PART ONE

BEN SIRA AND EARLY JEWISH WISDOM
CHAPTER ONE

WISDOM AND WOMEN AT QUMRAN

Israelite and Jewish wisdom texts form a tributary of a larger stream of ancient wisdom that flowed through the Near East. The primary concerns of these traditions were with interpersonal relationships, with how to live a good life, with humankind’s place in the created order and with the way that the created order works (what we in the modern world leave predominantly to scientists). Furthermore, the wisdom traditions particular to ancient Israel and later to early Judaism drew heavily on the larger common stock of ancient Near Eastern wisdom. Thus, much of the content of Israelite and Jewish wisdom is conventional wisdom instruction that cannot be understood as reflecting any specific social situation or political concern at a particular time. For anyone interested in using these texts to assist in reconstructing the social or political realities of early Judaism, the wisdom texts look potentially fruitful, but they present difficult obstacles. Such problems certainly attend any attempt to use these works to shed some light on the possible presence of women in the Qumran community and the roles envisioned for them there. Can the Qumran wisdom texts tell us anything about whether women were present at the community along the shores of the Dead Sea, and if they were, were they members of the sect? Do they provide any evidence for the attitudes of this particular community toward women?

Wisdom Texts at Qumran

Several kinds of wisdom texts came to light among the scrolls from Qumran. There were, of course, biblical wisdom texts (Proverbs,

---

1 For examples of some of the problems and payoffs using one particular wisdom text, the Wisdom of Ben Sira, see Chapter 4 “‘Who Has Been Tested by Gold and Found Perfect?’ Ben Sira’s Discourse of Riches and Poverty,” Chapter 5, “‘Fear the Lord and Honor the Priest’: Ben Sira as Defender of the Jerusalem Priesthood,” and Chapter 6, “‘Put the Nations in Fear of You’: Ben Sira and the Problem of Foreign Rule.”

2 For a general discussion of wisdom at Qumran and the manuscripts identified as such, see A. Lange, “Die Weisheit aus Qumran,” The Wisdom Texts from Qumran