Animals play an important role in Ancient Near Eastern literature and in the Bible, especially in the prophetic and wisdom writings. Among the latter, Proverbs and Sirach, two wisdom books with an essentially didactic aim and framework, stand out. Their authors use countless ways to capture and retain the attention of their disciples and, most importantly, to leave their teachings fixed in the hearts of the young. One of these means consists in incorporating animal imagery in their wide-ranging repertory of literary patterns (prohibitions, comparative sayings, pieces of advice, rhetorical questions, instructions, numerical sayings...), with the aim of illustrating different aspects of human life as well as different forms of human behavior.

The images of animals in Proverbs were recently studied by Tova L. Forti, in an excellent monograph that has shed light on various aspects of our investigation. Our obviously much more modest work could serve as a starting point for further investigations on the subject. Here,
the intention is to analyze the animal images in some selected passages of the Hebrew text of Ben Sirach, according to the following classification: animal imagery and reprehensible behavior (Sir 4:30; 33:6; 42:13), animal imagery and social categories (Sir 13:17–19; 33:25), a new wisdom paradigm (Sir 11:3), and a controversial image (Sir 25:8ab).

A. Animal Imagery and Reprehensible Behavior

Unlike the book of Proverbs, where animal images appear as models to be imitated (cf. Prov 6:6–8; 30:25, about the ant), Ben Sira often uses them to illustrate reprehensible forms of human behavior in family and social circles.

1. The Lion (Sir 4:30)

Sir 4:30 belongs to a series of negative precepts beginning in 4:20 with the vocative بְּנֵי (my son) and ending with 6:4. These precepts are constructed according to the following arrangement: prohibitive particle (לע + ) verb in imperfect (with value of imperative) + motivation (missing in some cases). This negative series begins with an instruction about shame and arrogance (4:20–31); its final strophe (4:29–31) constitutes the immediate context of our verse. The text appears in Mss A (4:29–31) and C (4:30–31).