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## Σοφία Σιραχ (*Ecclesiasticus*) ▫ THE WISDOM OF SIRACH (*ECCLESIASTICUS*)

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### INTRODUCTION

The *Wisdom of Sirach* is also known as *Ecclesiasticus* and *The Wisdom of Jesus Ben Sira*; the former suggests its use as a ‘church book’ in the early Christian community, which accepted it into its canon. The Jewish community, followed by the Reformers, excluded it from the canon. This explains the extraordinary history of its text. The original Hebrew text was lost to the western world from about 400 CE to 1900; the book survived in Greek, Latin, Syriac and other translations. Since about 1900, extensive sections of the Hebrew text have been discovered in various MSS: those of the *Cairo Genizah*, the *Qumran Scrolls*, and the *Masada Corpus*, so that now two thirds of that exists. The translation here is largely based on the Septuagint, with notable omissions and differences from other texts addressed in the footnotes.

Although the book lacks any clear structure, it resembles the Book of Proverbs in many ways. It stresses characteristic wisdom teachings: proper speech, riches and poverty, honesty, diligence, choice of friends, sin and death, retribution and wisdom itself. Unlike Proverbs 10ff, individual maxims are not set apart but are incorporated into smooth-flowing poems of some length (often in accordance with the number of letters in the Hebrew alphabet). The doctrine is surprisingly traditional, almost as if Job and Ecclesiastes have never been written. Ben Sira is aware of the problem of suffering (2:1–6, 11:4, 40:1–10) but he is a firm believer in the justice of divine retribution. God will reward everyone according to one’s deserts (15:11–16:23). There is not intimation of a future life with God in the Hebrew text; rather, all go to Sheol (14:12–19, 38:16–23). This is the usual Hebrew teaching, which understood immortality only in terms of one’s progeny and good name (44:13–15). Traditionally, Wisdom literature never appealed to Israel’s sacred history or Covenant. Ben Sira is an outstanding exception, in view of his ‘Praise of the Ancestors’ (Chs 44–50) and his identification of personified wisdom with the Torah or Law (24:23). At the same time, his book belongs definitely to the genre of wisdom literature, with its stress on the lessons of experience and on the ‘fear of the Lord’ (1:11–30, 25:10–11, 40:25–27).

### AUTHORSHIP AND DATES

Ben Sira signs his name (50:27), describes his profession (39:1–11) and invites students to his school (51:23). Sometime before 180 BCE and the ensuing Maccabean revolt, he committed his wisdom to writing, probably in Jerusalem (see his description in 50:1–24 of Simeon II, who was High Priest from 219–196). Sometime after 132 BCE (see the Prologue), his grandson translated the original Hebrew into Greek. The grandson rightly stresses the profound knowledge that Ben Sira had of Hebrew traditions (‘the Law and the Prophets and the other books’ – already the threefold division of the Hebrew Bible was in the process of formation).

*The ‘TheoDoor’ file for this book has yet to be completed; this is awaiting completion of the encoding of the Hebrew text, so that proper comparisons can be made between that and the Greek text, which is the source for the deuterocanonical entries in the Catholic and Orthodox bibles.*

—| WORK-IN-PROGRESS |—