." Thus, if the effort is tangible and material, then it really should not be so surprising that in this line of thinking God's "reward" for this may also be concretely experienced. The longing to live without suffering, conscious of being secure within a divine "order" that is well-disposed towards human beings, seems, in the OT wisdom literature, to be a deep-seated human characteristic that is accepted without further question.

Old Testament wisdom observes, in other words, what happens in the given (social and natural) order and tries to reach a conclusion as to why and how this happens. In this context, wisdom wants to teach people how to get the most out of life and not to waste the chances they are given. Happiness then becomes the sum of the good things that happen to a person, and for which he has worked. Good behaviour delivers results. After all, good behaviour and prosperity are, in traditional wisdom thinking,<sup>11</sup> two sides of the same coin.

Nevertheless, the texts also give voice to the fact that a person does not have everything under control. And we recognise that feeling. A person can do everything he can and still end up standing helplessly with his back against the wall, watching as things fail to go the way he wanted them to. When the OT wisdom literature reveals itself to be aware of this fact, the pertinent awareness of contingency and vulnerability again becomes apparent. Conversely, this is also relevant to situations in which it is indeed going well for people. If it goes well for a person, then this is, in wisdom thinking too, certainly not only attributable to his good behaviour, even if that is indeed a *conditio sine qua*

<sup>10</sup> See Terrence Merrigan and Bénédicte Lemmelijn, "Van de God der Vaderen naar God de Vader: Het christelijke triniteitsdenken en zijn oudtestamentische achtergrond," in *Triniteit, een kruis erover?* (ed. Terrence Merrigan, Christoph Moonen and Kristof Struys; Logos 1; Antwerp: Halewijn, 2006), 21–34, esp. 31.

<sup>11</sup> Note, however, that within biblical wisdom literature itself, different voices can be heard that also nuance this "traditional" truth: cf. the protest of Job or the criticism of Qohelet.



*non*. The ultimate source of human happiness, however, is God himself, insofar as he spreads his "blessing" on people. The "blessing" of God "full-fills" the life of the "righteous," of the "good" person, raises it up to a "full" life, gives it a perspective, allows it to touch and share in the divine itself. With this understanding, the OT wisdom literature, however, still translates this blessing very concretely, and in a fashion true to life, into daily things and circumstances that people recognise and that make them happy. God's "blessing" becomes a secure space within which daily existence, with and despite all its worries and fragility, is sustained and enriched.

### **C THE WISDOM OF JESUS SIRACH: WISDOM OF LIFE IN MULTIPLICITY**

To say, as above, that biblical wisdom is primarily a wisdom of life that tries to give meaningful shape to human life here and now, naturally implies that wisdom applies to the various domains of life. Thus, for example, one finds advice that stems from "socio-economic" wisdom, from "ethical-relational" wisdom, or recommendations that are directly related to the human being's relationship to God.

As it makes little sense to introduce the multiplicity of wisdom in abstract terms, what follows will focus very concretely on the book of the Wisdom of Jesus Sirach as a case in point.<sup>12</sup> Entirely in line with the "traditional" biblical wisdom literature, this book is a prototype of the pointedly life-oriented advice that one should follow if one wants to live a righteous life, in respect for the Lord, and with a view to a blessed existence.

In what follows, firstly and by way of introduction, a succinct overview of the book as such is offered. Then, the biblical wisdom of Jesus Sirach will be illustrated using a selection of passages, which all concern different aspects of human life and the search for meaning and fulfilment. Here, attention will be given to aspects that can be situated on the aforementioned horizontal axis of interhuman relationships, as well as to texts that, along the vertical axis, bring both the relationship with God himself, and the divine presence in human life, to the fore.

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<sup>12</sup> In the context of this contribution, the specific focus will be on the thematic illustration of biblical wisdom of life on the basis of Sirach. This implies that a discussion of its historical context and *Wirkungsgeschichte* cannot be dealt with extensively within the scope of this article.

## 1 “Wisdom of Jesus Sirach”: A Brief Overview

### 1a The Text and its Transmission

The book of the Wisdom of Jesus Sirach, which will simply be referred to as “Sirach” in what follows, is not found in every Bible.<sup>13</sup> It is what Catholics call a “deuterocanonical” or what Protestants call an “apocryphal” book. This means that it was not generally accepted among the books of the HB, just like, among others, Tobit, Judith and 1–2 Maccabees.<sup>14</sup> Only at the councils of Florence (1441) and Trent (1546) was it definitively accepted as inspired.<sup>15</sup> Nevertheless, Sirach did indeed obtain a place from the very beginning in the oldest

<sup>13</sup> For literature on the book of the Wisdom of Jesus Sirach, see, by way of example Gerhard von Rad, “Die Weisheit des Jesus Sirach,” *EvT* 29/3 (1969): 113–133; Otto Rickenbacher, *Weisheitsperikopen bei Ben Sira* (OBO 1; Freiburg: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1973); Maurice Gilbert, *Introduction au livre de Ben Sira, ou Siracide ou Ecclésiastique* (Rome: Pontificio Instituto Biblico, 1985–1986); Lutz Schrader, *Leiden und Gerechtigkeit: Studien zur Theologie und Textgeschichte des Sirachbuches* (Frankfurt: P. Lang, 1994); Johannes Marböck, *Zur Theologie des Buches Sirach*, (Freiburg: Herder, 1995); Alexander A. Di Lella, “The Wisdom of Ben Sira: Resources and Recent Research,” *CurBS* 4 (1996): 161–181; Pancratius C. Beentjes, ed., *The Book of Ben Sira in Modern Research: Proceedings of the First International Ben Sira Conference, 28–31 July 1996, Soesterberg, Netherlands* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 1997); Friedrich V. Reiterer, *Bibliographie zu Ben Sira* (BZAW 266; Berlin: De Gruyter, 1998); Richard J. Coggins, *Sirach* (GAP; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1998); Núria Calduch–Benages and Jacques Vermeylen, eds., *Treasures of Wisdom: Studies in Ben Sira and the Book of Wisdom* (BETL 143; Leuven: Peeters, 1999); Johannes Marböck, *Weisheit im Wandel: Untersuchungen zur Weisheitstheologie bei Ben Sira* (BZAW 272; Berlin: De Gruyter, 1999); Pancratius C. Beentjes, *Book of Ben Sira in Modern Research*; Pancratius C. Beentjes, “Five Years of Ben Sira Research (1994–1998): An Annotated Bibliography,” *Bijdragen* 61 (2000): 76–88; Pancratius C. Beentjes, “Some Major Topics in Ben Sira Research,” *Bijdragen* 66 (2005): 131–144; Pancratius C. Beentjes, “*Happy the One Who Meditates on Wisdom*” (*Sir. 14,20*): *Collected Essays on the Book of Ben Sira* (CBET 43; Leuven: Peeters, 2006); Jeremy Corley and Harm van Grol, eds., *Rewriting Biblical History: Essays on Chronicles and Ben Sira in Honour of Pancratius C. Beentjes* (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2011). See also, the very accessible Dutch works, Pancratius C. Beentjes, *Jesus, zoon van Sirach* (CvL 41; Averbode: Altiora, 1982) and Pancratius C. Beentjes, *De Wijsheid van Jesus Sirach: Een vergeten joods geschrift* (Budel: Damon, 2006). Cf. also very recently Maurice Gilbert, *Recueil d’études – Collected Essays* (BETL 264; Leuven: Peeters, 2014).

<sup>14</sup> Cf. in this regard, for example Hans P. Rüger, “Le Siracide: un livre à la frontière du canon,” in *Le canon de l’Ancien Testament: sa formation et son histoire* (ed. Jean–Daniel Kaestli and Otto Wermelinger; MdB 10; Geneva: Labor et Fides, 1984), 47–69.

<sup>15</sup> Cf. Pancratius C. Beentjes, *De Wijsheid*, 22–23.

Greek translation, namely in the Septuagint.<sup>16</sup> And that is also the only complete version of the book that has survived. Thus, we are talking about a Greek book, or to be more precise, a Greek translation. After all, Sirach was originally a Hebrew writing from about 200–170 B.C.E.. However, due to the fact that the book was not included in the Hebrew canon—one can only guess at the exact reasons for this—,<sup>17</sup> over the course of history it has quickly been forgotten that it was actually a Hebrew book.<sup>18</sup> After a few early references to this book in writings by Church fathers like Jerome, as well as references to this book in the NT, this fact seems to have been completely forgotten, until suddenly in 1896 the whole business gained momentum again.<sup>19</sup> At the end of the nineteenth century, and at the beginning of the twentieth century, in Cambridge and Oxford, text fragments from the *genizah* of the Ibn Esra synagogue in Cairo, were identified as passages from the original Hebrew version of the book of Sirach.<sup>20</sup> In

<sup>16</sup> Cf. in this regard, very specifically, Christian Wagner, *Die Septuaginta-Hapaxlegomena im Buch Jesu Sirach* (BZAW 282; Berlin: De Gruyter, 1999).

<sup>17</sup> Various reasons were given; even the fact that it is “wisdom literature” as such has been seen as a cause. In this regard see Giuseppe Veltri, *Libraries, Translations and “Canonic” Texts: The Septuagint, Aquila and Ben Sira in the Jewish and Christian Traditions* (JSJSup 109; Leiden: Brill, 2006), 194–195: “The more complicated question of Ben Sira’s book was precisely his proclaimed authorship of a written work with an explicit claim to transmit wisdom, hokhmah. This was in fact the reason why the authorized transmission of the text was forbidden.”

<sup>18</sup> In this regard see Alexander A. Di Lella, “The Recently Identified Leaves of Sirach in Hebrew,” *Bib* 45 (1964): 153–167; Alexander A. Di Lella, *The Hebrew Text of Sirach: A Text-Critical and Historical Study* (SCL 1; The Hague: Mouton, 1966); Dominique Barthélemy and Otto Rieckbacher, *Konkordanz zum hebräischen Sirach* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1973); Alexander A. Di Lella, *Hebrew Text*; Benjamin G. Wright, *No Small Difference: Sirach’s Relationship to Its Hebrew Parent Text* (SBLSCS 26; Atlanta, Ga.: Scholars Press, 1989); Antonino Massinale, *La Version Greca del Siracide confronto con il testo ebraico* (AnBib 133; Rome: Pontificio Istituto Biblico, 1995); Pancratius C. Beentjes, *The Book of Ben Sira in Hebrew: A Text Edition of All Extant Hebrew Manuscripts and a Synopsis of All Parallel Hebrew Ben Sira Texts* (VTSup 68; Leiden: Brill, 1997); Takamitsu Muraoka and John F. Elwolde, eds., *Sirach, Scrolls and Sages: Proceedings of the International Symposium on the Hebrew of the Dead Sea Scrolls and Ben Sirach, Leiden, 15–17 December* (STDJ 33; Leiden: Brill, 1999).

<sup>19</sup> For an overview of these “discoveries” see Pancratius C. Beentjes, *Book of Ben Sira in Hebrew*, as well as Beentjes, *Jesus*, 8–12 and Pancratius C. Beentjes, *De Wijsheid*, 24–26.

<sup>20</sup> Charles C. Torrey, “The Hebrew of the Geniza Sirach,” in *Alexander Marx Jubilee Volume* (ed. Saul Lieberman; New York: Jewish Theological Seminary of America, 1950), 585–602; Hans P. Rüger, *Text und Textform im Hebräischen Sirach: Untersuchungen zur Textgeschichte und Textkritik der hebräischen Sirachfragmente aus der Kairoer Geniza* (BZAW 112; Berlin: De Gruyter, 1970); Alexander A. Di Lella, “The Newly Discovered Sixth Manuscript of Ben Sira from the Cairo Geniza,” *Bib* 69 (1988): 226–238.

total, it had to do with four different manuscripts (named A to D). In 1931, a fifth manuscript (E) was discovered in the United States in the Adler Collection of the library of the Jewish Theological Seminary. A few decades later, more specifically between 1956 and 1960, another large number of fragments were defined in Cambridge again as pieces of text from the Hebrew Sirach. And in 1988, a sixth Sirach manuscript of the Cairo Geniza was identified.<sup>21</sup> All of the manuscripts that had been found and specified up to that time came, however, from the tenth to twelfth century after Christ, a long time after the original book was written in the second century before Christ. As in the case of the Masoretic Text of the HB, which was generally studied based on the *Codex Leningradensis* from 1009—recently called the *Codex Petropolitanus*, following again the original name, St Petersburg —, there was also a huge period of time between the original text and the preserved manuscript.

Nevertheless, and again, as in the case of the MT, the findings at the Dead Sea changed all this.<sup>22</sup> In 1947, in the 2nd and 11th caves of Qumran, Hebrew fragments of Sirach were discovered.<sup>23</sup> But it was particularly the so-called Sirach scroll – or rather “fragments” (cf. Mas1<sup>h</sup>) –, that was found in 1964 on Masada by Yigael Yadin that proved to be of great importance.<sup>24</sup> Considering that this scroll could not be younger than about 73 after Christ (the fall of Masada), there was suddenly a manuscript that was only a good 200 years younger than the original text. In the mean time, moreover, laboratory research pointed out that the origin is situated between 100 and 75 before Christ. So, the distance to the original seemed hardly to reach a hundred years. It got even better when it became apparent that this text looked very similar to the mediaeval manuscripts found previously, which had therefore been very carefully transmitted.

These findings mean that today we have at our disposal large parts of the Hebrew book of Sirach, in total reaching up to approximately 70% of the text. The text that is rendered in our Bibles, however, is usually the Greek version of the complete text that has been handed down in the Septuagint, which, incidentally, is also preserved in a shorter and a longer version.

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<sup>21</sup> Cf. Alexander A. Di Lella, “Newly Discovered.”

<sup>22</sup> See, in this regard, for example, Takamitsu Muraoka and John F. Elwolde, eds., *The Hebrew of the Dead Sea Scrolls and Ben Sirah* (STDJ 26; Leiden: Brill, 1997); Daniel J. Harrington, “Two Early Jewish Approaches to Wisdom: Sirach and Qumran Sapiential Work A,” *JSP* 16 (1997): 25–38.

<sup>23</sup> In the 11th Cave, and strictly speaking, it was not really a manuscript on Sirach, but rather a scroll on the psalms (11QPsa) in which (a Hebrew version of) the hymn of Sir 51 is extant.

<sup>24</sup> Cf. in this regard Yigael Yadin, *The Ben Sira Scroll from Masada* (Jerusalem: Israel Exploration Society, 1965).

## 1b The Book, the Author, and his Intention

The book “The Wisdom of Jesus Sirach” begins, as is the case in many modern books, with a prologue. Herein, the author mentions a number of facts, from which it is possible to deduce where, why, and when he penned the Greek Sirach.

He introduces himself as the grandson of “*Jesus*,” whom he calls, in the epilogue (Sir 50:27) the “*son of Sirach*.” His grandfather studied the law, the prophets, and the writings, and decided to write a book himself that would be based on his insight into the biblical tradition and that would contain “*instruction and wisdom*.”<sup>25</sup> He, as well as his grandson, are of the opinion that anyone who gains insight through the study of Scripture may not keep this for himself, but must also be prepared “*to help the outsiders*,” through both “*the spoken and written word*.”<sup>26</sup>

The grandson himself also makes his own contribution. Namely, he has done his utmost to translate this valuable work of his grandfather into Greek, and asks, “*despite our diligent labour in translating*,” for the reader’s indulgence regarding possible difficulties of understanding in his work. He shows himself to be fully aware of the fact that a faithful translation is not always easy. His words, “*For what was originally expressed in Hebrew does not have exactly the same sense when translated into another language*,” continue to be true to the present day, and form, incidentally, the point of departure and the central challenge for the contemporary study of the translation technique of the Septuagint, to which Prof. van Rooy has devoted so much time and energy.

The prologue also tells us when and where the grandson undertook this work: “*Egypt in the thirty–eighth year of the reign of Euergetes*.” Scholars agree that this “benefactor” (*eu–ergetes*) refers to Ptolemy VII. This king reigned from 171 to 117 B.C.E.. The thirty–eighth year of his reign would thus be 132 B.C.E.. If one roughly estimates the gap between the grandfather and his grandson, and keeps in mind that for such a task they would have both had to have attained a certain maturity, then one can place the origin of the original Hebrew writing between 200 and 170 B.C.E.<sup>27</sup> The fact that the Greek translation was done by the grandson in Egypt most probably contributed to the book’s being quickly taken up into the Septuagint, which, according to the tradition, came into being in Alexandria.

<sup>25</sup> Note, in this context, the mention of the three divisions—law, prophets, writings—which make up the three main parts of the TeNaK (the Hebrew Bible): Torah (Law), Nebiim (Prophets) and Ketubim (Writings).

<sup>26</sup> Cf. also for example Sir 33:18: “Consider that I have not laboured for myself alone, but for all who seek instruction.”

<sup>27</sup> Cf. Pancratius C. Beentjes, *De Wijsheid*, 26–27, who even narrows the period to 200–190 B.C.E.

The grandfather himself, on the other hand, seems, according to the direct and indirect references to this city in the text itself, to have lived in Jerusalem.<sup>28</sup> In the text itself, one finds no immediate indication as to whether or not he had a "profession" with which he supported himself. Whatever the case, he is clearly portrayed as a "scribe" in the literal sense of the word. He is someone who, through in-depth study, has familiarised himself with the Law, Prophets, and Writings. He wants to pass on the insights that he has obtained through his study.<sup>29</sup> His grandson characterises him as someone who studied the Scriptures himself. At the same time, he tells us that his grandfather wanted to relate the knowledge that "overflows from his heart" ("I have more on my mind to express; I am full like the full moon," Sir 39:12)—and which had become the "religious inheritance" of the Jewish tradition—to the time and circumstances in which he lived. He wants, in other words, to "update" the body of biblical thought in the context in which he lives, or more specifically to the Hellenism that was gaining influence at the time.<sup>30</sup> He is the moderator in the conversation between the spirit of his age and the biblical tradition, through which he aims to achieve and to formulate an all-encompassing and consistent vision of God, humankind, and the world.<sup>31</sup> He remains unrelentingly faithful to the biblical tradition, but does not reject enriching elements in the burgeoning Hellenistic culture.

Jesus Sirach is thus a "scribe," but also a "teacher of wisdom" and above all a "god-fearing" man.<sup>32</sup> He indirectly describes his own activity in Sir 39:1–11: He contemplates the law of the Almighty (v. 1), investigates the wisdom of earlier times (v. 1), busies himself with the prophets, (v. 1), plumbs the depths of the meaning of the proverbs (v. 2), receives insight from God himself, and

<sup>28</sup> Cf. Pancratius C. Beentjes, *Jesus*, 14–36.

<sup>29</sup> Cf. also Sir 24:30–34: "As for me, I was like a canal from a river, like a water channel into a garden. I said, 'I will water my garden and drench my flower-beds.' And look, my canal became a river, and my river a sea. I will again make instruction shine forth like the dawn, and I will make it clear from far away. I will again pour out teaching like prophecy, and leave it to all future generations. Observe that I have not laboured for myself alone, but for all who seek wisdom."

<sup>30</sup> In this regard see for example Theophil Middendorp, *Die Stellung Jesu Ben Siras zwischen Judentum und Hellenismus* (Leiden: Brill, 1973); James D. Martin, "Ben Sira: A Child of His Time," in *A Word in Season* (ed. James D. Martin and Philip R. Davies; JSOTSup 42; Sheffield: Academic Press, 1986), 141–161; Oda Wischmeyer, *Die Kultur des Buches Jesus Sirach* (BZAW 77; Berlin: De Gruyter, 1995); Johannes Marböck, "Gerechtigkeit Gottes und Leben nach dem Sirachbuch: Ein Antwortversuch in seinem Kontext," in *Gerechtigkeit und Leben im hellenistischen Zeitalter* (ed. Jörg Jeremias; BZAW 296; Berlin: De Gruyter, 2001), 21–52.

<sup>31</sup> See Pancratius C. Beentjes, *Jesus*, 39.

<sup>32</sup> In this regard, see, for example Georg Sauer, *Unterweisung in lehrhafter Form: Jesus Sirach* (JSHRZ 5; Gütersloh: Gütersloher, 1981); Jack T. Sanders, *Ben Sira and Demotic Wisdom* (SBLMS 28; Chico, Calif.: Society of Biblical Literature, 1983).

passes it on (v. 6). God is central to this description. It is He who grants insight to the wise one, who is only thereby able to contemplate creation and to draw wisdom from it that he can apply to life.

### 1c In Search of the Composition and Structure

This wisdom has been written down in the text that has been transmitted to us. Discerning the composition or structure of this book, as is common in contemporary biblical research, is, however, a difficult task. Several different attempts have been made in this regard.<sup>33</sup>

Some are of the opinion that the work came about in two stages. The first part (Sir 1:1–42,14) supposedly consists of proverbs of various sorts, while the second part (Sir 42:15–50:24) is supposed to sound more hymnic in nature and more specifically comprises the "Hymn in Honour of Our Ancestors" (Sir 44:1–50:24) and the hymn concerning God's wisdom in creation (Sir 42:15–43:33).<sup>34</sup>

Others have tried to divide the book into different thematic sections that are each supposedly preceded by a prologue: 1:1–4:10; 4:11–6:17; 6:18–14:19 and 14:10–23:27. In the rest, namely Sir 24:1–50:29, one sees the same pattern, except that after the respective prologues there is always an autobiographical note added: 24:1–32:13; 32:14–38:23; 38:24–50:29. In this view, the concluding chapter Sir 51:1–30,<sup>35</sup> an acrostic, is seen as a secondary "appendix" and not even relevant to the structure of the book.

What is typical of this book, and what makes it so difficult to systematise it into structures, is the way that it expresses ideas in concrete phrases and proverbs that are just as concrete and manifold as concrete reality itself. If any *leitmotiv* can be identified, it is indeed the emphasis on "respect for the Lord."<sup>36</sup> Just as in the book of Proverbs, Sirach seems more like a long collection of words of wisdom that are thematically ordered, and that pass comment on aspects of human life and action. The way in which these "wisdoms" are

<sup>33</sup> In this regard see also Pancratius C. Beentjes, *Jesus*, 36–45.

<sup>34</sup> See, for example, Burton L. Mack, *Wisdom and the Hebrew Epic: Ben Sira's Hymn in Praise of the Fathers* (CSHJ; Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1985); Thomas R. Lee, *Studies in the Form of Sirach 44–50* (SBLDS 75; Atlanta Ga.: Scholars Press, 1986).

<sup>35</sup> In this regard, see, for example, Patrick W. Skehan, "The Acrostic Poem in Sirach 51:13–30," *HTR* 64 (1971): 387–400 and Alexander A. Di Lella, "Sirach 51:1–12: Poetic Structure and Analysis of Ben Sira's Psalm," *CBQ* 48 (1986): 395–407.

<sup>36</sup> Cf. among others Sir 1:11–30; 2:1–17; 3:7; 6:16–17:36; 7:29–31; 9:16; 10:19–24; 15:1, 13, 19; 16:2; 21:6, 11–17; 23:27; 25:6, 10–11; 26:23–25; 32:14–33:1; 34:14–20; 40:26–27; 50:29. See also Pancratius C. Beentjes, *Jesus*, 45.

worded is also diverse.<sup>37</sup> There are proverbs, aphorisms, beatitudes, didactic counsels, hymns and prayers.

To look for a definite structure in such a book is very difficult and perhaps not desirable as such. A person who contemplates his life, sometimes draws comfort and encouragement from one particular set of proverbs, and in other circumstances he instead finds joy and profundity in another set of proverbs. Sirach is perhaps not really a book that should be read through from A to Z in a single sitting.<sup>38</sup> In my opinion, it is more a book that one picks up as night falls, at a time when all is quiet in the house, and one has the peace of mind to reflect on everyday things and vicissitudes, and to entrust one's own vulnerability to the Other.

I am personally inclined to argue that a definite structure is thus of no importance whatsoever. Perhaps it is good just to read what Sirach has to say. After all, is it not the case that biblical scholars should aim to achieve exactly what Sirach did? Namely, to pass on the results of a thorough study and exploration of the biblical writings, and to translate the body of biblical thought, with respect for its venerable tradition, for the spirit of our times and our milieu. In what follows it should become apparent how Sirach's reflections can be very relevant.

## 2 "Wisdom of Jesus Sirach": Go Well and Live Beautifully<sup>39</sup>

In what follows, an attempt is made, on the basis of a presentation of the thought of Jesus Sirach, to show that the OT wisdom literature relates to various aspects of human life in its quest for meaning and fulfilment. A twofold point of departure is employed.

As demonstrated above, the OT wisdom literature can be thematically arranged along two axes, namely, a horizontal one that focuses on the immanence and the vulnerability of daily life, and a vertical one that focuses on the transcendent aspect, on God, who can be considered the origin and goal of this life. A connection was then made between these two orientations and two central theological concepts, respectively, "righteousness" on the one hand, and "fear of God" or "respect for the Lord" on the other. Both facets are strongly,

<sup>37</sup> For this, see, for example, Walter Baumgartner, "Die literarischen Gattungen in der Weisheit des Jesus Sirach," *ZAW* 34 (1914): 161–198.

<sup>38</sup> Perhaps the nature of the book of the Wisdom of Jesus Sirach can indeed be compared to theological–existential and especially to contemplative works like those of Anselm Grün or Phil Bosmans, in which people, from a faith–based perspective, find inspiration and encouragement for their daily life. Such books are also usually not read in one sitting, or even from front to back, but instead paged through now and again in order to find some wisdom and comfort.

<sup>39</sup> This expression functions as an attempt to translate the Dutch saying of the medieval mystic poet, Hadewijch: "vaert wel ende levet scone."



even almost indissolubly, bound to each other, and, when they are both realised in human life, they result in the “blessing of the Most High” which is expressed in a “full-filled” life in harmony with itself, the neighbour and God, and in which, in other words, the biblical  $\text{שְׁלוֹמִים}$  – *shalom* is actualised.

## 2a Immanent and Everyday: The Quest for “Righteousness”

Jesus Sirach gives expression to the biblical quest for “righteousness” in everyday life from two perspectives, namely, the personal attitude to life with regard to oneself, on the one hand, and, on the other hand, the attitude to life in relationship to one’s “neighbour.”<sup>40</sup>

When discussing the individual “self,” Jesus Sirach explicitly argues for inner riches and harmony, sincerity and integrity.<sup>41</sup> He recommends humility (Sir 1:27–30; 3:17–20), but also self-respect (Sir 10:28–29) and steadfastness (Sir 2:1–3). The one who seeks wisdom in his life, finds inner peace and joy (Sir 6:23–31) and lives joyfully and optimistically (Sir 30:21–25). In addition, he also warns of being swallowed up by excessive grief (Sir 38:16–23). In a number of pericopes, a selection of which is offered below, Sirach makes an experienced and impressive argument for the person who – as we say in expressions that are just as apt and pithy – walks tall, who approaches the other with nothing to hide, who approaches, treats, and judges the other with diffidence and respect. It concerns a person who knows where his origin and goal lie, who, with self-respect *and* humility, knows his place, who never loses sight of the purpose for which he actually lives, who knows who he is and what he stands for, who, in spite of everything also pursues his passions, and who moulds and gives shape to his life in light of the ideal of “righteousness.”

When Jesus Sirach discusses the interaction with the “neighbour,” in other words, when the social dimension of life is on the agenda, he also speaks of many aspects in which it again becomes clear that OT wisdom is very realistically connected to life, in all its ups and downs. Jesus Sirach warns against pride (Sir 3:28; 10:7, 9, 12), envy (Sir 12:16–18), slander and gossip (Sir 19:6–8, 13–17; 28:13–16). He recommends sincerity (Sir 5:9–14) and caution in the judgement of others (Sir 11:7–8; 18:19–23, 27). Pride is a thorn in the eye of the human being and God; it deprives a person of the proper perspective on his existence and makes him hard and merciless to his neighbour. Envy sours life, engenders intolerance, and it enables extreme viciousness. Gossip and slander

<sup>40</sup> In this regard, see, for example, Renate Egger-Wenzel and Ingrid Krammer, eds., *Der Einzelne und seine Gemeinschaft bei Ben Sira* (BZAW 270; Berlin: De Gruyter, 1998).

<sup>41</sup> All citations are taken from *The Bible: The New Revised Standard Version: Anglicized Edition* (Washington: Division of Christian Education of the Division of Christian Education of the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the United States of America, 1995).

ruin others. The wise person is advised not to just believe every rumour, but to directly ask the party in question about the (true) circumstances. Not intrigue, but an open conversation is the answer. Sincerity and constancy in one's own speech and thought, on the one hand, and prudence in the judgement of others, on the other, bring a wise man peace with himself, with others and with God.

A readiness to forgive, compassion, friendship, fidelity and respect are absolute values in the wisdom of Jesus Sirach, values that find expression in one's daily interactions with parents, spouses, children, friends, and acquaintances (Sir 25:1). Fathers and mothers are the source of existence, and therefore deserve the respect and love of their children, even at times when that might become more difficult for everybody (Sir 3:3–6:12–14; 7:27–28). A readiness to forgive, just as in the NT's Our Father, is described as a condition of forgiveness for one's own shortcomings (Sir 28:2–4). Friendship is extolled as an exceedingly valuable gift (Sir 6:14–17; 22:19–22). Sirach urges us to nourish this friendship with sincerity and, at the same time, warns against the abuse of trust, which is fatal to any friendship. You only get good counsel from a sincerely concerned person and in the wisdom of the counsel of your own heart (Sir 27:16–24; 37:1–6, 7–10, 12–15). And certainly not from someone who is envious. Caution is also necessary with regard to people who go along with what you say, but actually have a hidden personal agenda. The extent to which Sirach is able to insightfully assess human life, in its happiness and its vulnerability, is also apparent, incidentally, in the fact that he also gives advice regarding the lending and borrowing of money and the preservation of one's own independence (Sir 29:1–28), dealing with the doctor (Sir 38:1–15), table manners (Sir 31:12–31) and other rules of etiquette (Sir 21:22–26), which bear witness to one's respect for oneself and one's neighbour, and indeed do so in a very concrete, even seemingly banal, but elemental way.

In short, Sirach paints a very realistic picture of how interhuman relationships of the highest and most humane integrity and genuine love of neighbour can deteriorate into mean jealousy, false duplicity, hypocrisy, and negativity, which can consume people and which, precisely in this way, illustrate how fragile and vulnerable human happiness is and can be.

## **2b Transcendent and Direction-Giving: The "Fear of God" or the "Respect for the Lord"**

Complementary to what has been described above as an immanent orientation towards living a life based on "righteousness" or what we could call, in both personal and interpersonal terms, dignified, Sirach emphasises the orientating perspective offered by the transcendent, namely God, who is the origin and goal of human existence. Every worthwhile life begins in so-called "respect for

the Lord"—righteousness is intrinsically connected to it—, as does wisdom and love.<sup>42</sup>

Respect for the Lord offers a person a fundamental attitude of trust, of "daring" certainty in life, in spite of everything. Trust in the all-sustaining God opens a perspective of hope in the good that He bestows on the righteous person (Sir 2:7–10). Respect for the Lord presupposes actually living according to the Law of God and the acceptance of his instruction (Sir 2:15–17; 32:14–17, 24; 33:1–3). The Law is overflowing with wisdom, understanding and instruction (Sir 24:23–29). Respect for the Lord is, in this way, the fount of wisdom. And, indeed, wisdom even *is* respect for the Lord. Respect for the Lord is the beginning and the completion, the crown and the root of wisdom (Sir 1:14, 16–18, 20).

Sirach also outlines, in extremely strong wording, the difference between wisdom and folly (Sir 21:11–15; 22:9–15): teaching a fool is like gluing the pieces of a pot together or like talking to a drowsy man who then "foolishly" asks what you actually said. At the same time, he warns against the abuse of cleverness, which can be horrific when it becomes so sophisticated that it becomes unjust, and when people know how to twist things so that the law favours them (Sir 19:20–28).

Moreover, sound wisdom is connected to creation itself (Sir 1:1–4, 8–10). "All wisdom is from the Lord." God created wisdom and from the beginning "poured her out upon all his works, upon all the living according to his gift; he lavished her upon those who love him." It is very clear: He gives wisdom to those who respect him. It is that simple! Respect for the Lord is, in other words, alongside "righteousness" in the practice of daily life, the orienting horizon of the human life that attunes itself to God and finds therein wisdom and fulfilment.

## **2c God's Blessing: An "Intrinsically Human" Life in Deep "Fulfilment"**

A life that is given shape in this manner, that is, from the dual perspective of an immanent righteousness on the one hand and a transcendent respect for the Lord that is its inspiration on the other, leads to and is "full-filled" in the "blessing of the Most High," which, in the OT wisdom tradition, becomes very concretely and tangibly real. In the texts that describe God's blessing, it is, incidentally, immediately clear that the aforementioned perspectives on "righteousness" and "respect for the Lord" are strongly connected.

<sup>42</sup> See for example, specifically, Josef Haspecker, *Gottesfurcht bei Jesus Sirach* (AnBib 30; Rome: Pontificio Instituto Biblico, 1967).

Respect for the Lord, and thus *de facto* also the righteousness which is its everyday expression, is rewarded by a long, secure life under the protection of God himself (Sir 34:14–20; 40:26–27). The person who trusts in God has nothing to fear. He finds, in God, his support, his strength, his shield, his shade in the noonday sun. God fills his heart with joy, makes his eyes sparkle, heals, gives life, and brings blessing. "Respect for the Lord is like a garden of blessing."

What the blessing consists of is very concrete. Respect for the Lord leads to blessings of honour and glory, of gladness and a crown of rejoicing, of delight for the heart, joy and a long life. Respect for the Lord is a gift of God himself and paves the way to love (Sir 1:11–13). God's blessing reveals itself, according to Sirach, in a good spouse, who is moreover described quite precisely (Sir 26:1–3, 13–18; 36:27–29). She is good. She is strong. She gives her husband joy. She is skilful. She is quiet and modest. She has self-control. She is neat and not to be despised: she is charming. In describing her charm, Sirach is also very concrete: she has a beautiful face, a stately figure, shapely legs and steadfast feet. A man who is blessed with such a wife lives twice as long. He is happy. His face is always cheerful. He gets the best possession: He receives a helper who is appropriate for him and acquires a pillar of rest.<sup>43</sup>

When God blesses someone in this way, Sirach advises him to enjoy it. He warns against stinginess and urges people to share (Sir 14:5–6, 11–16; 31:27–28). A person who has worked should not amass what he has acquired and allow the fruits of his toil to pass him by. Realising that human life is contingent and vulnerable, and being conscious of the certainty of an approaching death, which means the end, a person should not allow the good days to slip through his fingers.

Sirach speaks very concretely about the joys of life, the fruits of labour, feasting and wine. Life plays itself out here and now. Yesterday is gone, and tomorrow is always uncertain. Today, a person is blessed, and, today, he must be grateful for this. The "now" is the only time that we live and the only time that we, with trust in and appreciation toward God, can give meaning to life in the deepest sense of the word. This is true for the OT wisdom in general, and for Sirach in particular, it is a self-evident reality and simultaneously a challenge for life itself. The search for fulfilment in the blessing of the Most High, very concretely in daily life on the basis of the honourable dedication to "righteous-

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<sup>43</sup> For studies on Jesus Sirach's view of women, see, among others, Kenneth E. Bailey, "Women in Ben Sirach and in the New Testament," in *For Me To Live* (ed. Robert A. Coughenour; Cleveland: Dillon/Liederbach, 1972), 56–73; Henry McKeating, "Jesus Ben Sira's Attitude to Women," *ExpTim* 85 (1974): 85–87; Warren C. Trenchard, *Ben Sira's View of Women: A Literary Analysis* (BJS 38; Chico, Calif.: Scholars Press, 1982).

ness” on the one hand, and sincere “respect for the Lord” on the other, is the task of life for everyone. That is the core of Sirach’s thought.

#### **D CONCLUSION: “ALL WISDOM IS RESPECT FOR THE LORD” (SIRACH 19:20)**

From what has been said above, it should be clear that the OT wisdom literature in general and that of Jesus Sirach in particular is very explicitly connected to finding meaning in life and the realisation of life itself, here and now, with all its cares and joys. It discusses “wisdom,” which is concretely and immanently expressed in “righteousness,” is always transcendently oriented towards “respect for the Lord”—who is the source and goal of wisdom—and leads to the tangible “blessing of the Most High.”

In all of this, God, as origin of all life and source of wisdom and blessing, is without doubt central. However specific the daily concerns may be, however closely and tangibly this God may come to meet us in the midst of them, OT wisdom never denies the idea that this God in the end transcends the human being, surpasses him, and, however close He may be, always remains ultimately transcendent. This idea is beautifully worded in Sirach in the following quote (Sir 43:27–30):

We could say more but could never say enough;  
let the final word be: “He is the all.”  
Where can we find the strength to praise him?  
For he is greater than all his works.  
Awesome is the Lord and very great,  
and marvellous is his power.  
Glorify the Lord and exalt him as much as you can,  
for he surpasses even that.  
When you exalt him, summon all your strength,  
and do not grow weary, for you cannot praise him enough.

With this idea, I would like to end this contribution. In the hope that the considerations offered above will make Jesus Sirach’s wisdom a little bit more familiar, I conclude with his proper fitting words (Sir 25:9–10):

Happy is one who finds a friend,  
and one who speaks to attentive listeners.  
How great is one who finds wisdom!  
But none is superior to one who fears the Lord.

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