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*
Like an Everlasting Signet Ring: Generosity in the Book of Sirach.*  

This volume is a slightly revised Ph.D. dissertation undertaken at the University of Notre Dame. The author, who teaches theology at the University of Scranton (Penn), is not to be confused with Brad S. Gregory, history professor at Notre Dame and an expert on the Reformation period.

While the subject of wealth and poverty in Ben Sira has been studied in articles by various authors (e.g., C. V. Camp, R. A. Horsley, V. Morla Asensio, B. G. Wright), the specific topic of generosity in Ben Sira has not been the subject of a previous monograph. After introductory discussions, the main topics considered are generosity in light of human mortality (Sir 14:3-19), loans, almsgiving, and surety (Sir 29:1-20), almsgiving in relation to sacrifice, and charitable giving as imitation of the generous God. After a concluding synthesis, an appendix provides text criticism of six Hebrew and two Greek passages relevant to the study, while the volume ends with a bibliography and indexes of modern authors and ancient references. Although the monograph focuses in detail on several key passages in Ben Sira, it includes references to all 51 chapters of the book. The volume is sprinkled with words in Hebrew, Greek, and Syriac, but readers without those languages should be able to follow the train of thought.

The introduction offers a succinct and competent survey of the monograph topic, as well as an overview of historical background, textual criticism, and structure of Ben Sira’s book. Ch. 2 then considers theological approaches to the problem of social injustice, such as the valuing of wisdom above wealth and acknowledging questions about the supposed connection between a deed and its consequence. Other approaches to the problem of social injustice include a limited deferral of justice and the possibility of reward coming to the descendants of the righteous rather than to the righteous themselves. Whereas Ben Sira’s assertion that poverty and riches come from the Lord (Sir 11:14) might seem a bourgeois justification for present injustice, Gregory affirms in light of Sir 11:5 that “this verse functions to ground God’s ability to bring about a reversal of the status quo in his role as sovereign Creator” (80).

Ch. 3 explains how generosity is the appropriate stance in view of the loss of all human possessions at death (Sir 14:3-19). Whereas modern ethicists might contrast altruism (regarded as positive) and selfishness (seen as negative), Gregory observes that Ben Sira criticizes the miser for lacking both qualities: “The conceptual absurdity of miserliness in light of the finality of
death is countered by the proper use of wealth” which combines “one’s own enjoyment of life with a generous disposition” towards others (103). The fourth chapter then discusses the neglected topic of Ben Sira’s attitude to loans and surety (Sir 29:1-7, 14-20). Here the sage’s mercy ethic contrasts sharply with the prudential warnings in the Book of Proverbs, since he regards loans and financial guarantees as potentially a form of almsgiving, because of the element of risk.

With ch. 5 on generosity through charitable giving (Sir 29:8-13), Gregory reaches the heart of his investigation. Explaining why a call to almsgiving occurs within a context dealing with loans and surety (Sirach 29), he asserts: “The reason for the placement of this material between loans and surety is that for Ben Sira alms are a special kind of loan” (171). He also notes that “Ben Sira is the first author unambiguously to use the Hebrew צדקה [šĕdāqâ] with the meaning of almsgiving” (178).

Ch. 6 now turns to the topic of almsgiving in relation to sacrifice. While Ben Sira echoes the Torah by affirming that both the priesthood and the poor deserve financial support, he also teaches that “almsgiving atones for sins” (Sir 3:30). Following Gary Anderson’s interpretation of Daniel’s command: “Redeem your sins by almsgiving” (Dan 4:24), Gregory sees charitable giving as a way to repay the debt incurred by one’s sins. In the seventh chapter Gregory then investigates the proper extent of almsgiving according to the sage, indicating that “Ben Sira understands the treatment of the poor through the ethical paradigm of imitatio Dei” (254). Here he notes the tension between considerations of justice and imitation of God’s universal generosity, since Sir 12:1-6 advocates aiding only the righteous, whereas texts such as Sir 4:1-10 emphasize the call to help anyone in need. For readers familiar with the Sermon on the Mount, it seems strange that Sir 12:1-6 confines generosity only towards the righteous, but Gregory insightfully explains the passage in terms of the sage’s view of retributive justice, whereby God wishes to reward the righteous (257-60). He could have added that this motif also echoes Theognis’ distinction between noble and ignoble people: “Doing a good turn to the base is an utterly useless act of kindness. . . . You cannot get anything good in return by doing good to the base” (Elegies 105 and 108).

The conclusion provides a brief synthesis of the author’s findings: “The essential matrix of thought in which Ben Sira develops his understanding of generosity is the principle of retributive justice and the dissonance caused by the disjunction between the principle’s implications and the social realities of Seleucid Judea” (291-92). Ben Sira regards almsgiving as contributing to a kind of heavenly treasury: “While many might consider generosity to the poor as a ‘loss,’ Ben Sira assures his students that it is actually ‘more profitable than gold.’