Ben Sira and Hellenistic Literature in Greek

Benjamin G. Wright III

1 Introduction

Much has been written about Ben Sira’s relationship to Hellenism and how much he was influenced by Hellenistic culture. In fact, there really is no dispute on this score. Of course Hellenistic culture had an impact on Ben Sira. If one accepts Martin Hengel’s analysis, however, Ben Sira had a confrontational relationship with what Hengel calls “Hellenistic liberalism.”1 On the other end of the spectrum, if one agrees with Theophil Middendorp’s assessment, “Ben Sira wrote a schoolbook according to a Greek model.”2 To see the problem this way misses the mark, however, as I have argued elsewhere.3 Ben Sira lived in a period in which one of two Hellenistic kingdoms, Ptolemaic or Seleucid, controlled Judea and Jerusalem, and culture was often wielded as a weapon of imperialist policy. For Ben Sira, foreign control over the people of God caused him the most concern, not whether Hellenistic culture per se was either beneficial or harmful.4 That is not my topic in this paper, however, although it does bear on how we think about Ben Sira and things Greek.

1 Martin Hengel, Judaism and Hellenism (trans. John Bowden; 2 vols.; Philadelphia, Penn.: Fortress, 1974), 113–53. Hengel is following in the footsteps of commentators like Rudolph Smend who read Ben Sira’s Judaism as opposed to Hellenism. See, for example, Rudolf Smend, Die Weisheit des Jesus Sirach erklärt (Berlin: Georg Reimer, 1906), xxiii, who sees Ben Sira as setting forth a “declaration of war” (Kriegserklärung) of Judaism against Hellenism. My thanks to Jeremy Corley who read an earlier version of this paper and made a number of helpful suggestions.


4 See, Benjamin G. Wright, “What Does India Have to Do with Jerusalem?” For a different view of Ben Sira and foreign nations, see Marko Marttila, Foreign Nations in the Wisdom of Ben Sira: A Jewish Sage between Opposition and Assimilation (DCLS 13; Berlin: de Gruyter, 2012) and my review in JSJ 45 (2014): 419–21.
In this short essay I want to look at the extent to which we can determine if Ben Sira knew Greek and what that might mean for his wisdom project, since when one looks to scholarly studies that treat the issue of Ben Sira and Hellenism, almost no consideration is given to whether the sage knew any Greek and if he did, where he might have acquired such knowledge. So, for example, Oda Wischmeyer, in her study of culture in Ben Sira, includes chapters on language and literature and upbringing and education, and she essentially makes one comment on Ben Sira and Greek language: “Possibly having at hand knowledge of the Greek language might have served him in his travels.”

Burton Mack, who thinks that Ben Sira was heavily influenced by Hellenistic literary practices, nowhere addresses specifically whether Ben Sira knew Greek or how he might have learned it, if he did. Whereas Wischmeyer seems to assume that Ben Sira would have little need of Greek, except perhaps to travel, Mack appears to think that no argumentation is required to show that Ben Sira could operate in the language of Hellenism. Moreover, Wischmeyer and Mack reflect two different but related aspects of the problem of whether Ben Sira knew Greek. For Wischmeyer, Ben Sira might have needed Greek to use in his travels in much the same way that I might need to know some French to travel in France or some German to travel in Germany. I think that there can be little argument that Ben Sira knew enough Greek to travel. If the first-person report that speaks about travel in 34:12–13 and the remark about the sage traveling in foreign lands and “testing the good and bad things in people” in 39:4 do in fact reflect Ben Sira’s own experience, then it seems more than a likelihood that Ben Sira knew enough Greek to get around in the Hellenistic Mediterranean world. This type of practical language familiarity is a far cry from the circumstance that Mack envisions, however, since if Ben Sira were to know and employ Hellenistic literature and literary conventions, he would have had to acquire at least some Greek education.

Part of the reason for this state of affairs goes back to scholarly assumptions about how Judeans might have reacted to Hellenistic culture, assumptions that seem to have been framed by Jewish texts that paint those cultural influences with a broadly negative brush, such as 2 Maccabees. So, one encounters claims such as Hengel’s that Ben Sira was battling the influence of Hellenism in Jerusalem and his opponents were “infected” with Hellenistic

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5 Oda Wischmeyer, Die Kultur des Buches Jesus Sirach (BZNW 77; Berlin: de Gruyter, 1995), 139.
"Möglicherweise vorhandene griechische Sprachkenntnisse mögen ihm auf seinen Reisen gedient haben."