


Samuel Adams – Greg Schmidt Goering – Matthew J. Goff (eds.), *Sirach and Its Contexts. The Pursuit of Wisdom and Human Flourishing* (Supplements to the Journal for the Study of Judaism 196; Leiden – Boston, MA: Brill 2021). Pp. 301. € 125. ISBN: 978-90-04-44733-2 (E-Book)

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The reviewed publication is a collection of biblical articles, the fruit of an international seminar held at the Union Presbyterian Seminary (Richmond, VA) and the University of Virginia (Charlottesville, VA) in 2017. The very idea of the symposium and the book was born in the context of a particular scholarly environment (Virginia–Washington), which began to bring together exegetes and scholars interested in the study of the Book of Sirach. The symposium brought together many specialists in the literature of the Second Temple period, which has been experiencing a specific renaissance of interest since the discoveries at Qumran. The post-symposium publication was prepared by editors who are particularly dedicated to the study of sapiential literature.

The book is 301 pages long and contains a series of 14 articles that are grouped into four parts of the book. The first part deals with topics related to the context and interpretation of the Book of Sirach, while the second addresses issues related to the transmission of the text and the condition of individual manuscripts. The third part focuses on selected exegetical issues, and the fourth deals with the reception of the Wisdom of Sirach in antiquity and in medieval literature, taking into account various cultural contexts. The publication includes an index of ancient sources (pp. 285–295) and an index of modern authors (pp. 296–301).

In the introduction, Greg Schmidt Goering briefly describes the context in which the publication came into being, related to a particular community interested in the study of sapiential literature. He emphasises the great increase in interest in the literature of the Second Temple period, which has not yet received as many studies as other books of the Bible. In the introduction, he also provides a brief overview of the articles presented in the publication.

The first part of the book opens with an article by John J. Collins on the genre of the Book of Sirach. The author compares it specifically with the Book of Proverbs as the prototype of wisdom literature. He also reflects on the literary genre known as “sapiential literature” and the role of the genre in interpreting the various books included in this

tradition. He believes that it is necessary to take into account both the ancient literature that the sapiential tradition accepts and develops, as well as that with which it disputes. Jacqueline Vayntrub's essay, on the other hand, presents a different point of view, emphasising the special role of ancient proverbs (*masbal*) in the creation of the Book of Sirach and the question of transmission and development of this particular work. Analysing the opinions of recognised authors, it briefly outlines the history of research on this topic and the relationship between the Book of Proverbs and the Book of Sirach. In the following article, Bradley C. Gregory analyses in detail the relationship between the figure of Wisdom and a foreign woman. He addresses issues related to the personification of the figure of Wisdom and the depiction of Woman Folly. He also deals with problems of the methodology of the cognitive process and its credibility and reliability. Finally, the last article in this part, by A. Jordan Schmidt, examines issues related to ancient rhetoric, showing the use of poetic *ekphrasis* in a hymn about God's glory in nature, covering Sir 42:14–43:33. It reveals the dual purpose of the hymn (to praise God and teach to contemplate the world) and the author's rhetorical devices to make the reader see reality through the author's eyes.

The second part of the book consists of three articles analysing issues related to literary criticism and the transmission of the text of the Book of Sirach, which exists in Greek, partly in Hebrew and presents many variants. In his article, Frank Ueberschaer analyses Manuscript C showing its structure and emphasising that it should be regarded as a form of a compendium of knowledge related to a happy life. It also shows how this text is reinterpreted by the writer in a specific historical context. Eric D. Reymond explores the issue of the two Hebrew consonants *waw* and *yod*, which were very often confused when the text was copied. It also deals with the difficult problem of distinguishing between an obvious copyist's error and possible intentional changes made by the ancient author-copier. Finally, Jean-Sébastien Rey's article addresses the question of doublets in the text of the Book of Sirach, attempting to identify their origin and the nature of the phenomenon. It emphasises the active role of copyists who not only made mistakes when copying but also actively and intentionally changed the text.

The third part of the publication, entitled "Sages and Their Contexts: Hellenism, Hymns, and Pedagogy," addresses issues related to the interpretative problems of the Book of Sirach related to the historical context. The article by Samuel L. Adams examines passages from the so-called "Praise of the Fathers" and analyses the issue of the omission of Ezra and other important Old Testament figures such as Joshua and Zorobabel from the biblical depiction. Citing various opinions on the failure to include the figure of Ezra, the author suggests that this may have been related to the fact that Ezra was not sufficiently important in theological reception, and only gained his prominence in the period after the Book of Sirach was written. David A. Skelton addresses the musical education of the Ancient Near East and the Greco-Roman world and attempts to identify its influence on some particularly rhythmic and musical parts of the book. It emphasises the role of musical accents as mnemonic devices in the process of learning for students and the importance of these skills for the teacher. In the final article of this part, James K. Aitken examines the problem of

the relationship of the Book of Sirach to Hellenism. He shows the influence of particular ideologies (e.g. anti-colonialism) on the way the text is interpreted, suggesting the need to situate the book precisely in its historical context. In his view, a key point in interpretation is to refer to various ancient documents, particularly on the functioning of government and administration, when undertaking an analysis of passages dealing with court and administrative relations.

The fourth part of the book, entitled “The Reception of the Book and Figure of Ben Sira in Antiquity and the Middle Ages,” addresses the influence of the Wisdom of Sirach on specific historical contexts and the reception of the book in history. The first article by Benjamin G. Wright III and Eva Mroczek addresses the problem of book authorship and analyses the author’s self-presentation, introducing the concept of pseudo-pseudepigraphy. In this context, there are also reflections on the memory of the author to survive after his death. Matthew Goff’s article examines selected passages from the Book of Sirach and its possible influence on ancient poetic texts used particularly in the context of temple liturgy. The author shows their relationship to specific genres present in the literature of the Second Temple period, i.e. when this book was written. Finally, in a recent publication, Yonatan Binyam analyses the little-known Ethiopian commentaries on the Book of Sirach, specifically on Chapters 1 and 24, showing their Christological perspective, linked to the Johannine tradition. The author briefly presents the history of the study of this literature and introduces the reader to the issues of *andāmta*. He translates selected passages and briefly comments on them, offering the reader an interesting insight into Ethiopian interpretive traditions.

The articles in the book are meticulously edited. Each contains bibliographical references and is an interesting contribution to the study of the Wisdom of Sirach, which seems to be attracting the attention of an increasing number of scholars. Still, studies on this book are scarce if one compares their number with publications on other biblical traditions and individual books. There are also no theological studies that bring out the message of Sirach and show it in a broad biblical and extra-biblical context. The book *Sirach and Its Contexts. The Pursuit of Wisdom and Human Flourishing* contains some theological elements, but its purpose seems to be primarily to analyse some issues related to the text itself, transmission and reception. In this way, it lays a solid foundation for further research on the Wisdom of Sirach and its theological message.

