WOMEN IN THE WISDOM OF BEN SIRA AND THE BOOK OF JUDITH: A STUDY IN CONTRASTS AND REVERSALS

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Introduction

Ben Sira’s attitude toward women is, to say the least, uncongenial to most contemporary Western readers. Even in his laudatory remarks he views women primarily in relationship to men. Ben Sira’s highest acclaim appears in xxxvi 29:

He who possesses a wife possesses his principal possession,
a help like himself, a strong support.¹

Ben Sira derived the Hebrew phrase reʾšit qinyān, “principal possession”, from the middle two words of Prov. viii 22a, in which personified Wisdom is the speaker: yhwh qānānî reʾšit dērākāw,² “Yahweh took possession of me as the principle of his ways”.³ The noun qinyān (root qnh) has the same consonants as the verb form qānānî (with yod and second nun reversed). By describing the wife as a husband’s reʾšit qinyān, Ben Sira clearly suggests that she is like Lady Wisdom in the majestic poem of Prov. viii 22–36—high praise indeed even though, to be sure, the wife is still viewed as a husband’s possession.

Ben Sira makes other favorable comments about women, but the emphasis is chiefly on the value a woman can have for a man. Regarding marriage, Ben Sira writes:

¹ My literal translation of MS B v. 29a, qnh 'issā reʾšit qinyān, to bring out the word play in Hebrew; I read qnh as a participle, qāneh, a reading supported by MS B’s qunh and the Greek; the Syriac, however, read qnh as imperative. The phrase, “a helper like himself”, comes from the Greek and Syriac (in v. 29b, MS B is corrupt). Unless noted otherwise, translations from the Wisdom of Ben Sira are taken from P.W. Skehan and A.A. Di Lella, The Wisdom of Ben Sira (Garden City, New York, 1987). All other biblical quotations, unless noted otherwise, are taken from the NAB (New American Bible).
² So LXX, Symmachus, and Vulgate; the MT has darkā.
Happy the husband of a good wife,  
twice lengthened are his days;  
A worthy wife brings joy to her husband,  
peaceful and full is his life.  
A good wife is a generous gift  
bestowed upon him who fears the Lord;  
Be he rich or poor, his heart is content  
and a smile is ever on his face (xxvi 1–4).

Ben Sira also defends a mother’s rights over her children; what he says in iii 2 is typical:

... the Lord sets a father in honor over his children;  
a mother’s right he confirms over her sons.

See also iii 4, 6–7, 9, 16. Nonetheless, most of what Ben Sira writes about woman as wife, daughter, adulteress, or prostitute is sexist, patronizing, and objectionable.4 To be sure, Ben Sira was not alone among the wisdom writers to have such attitudes toward women (see, e.g., Prov. v 3–14, vii 10–27; Qoh. vii 26–8). Like others in his society, he viewed women primarily, if not exclusively, in terms of their sociologically validated and religiously legitimated roles, i.e., in their relationships to the significant males of their family—father, husband, brother(s), son(s)—and not as autonomous and independent persons or as the equals of men.5

The book of Judith provides a sharp contrast to many of the statements Ben Sira makes about women and their roles in society. In describing the life, actions, and speeches of Judith, the book reverses a number of stereotypes and biases the Jewish community of Ben Sira’s day held about men and women. These contrasts and reversals


5 Skehan and Di Lella (n. 1), p. 91. C.V. Camp (“Understanding a Patriarchy: Women in Second Century Jerusalem Through the Eyes of Ben Sira”, in A.-J. Levine [ed], “Women Like This:” New Perspectives on Jewish Women in the Greco-Roman World [Atlanta, 1991], pp. 1–39) examines Ben Sira’s views about women through the lens of the honor-shame complex, suggesting that “social identity is construed with particular attention to sexual relationships, such that male ‘honor’—the highest, and a highly contested good—is determined essentially by the control men exercise over women’s ‘shame,’ that is their sexuality” (p. 2).