Ibolya Balla


This volume, a revision of the author’s doctoral thesis submitted to Murdoch University in Perth, Australia, analyzes Ben Sira’s views on gender and sexuality through a full review of all relevant passages. Balla rightly notes that this sapiential work has received a great deal of scholarly attention in recent decades, but no monograph-length study has attempted to explicate the sage’s memorable views on sexuality. Balla succeeds in providing such a synthesis, even if the study at times reads more like a summary than an argument.

An introductory chapter provides a helpful overview of the current state of scholarship on Ben Sira, including necessary attention to the complex textual history of the book. Balla states her thesis here, claiming that Ben Sira is not intrinsically negative about human sexuality. Instead, his perspective is “complex, subtle, and depends on the context of the individual sayings” (10). This is a helpful observation, and subsequent analysis validates her thesis. Yet Balla does not offer an explicit methodology at the outset, whether from the area of gender studies, social-scientific analysis, or some other framework.

Chapter 1 considers Ben Sira’s views on filial piety and treatment of widows. Here and in subsequent chapters, Balla provides the relevant translations from both the extant Hebrew (if available) and both G1 and G11. She provides original words/phrases when these have bearing on the discussion, and a lengthy appendix gives the full Hebrew and Greek for all passages under consideration in this volume. Fathers receive more attention than mothers in the sayings on filial piety. In all passages on honoring one’s parents, the ultimate authority for Ben Sira is the deity, and Balla demonstrates the sage’s dependence on earlier traditions. Similarly, the treatment of widows in Sirach follows closely the demand to act with benevolence that is stressed in the Hebrew Bible.

The next chapter takes up attitudes towards sons and daughters in Sirach. Scholars have long noticed Ben Sira’s extreme anxiety about a potentially recalcitrant daughter and the stain she might bring upon her father, especially through illicit behavior prior to marriage. Balla gives careful attention to the difficult text of Sir 42:9–14, and her discussion makes several persuasive suggestions regarding the best translation of MS B. She raises the possibility that the Greek translator substituted “daughter” for “adulterous wife” in Sir 26:10, so that this entire section (26:7–12) might pertain to wives. Balla also claims that Ben Sira’s excessive concern over daughters is “not representative of his
view on women, femininity or sexuality in general” (50). Yet how is this possible? Such a conclusion seeks to minimize a troublesome aspect of the ancient author’s social ethics. The palpable concern with social disgrace and daughters remains a fundamental part of this instruction and the author’s perspective on women.

Chapter 3 addresses marital relations in Ben Sira. Both “good” and “wicked” wives receive attention from the sage, and Balla gives a meticulous analysis of the relevant Hebrew terminology. She argues that a wife’s physical beauty can be a positive gift for her husband in certain passages. Moreover, she questions whether Sir 25:24 (“From a woman sin had its beginning . . .”) is a veiled reference to Eve. Chapter 4 examines illicit sexual behaviors, including prostitution and other activities deemed by the sage to be “strange.” Balla’s treatment of Sir 9:1–9 and the similarities (both thematic and terminological) between this passage and the book of Proverbs is cogent and insightful. Her attentiveness to the language of the text provides the interpreter with a clear template for understanding Ben Sira’s perspective on forbidden relations. This chapter includes an excursus on honor and shame, key concepts for the sage and his cultural context. One wonders why Balla does not examine texts from the same general period as Ben Sira more thoroughly in this discussion, especially 4Q184, “The Wiles of the Wicked Woman.” (This study does, however, pay close attention to the Wisdom of Solomon.)

Chapter 5 looks at the laudatory descriptions of wisdom in the book and the manner in which Ben Sira applies gender to these poems. Balla highlights the use of sexual imagery in some of the relevant passages (e.g., 4:19; 6:19–31; 14:20–15:10; 24:13–21). She includes a careful analysis of the acrostic poem in Sir 51:3–30, as reflected in 11QPs^a and the other witnesses to this passage. The conclusion here is that such passages, especially the concluding poem, evince a positive affirmation of sexuality, even though the wisdom figure is not a real woman (218). Yet this does not resolve the issue of Ben Sira’s largely negative views on female sexuality in many other passages. It is difficult to infer views on everyday gender relations from the poems on wisdom.

Balla has provided a helpful, thorough examination of some of the more interesting and central sections in Ben Sira. This is a difficult topic, because the relevant passages are often disturbing and difficult to translate. Balla’s lucid style and careful treatment of text-critical matters make this a useful reference work for Ben Sira’s treatment of gender and sexuality. Greater attention to the historical context throughout the study might have enhanced her probes of individual texts. In addition, more detailed conversation with feminist approaches to this text would add to the discussion. Nevertheless, future