

Reading Questions on Jewish Wisdom

Jewish World of the New Testament

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Reading

- Wisdom of Solomon (Wisdom)
- Ben Sira (Sirach; Ecclesiasticus) 1-15; 34:9-36:17; 38-51

In Wisdom of Solomon

- Who are the “sinners” in the first section of Wisdom? How does our decision at this point influence our reading of the rest of the book?
- In the middle chapters, how is personified Wisdom depicted? Read Proverbs 1-8 and compare this depiction of Wisdom with the later portrait in Wisdom of Solomon. Then read John 1:1-18. Does the depiction of personified Wisdom help us to understand John’s Christology?
- In the latter chapters of the book, how does Wisdom understand idolatry? Why is it problematic? What are its consequences? Read Romans 1:18-32 and compare Paul’s account of human idolatry there with the account in Wisdom.
- Wisdom of Solomon is usually thought to have been written in Egypt (probably Alexandria). How does the author draw on the Exodus story in the latter parts of the book? What does this suggest about his stance toward the gentile communities around him (remember that there were distinct communities of Hellenistic urbanites and indigenous Egyptians).

In Ben Sira

- What hints do we see in Ben Sira about the profession, activities, and social standing of a Jewish wisdom teacher?
- In the final “hymn of Israel’s heroes,” who is singled out for mention? Is anyone surprising left out?
- In the “hymn of Israel’s heroes,” what virtues are held up for emulation? Does the characterization of any of these figures surprise you? What does this section suggest about the way Ben Sira read the OT?
- Ben Sira has sometimes been used as a key

Comparing the Two Books

- Which of these books seems more like biblical wisdom? Why? What features in each book are like/unlike traditional Israelite wisdom literature?
- How is God depicted in each of these books? What main divine character traits are emphasized? What do they say God does or will do in the future?
- What topics are the focus of wisdom teaching in each book? Do they agree about the content of divine wisdom?
- What role does reward/punishment after death play in each book? What impact does this have on the substance of their teaching?
- How does each book try to motivate its reader to live a wise life? What kind of educational and rhetorical strategies does the author use?
- What kind of epistemology is implied in each book? How are human beings able to come to know God and the world?
- How does each author seem to respond to (a) Gentiles in general, and (b) Hellenistic culture in particular? How do they depict God’s stance toward these non-Jews?