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Ben Sira in Conversation with Traditions

A Festschrift for Prof. Núria Calduch-Benages
on the Occasion of Her 65th Birthday

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Contents

Preface — vii

Introduction — 1

Select Bibliography — 7

Contributors — 13

Part I: Ben Sira in Conversation with the Torah

John J. Collins

The Creation of Humanity in Hebrew Wisdom Literature of the Second Century BCE — 19

Jean-Louis Ska

Torah, Paideia, and Sophia in Ben Sira — 35

Pancratius C. Beentjes

Ben Sira's Portrayal of Aaron and Phinehas (Sir 45:6–25): An Interaction between Tradition and Innovation — 51

Benjamin G. Wright III

"Do Not Defraud the Life of the Poor": Notes on the Greek of Sir 4:1–10 — 65

Part II: Ben Sira in Conversation with the Prophets

Jeremy Corley

Ben Sira and Ezekiel — 81

Bradley C. Gregory

"Bread to the Hungry and Clothes to the Naked": A History of a Prophetic-Sapiential Motif from Tobit to the Syriac of Ben Sira — 95

Paweł Paszko

The Metaphor of a Woman Giving Birth: The Book of Ben Sira in the Light of Prophetic Literature — 109

Ibolya Balla

Banquet of Life in Ben Sira and Hosea: Intertextual Links between Sir 24:12–23 and Hos 14:5–10 — 123

Part III: Ben Sira in Conversation with Wisdom Traditions

Tova Forti

“Yet, No One Remembered that Poor Man”: Qoheleth and Ben Sira on the Wisdom of the Poor — 149

Sergio Rotasperti and F. Javier Ruiz-Ortiz

Living with Wild Animals: A Study of the Imagery in Sir 25:15–16 — 165

Friedrich V. Reiterer

On the Gifts of the Lord in Ben Sira — 177

Dinh Anh Nhue Nguyen

Family Ethos and Wise Behavior in Proverbs, Sirach, and Vietnamese Folk Sayings — 191

Part IV: Ben Sira in Conversation with Some of the Literature of the Second Temple

Francis M. Macatangay and Emilio López Navas

Jerusalem in the Books of Tobit and Ben Sira — 217

Michael W. Duggan

Wisdom in Disguise and the Heroism of Widows: Ben Sira and Judean Traditions (Sir 4:1–19) — 235

Barbara Schmitz

Path Dependence and Institutional Change: The Portrayal of Alcimus and Jonathan as High Priests in 1 Maccabees — 249

Matthew Goff

A Devilish Parallel: Sir 15:14 in its Hebrew Reception — 267

Part V: Later Authors in Conversation with the Book of Ben Sira

Oda Wischmeyer

The Book of Ben Sira From a Reception-Historical Perspective: Hubert Frankemölle’s Commentary on the Letter of James — 285

Elisa Estévez López

Quick to Listen, Slow to Speak, and Slow to Anger (Jas 1:19 and Sir 5:11) — 301

Maurice Gilbert

Reliability and Gentleness: Moses, Jesus, and the Disciple — 321

Juan Chapa

“Useful for Instruction”: The Popularity of Sirach in Christian Egypt — 337

Stefan C. Reif

M. H. Segal (1875–1968) and his Abiding Interest in Ben Sira — 351

Index of References — 371

Index of Authors — 381

Elisa Estévez López

Quick to Listen, Slow to Speak, and Slow to Anger (Jas 1:19 and Sir 5:11)

Abstract: This article aims to relate the exhortation of James on the proper use of language, the difficulties to control what is said, the evil that it can cause (Jas 3:1–12), and the need to listen and be slow to speak (Jas 1:19–20, 26; 3:1–12), with the convictions that Ben Sira holds regarding the ethics of language (Sir 5:9–6:1). Although the contexts are different, both texts share the belief that the ability to control the tongue singles out wise people and is a way of delimiting the boundaries of identity for their communities of reference. The study uses the personality model with its three interconnected zones: zone of self-expressive speech (mouth-ears), emotion-fused thought (eyes-heart), and purposeful action (hands-feet).

Keywords: Jas 1:9, Sir 5:11, control of the tongue, wisdom from above, identity, three zones of personality

Introduction

The ethics of language is part of the concerns of the ancient Mediterranean world. Since words can mean life or death, every culture encourages the proper control of the two organs of the body, namely the mouth and the ears. What is heard and spoken is continually and carefully examined so that it does not transgress the identity boundaries of the groups to which it belongs. This is found in Jewish wisdom literature, in Christian writings, and also in the ethical reflections of the Greco-Roman world.

In this article, we focus on James's exhortations on the proper use of words in relationships with others and the difficulties of regulating what is said and the harm that a word can cause. And so, James urges the need to listen and be slow to speak (Jas 1:19–20, 26; 3:1–12).¹ In the style of the sages, James reworks, in light of his faith in Jesus, common elements of wisdom traditions from before him, belonging to both the Hellenistic and the Jewish world. His development is an exercise in the collective memory of the teaching of Jesus in order to serve

¹ In James, there are other texts on the use and abuse of the tongue (Jas 2:12; 4:1–2, 11–12; 5:12), to which we will refer, without analyzing them.