The rich and the poor have always been part of the fabric of human society. Yet how societies have constructed the relative values of wealth and poverty and how they have treated rich and poor people have varied over time and geography. The sages of ancient Israel were well aware of the socio-economic disparities between rich and poor, and Israelite and Jewish sapiential literature has as one of its major concerns these disparities and how people ought to respond to them.

In the Wisdom of Ben Sira, the sage’s discourses on riches and poverty occur almost exclusively in material that A.A. Di Lella has called “recipe wisdom,” that is, wisdom that “deals with everyday attitudes, beliefs, customs, manners and forms of behavior one should have toward God, one’s fellows, and the world at large if one is to live fully and well as a faithful Israelite.”¹ For Ben Sira riches and poverty are not metaphorical concepts that apply, for instance, to those who are spiritually wealthy or impoverished in the way that the author of the gospel of Matthew redacts the Beatitudes in his Sermon on the Mount. When Ben Sira speaks of wealth and poverty, he talks almost exclusively in terms of people who do or do not have material wealth. The ways in which he constructs his discourse allow insight into his own attitudes toward these conditions as well as how he wants his students to respond to them. They also provide a glimpse into the social world of the sage, the rich and the poor in second-century BCE Judea, and the ideology that supports these complex relationships.

The Vocabulary of Riches and Poverty in Ben Sira

Since the Wisdom of Ben Sira is not fully extant in Hebrew, one must look both at the surviving Hebrew texts and at the Greek translation of Ben Sira’s grandson in order to get as complete an understanding as possible of the vocabulary of riches and poverty in the entire book.²

In general the terminology in the surviving Hebrew texts is what one would expect to find when one compares it to other wisdom texts like Proverbs, for example.³ The major terms for poverty all appear in Sirach, עבון, דל, מחסור, עני/ענוה, רש. Ben Sira prefers the terms דל and עני, however, to indicate poverty. מחסור only occurs once in the extant portions of the Hebrew (40:26), and it means “lack” or “want.”⁴

The Greek translation employs two major word groups to translate the Hebrew words for poverty; these are derived from the stems πτωχ- and ταπειν-. The Greek translator, however, often seems to regard the two roots as synonymous. One example will suffice at this juncture. In Sir 13:20–23 Ben Sira writes of the rich and the poor. He notes that "humility (ענוה/ταπεινότης) is an abomination to the proud; likewise the poor (אבון/πτῶχος) are an abomination to the rich (עשיר)."⁵ The surrounding context of the verse shows that the translator was not consistent in his renderings. At the end of verse 19 he rendered דל with πτῶχος. The same Hebrew word, דל, appears in verse 21 as ταπεινός, in verse 22 as ταπεινός again, and in verse 23 as πτῶχος as in verse 19. What complicates matters even more is that the Greek translator, while

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² After the completion of this paper, we became aware of V.M. Asensio, “Poverty and Wealth: Ben Sira’s View of Possessions,” Der Einzelne und Seine Gemeinschaft bei Ben Sira (R. Egger-Wenzel and I. Krammer, eds.; BZAW 270; Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1998) 151–77. In this article Asensio’s description of Ben Sira’s general attitude toward riches and poverty is in essential agreement with the one we set out here. His analysis, however, views the material as essentially reflecting a dichotomy between rich and poor throughout Ben Sira’s teaching and does not take into consideration Ben Sira’s own ambiguous status vis-à-vis his rich superiors. See below for our remarks on this problem, which we view as central to understanding Ben Sira. For the Hebrew manuscripts and the places where they are extant, see P.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). For the Greek, see J. Ziegler, Septuaginta: Vetus Testamentum Graecum Auctioritate Academiae Litterarum Gottingensis editum; vol. XII, 2: Sapientia Iesu Filii Sirach (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1965).


⁴ In this single instance, the Greek has ἐλάττωσις.

⁵ In Hebrew the passage is only extant in Ms A.