The Greek Period

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The Greek Period

Cyrus the Great had eleven successors including the usurper, Pseudo-Smerdis. But the luxury of Ecbatana and Susa mollified the Persian kings and courtiers; and in time Persia went the way of Babylon.

Mardonius, the Persian general, son-in-law of King Darius I, had crossed the Hellespont into Europe, and conquered Macedonia in 492 B.C.; but the Persian conquest of glory was halted by ancient Greece in 478 B.C. Then Greece declined; Macedonia rose. Macedonia inherited the military and the classic culture of Greece. Philip, King of Macedonia, learned "the arts of war and peace" in Greece; but he improved on his masters. He introduced "the Macedonian phalanx" and other new methods of waging war. He soon subjected Illyria, Thrace, the Chersonese, and Greece itself (359-338 B.C.); and he had planned to attack Persia when he was assassinated in 336 B.C.

Philip of Macedon was succeeded by his son, Alexander the Great, pupil of Aristotle, the greatest soldier and statesman of the ancient world (336-323 B.C.). Alexander effected what his father had designed. By 332 B.C. he was master of the Persian Empire—including, of course, Palestine: "Now it came to pass, after that Alexander the son of Philip the Macedonian, who first (i.e. formerly) reigned in Greece, coming out of the land of Cethim (i.e. Europe, in this context), had overthrown Darius (II) king of the Persians and Medes: he fought many battles, and took the strongholds of all, and slew the kings of the earth: and he went to the ends of the earth, and took the spoils of many nations: and the earth was quiet before him" (I Machabees I, 1-3).

Alexander aimed at Hellenizing his vast empire. He established Greek colonies everywhere to introduce the Greek language, culture and civilization. He died at the early age of thirty-three, but his successors continued his policy. Greek civilisation was based on materialism and naturalism of necessity it must clash with the revealed religion of the Law and the Prophets—a spiritual religion, based on the supernatural. Hellenism was supported by the ruling powers; it was propagated widely and often enforced by persecution. This period was a time of bitter trial for the Jews; and the Sacred Books carry clear traces of the struggle between naturalism and revealed religion.

Another feature of this period is that the diaspora (Jews of the dispersion) has grown to maturity. This is true especially in Egypt where the city of Alexandria became "a second Jerusalem." Heretofore the "dispersion" consisted of Jews who had been forcibly exiled, and their descendants. In this period large numbers emigrated from Palestine of their own accord; and Jewish colonies became numerous and influential. The "dispersion" had a place in the Messianic design also, They prepared the gentile world for the coming of the Redeemer. God spoke to them and through them.

Thus Wisdom which "reacheth from end to end (of the universe) mightily, and ordereth all things sweetly" (Wisdom. 8, 1) was preparing "the fullness of the time" (Galatians 4, 4).

The Book of Ecclesiastes

This strange title, Ecclesiastes, is simply the Greek translation of the Hebrew word "Coheleth," a preacher. In several passages (e.g. 1, 1; 1, 2; 1, 12 etc.) the author calls himself "Coheleth." It is a literary or academic name. Also he describes himself as "the son of David, King of Jerusalem" (1, 1); and until recent times Solomon was accepted as the author. The language of the original, however, would argue against this; it is the Hebrew of a late period. The opinion is gaining ground that it was composed (at least in its final form) in the period of the Greek domination; but the numerous proverbs which occur are in the Solomonic tradition. Much of this Book is in prose; the proverbs are in verse.

The Book is not so much a sermon as a reasoned plea for the necessity of religion. Strict logical order is not followed; it is a series of reflections with maxims of wisdom interspersed. The author states his first positive conclusion: "Vanity of vanities, and all is vanity" (1, 2); i.e. everything on earth is valueless; nothing temporal can satisfy the capacity of the human soul. Then, from facts of experience and observation this is proved.

The preacher has studied wisdom, i.e. philosophy, the causes of things (1, 12-18); he has experienced the pleasures of riches and power (2, 1-11); he knows the advantage of learning over ignorance (2, 12-14). And yet he finds that all these are transient things; moreover they are secured with toil, and possessed with anxiety. The rich and the poor, the learned and the ignorant all die alike; and at death there is no advantage for the rich and the learned. From this he argues for moderation—the avoidance of avarice and excessive solicitude. This is the doctrine of "the golden mean" in virtue, which Aristotle discovered independently.

So much for experience. He now speaks from observation. There is continual fluctuation in all earthly things: "All things have their season, and in their times all things pass under heaven" (3, 1). The designs of the Creator, even in this present order, are a mystery to the human mind (3, 10-15). Justice is in the power of evil men; but God will yet judge and requite all (3, 16-22). The innocent are wronged by evil-doers, and they receive neither redress nor compassion (4, 1-3). Men are moved to greater efforts by envy and by avarice than by good motives; and again "this also is vanity, and a grievous vexation" (4, 8). Popularity is a fleeting thing; and at best it too is ended by death (4, 13-16).

Here out of context is placed a warning regarding the reverence required for divine worship, and the serious nature of vows: "it is much better not to vow, than after a vow not to perform the things promised" (5, 4).

Again he speaks of the misery which covetousness causes, and argues for moderation (5, 9-6, 9). There is a plea for self-restraint: "sadness is better than laughter" (7, 4); for accepting wholesome correction and shunning foolish flattery (7, 6-7); for patience (7, 9-10). The preacher condemns the propensity to praise "the good old times:" "Say not: What thinkest thou is the cause that the former times were better than they are now? For this manner of question is foolish" (7, 10).

He has a warning against scruples, which defeat their own purpose: "Be not over just: and be not more wise than is necessary, lest thou become stupid" (7, 17); another against listening to rumours:

"do not apply thy heart to all words that are spoken: lest perhaps thou hear thy servant reviling thee" (7, 22).

"All is vanity"—worldly values are all wrong; appearances are deceptive. The preacher has seen evil-doers buried with pomp and honour and religious rites—but "this also is vanity" (8, 10). Because sin is not punished immediately, people grow callous; but God is just, and true wisdom bids us fear Him and avoid sin. The good suffer and the wicked prosper; but again this is only for a time (8, 1-17). No one knows with absolute certainty whether he is pleasing to God; this is God's secret: "Man knoweth not whether he be worthy of love or hatred" (9, 1). He has observed also the continual influence of unseen forces on human affairs: "the race is not to the swift, nor the battle to the strong, nor bread to the wise, nor riches to the learned, nor favour to the skilful..." (9, 11).

He has seen ingratitude (9, 13-16); fools in positions of authority (10, 6); slaves on horses, and princes walking (10, 7); "and all things obey money" (10, 19). He recommends mercy, prudence, control of the tongue (10, 8-20); thrift and foresight (11, 1-10).

Having shown the futility of all temporal things the preacher states his second proposition: "Fear God, and keep His commandments: for this is all man" (12, 13). Created to know and love God, man must accept this as his highest good and make it his purpose in life. Otherwise, he never can possess peace. This thesis is introduced by a description in poetry of old age, which is unexcelled in all literature:

"Remember thy Creator in the days of thy youth before the time of affliction come,

And the years draw nigh of which thou shalt say: They please me not:—

Before the sun, and the light, and the moon, and the stars be darkened,

And the clouds return after the rain:

When the keepers of the house (i.e. the hands) shall tremble, and the strong men (i.e. the legs) shall stagger

And the grinders (the teeth) shall be idle in a small number, and those that look out of the windows (the eyes) shall be darkened:

Before the silver cord be broken, and the golden fillet destroyed,

And the pitcher be broken at the well, and the pulley be thrown to the ground,

And the dust return to its earth from whence it was, and the spirit return to God Who gave it" (12, 1-7).

The Book of Ecclesiastes answers the ever recurring problem of human happiness. The "critics" have dealt harshly with this most interesting book. The preacher's reflections are strongly tinged with melancholy, it is true: but it must be remembered that he has a thesis to establish, and he chooses his facts admirably and argues his case cogently. There is no slightest trace of epicureanism. In such texts as: "Is it not better to eat and drink...?" (2, 24) the context speaks against avarice; the text argues for the moderate use of temporal goods. Neither is there materialism. "The death of man and beasts is one..." (3, 19): the context speaks against unjust judges, and this is a reminder to them of the humble origin of the human body, and of the transient nature of life on earth. Nor is there scepticism. "Who knoweth if the spirit of the children of Adam ascend upward, and if the spirit of the beasts descend downward?" (3, 21). There is question here of

the death of the body only. Nor fatalism. "...but time and chance in all (things)" (9, 11). The argument here is that many factors in human affairs are beyond man's knowledge and outside man's control. Divine Providence is taken for granted. Finally, the preacher's description of the just after death is a gloomy one (9, 5-6); but it must be remembered that in Old Testament times there was no immediate glory. The souls of the just had a colourless existence in Limbo until the Redemption was accomplished.

All these objections were raised to prove that pagan philosophy had an influence on this Book. There is no basis whatever for such an assumption. The preacher had nothing to learn from Aristotle; he goes far beyond that great philosopher. "Ecclesiastes at most has been touched by Hellenic culture, and has borrowed from it, if anything at all, only a few thoughts."

This Book of Ecclesiastes is the original source of the familiar expression, 'a fly in the ointment:' "Dying flies spoil the sweetness of the ointment" (10, 1).

The Septuagint

Between 300 and 100 B.C. the Hebrew Old Testament was translated into Greek at Alexandria in Egypt. This translation—"one of the finest scientific works of antiquity"—is properly known as the Alexandrine version; but more commonly it is called the Septuagint (often written LXX), or the version of the Seventy (interpreters).

This latter title takes its origin from the letter of pseudo-Aristeas. Purporting to have been written by a Greek pagan named Aristeas it describes how Demetrius of Phalerum, librarian of Ptolemy Philadelphus (286-247 B.C.), suggested to that king that the Law of the Jews should find a place in the royal library of Alexandria. Accordingly Aristeas was sent at the head of a delegation to Jerusalem to the high priest Eleazar. The high priest sent seventy-two ancients (six from each of the twelve tribes) to Alexandria: and these made the translation in seventy-two days. This story was further embellished in the course of time: the seventy-two worked independently in separate cells, and yet when they had completed the translation all had one and the same wording.

The letter of Aristeas was accepted as genuine until the sixteenth century, but it is now known to have been a fabrication written by a Jew about 200 B.C. The translation was made to meet the practical needs of the Greek-speaking Jews in Egypt who no longer could read the Hebrew original. The quality of the translation and the style of the Greek show it to have been the work of men of very various qualifications. Indeed the translation of Daniel is so faulty that the Christian Church set it aside in favour of the later version of Theodotion. The Septuagint soon came to be widely used; the Old Testament is quoted in about three hundred and fifty places in the New Testament, and about three hundred of these quotations are taken from the Septuagint version. It was used in the Christian Church until the time of St. Jerome (347-420 A.D.); and even still the Book of Psalms in the Vulgate Bible is a Latin translation of the Septuagint. Thus, our (Douay) version of the Psalms derives from the Septuagint.

One or more of these translators of Alexandria was inspired to complete the Books of Esther and Daniel by adding Esther 10, 4-16, 24 and Daniel 3, 24-90; 13; 14. From Esther 11, 1, it seems that this Book was translated in Jerusalem, not in Alexandria.

The Book of Wisdom

This Book was written in poetry in the Greek language by a Jew of Alexandria (Egypt). In chapters 7, 8, and 9 the author speaks in the name of Solomon; but this is merely the rhetorical device known as prosopopoeia or personification. The purpose of the author is to confirm the faith of his fellow-Jews in Egypt, and to keep them loyal to the practice of the true religion. There are splendid passages of apologetic and polemic, written in circumstances where the true believer had much to suffer from apostates and pagans. In Egypt "there were popular uprisings against the Jews under Ptolemy Alexander (106-88 B.C.), and again under Ptolemy Dionysos (80-52 B.C.); and it is probable that the half-century from 100 to 50 B.C. provides the historical background for the composition of Wisdom."

St. Paul knew this Book thoroughly well. The theology of Wisdom is reflected in his Epistles frequently; and in Romans the Apostle adopts even its method and line of argument. Written to defend revealed religion in the era of Greek culture the argumentation is subtle and cogent, and well calculated to meet the sophisms of unbelievers in every age and clime.

The first section of Wisdom (chapters 1 to 9) is a philosophical treatise proving the excellence of Divine Wisdom in itself. It begins with an exhortation to cultivate holiness, an exhortation which is addressed particularly to those in positions of authority—the arabarchs or magistrates of the Jewish communities in Egypt. There is a warning that only by avoiding sin is it possible to acquire wisdom:

"For wisdom will not enter into a malicious soul,
Nor dwell in a body subject to sins" (1, 4).

Murmuring, detraction, deceit are evil things which thwart the plans of God, and provoke His chastisements. Evil-doers think only of sensual pleasure and the enjoyment of the passing hour. Blinded by passion they persecute the just, and fly in the face of God:

"For God created man incorruptible (i.e. for immortality)
And to the image of His own likeness He made him.
But by the envy of the devil death came into the world:
And they experience it (death) who are his (the devil's) followers" (2, 23-25).

The Book of Wisdom is unique in the Old Testament for the glowing description which it gives of the reward of God's elect. The death of the just is glorious; they shall live forever in peace; their sufferings shall be crowned with an everlasting reward:

"At the time of their reward they shall be resplendent,
And like sparks among the stubble they shall run to and fro" (3, 7).

But they who despise wisdom and correction are unfortunate indeed—their future hopeless; their lives useless; their work unprofitable. They bring misery not only on themselves, but on their wives, homes, and families as well:

"For dreadful is the end of a wicked race" (3, 19).

Virtue is the greatest of all possessions. Virtue leads to immortal glory in the world to come:

"But the just shall live for evermore
And their reward is with the Lord,
And the care of them with the Most High.

Therefore they shall receive a kingdom of glory
And a crown of beauty at the hand of the Lord" (5, 16-17).

Sin leads to eternal shame and horror. Avarice and pride shall be punished with never-ending remorse.

Wisdom is within easy reach—"easily seen by them that love her,... found by them that seek her" (6, 13). The stages in the acquisition of wisdom are: eagerness for instruction; love of wisdom; obedience to the laws of wisdom; and this obedience leads to eternal life.

The kings of the ancient world claimed divine origin and required from their subjects divine honours. In refutation of these preposterous demands Solomon is introduced as speaking. He tells of his human origin, and that he received his wisdom from God: of Whom he had asked it in prayer:

"I myself also am a mortal man, like all others
And come from him that first man who was formed of clay..." (7, 1).

"Indeed no king had other beginning of existence;
For all men the way of entering the world is one,
And one the way of going out" (7, 5-6).

Solomon loved wisdom more than kingdoms and treasures; more than riches of gold, silver and precious stones; more than health and beauty. Then with wisdom all good things came to him.

The Wisdom of God—Uncreated Wisdom—is one in essence, manifold in efficacy:

"Indeed in her is an understanding spirit
Holy, one in nature, and yet multiple;
Subtle, active, agile, undefiled.
Bright, inoffensive, loving that which is good, quick,
Hindered by nothing, beneficent, kind, sure, infallible,
She is an exhalation of the power of God
And a pure emanation of the majesty of the Almighty.
She is a reflection of the eternal light
And a clear mirror of the majesty of God
And an image of his Goodness" (7, 22-26, 25).

These words were before St. Paul's mind when he described Christ as "the brightness of God's glory, and the figure (i.e. image) of his substance (i.e. nature)" (Hebrews 1, 3). In Solomon's prayer Wisdom is described as "seated beside God on His throne" (9, 4).

In the second portion of the Book (chapters 10 to 19) the excellence of divine wisdom is proved from its effects. In a masterly survey of sacred history the justice and mercy of God are demonstrated in the repentance of Adam; in the lives of the Patriarchs, especially of Abraham; in the Exodus from Egypt. Even in the rigorous punishments inflicted on the Egyptians, Chanaanites, and other sinful nations God's wise and merciful designs are clearly to be seen. This leads up to one of the finest descriptions of the mercy of God in all revelation:

"But thou hast mercy upon all, because thou canst do all things,
And overlookest the sins of men for the sake of repentance.
For thou lovest all things that are, and hatest none of the things which thou hast made:
For thou didst not appoint or make anything hating it.

And how could anything endure, if thou wouldst not?
Or be preserved, if not called by thee?
But thou sparest all: because they are thine,
O Lord, who lovest souls" (11, 24-27).

Idolatry is the total denial of right reason and the perversion of all religion. Without any aid from revelation man can know the existence of the Creator if only he uses his natural reasoning power aright. The might and beauty and wisdom which are seen in the material universe reflect the infinite greatness of God:

"Let them know how much the Lord of them is more beautiful than they:
For the first author of beauty made all these things" (13, 3).

Those who worship fire, the elements, the heavenly orbs, are blameworthy. But more blameworthy still are they who worship idols, lifeless images—sometimes images of brute animals—fashioned from clay or wood or stone by the hand of man. It is as grossly sinful and as grossly foolish for a man endowed with reason to call these idols gods, to worship them and to pray to them. Idolatry did not exist from the first. It was introduced by foolish men who through sin had lost knowledge of the True God. Then a father, mourning a dead son, had an image of him made. Next he appointed sacrifices to be offered to the image. The evil custom spread. Kings took advantage of it, and commanded their statues to be treated with the respect due only to the Deity. There followed human sacrifice; occult mysteries; wild orgies in the night. And with this corruption of thought went also corruption of morals. The results are plainly seen in the heathen world: murder; envy; brawling; adultery; theft; deceit; bribery; treachery; perjury; persecution of the good; ingratitude; scandals and all manner of sexual crime:

"For the worship of abominable idols
Is the cause, and the beginning and end of all evil" (14, 27).

Fortunate, therefore, are the Jews who alone in the ancient heathen world have knowledge of the True God:

"For to know thee is perfect justice:
And to know thy justice, and thy power, is the root of immortality" (15, 3).

God's kindness and fidelity, His patience and mercy were displayed in His treatment of the Chosen People. When they were justly punished for their sins the punishment was of short duration; and its aim was to lead them to repentance. Once this aim was secured God's mercy intervened at once to arrest the scourge—as in the case of the brazen serpent in the wilderness (Numbers 21). Far otherwise did He punish His enemies. Contrast the ten plagues of Egypt and the destruction of Pharao and his army by the terrible miracle at the Red Sea (Exodus 14) with the divine favour and protection which the Hebrews received.

And on this note the Book of Wisdom ends:

"At every turn, O Lord, thou hast made thy people great and glorious,
And hast not failed to assist them at all times, in every place" (19, 22).

The Book of Ecclesiasticus

In the Septuagint this Book is entitled WISDOM OF SIRACH (in some MSS, WISDOM OF JESUS SON OF SIRACH). In the Latin Church since the third century it has been known as (Liber) Ecclesiasticus—"the ecclesiastical book"—because it was much used for the instruction of the faithful and especially of catechumens. It is an exhaustive explanation of the revealed law of God—treating fully of all human obligations. All the virtues and the opposed vices are described. All states of human life are considered. The social virtues and vices are included, and rules are given for courtesy and table manners.

Ecclesiasticus was written in Hebrew poetry by Jesus, son of Eleazar, son of Sirach (50, 29). It was written between 190 and 180 B.C., and translated into Greek by another Jesus grandson of the inspired author after 116 B.C.—"the last of the Books of the Old Testament to have been translated into Greek." Sirach is a family name, hence the author of Ecclesiasticus is often called Ben Sirach or Ben Sira. The original Hebrew was lost for long; but at the end of the last century about two thirds of the Book in Hebrew was discovered in Cairo (Egypt).

The translator prefixed a prologue of his own composition in prose. This is of interest because it fixes the dates of the writing of the Book and of its translation. Also it speaks of "the law, the prophets, and the other books." Therefore this triple division of the Old Testament was accepted in the second century B.C. He found it difficult to render the Hebrew into Greek, and the work of translating was completed only after "much watching and study in some space of time." Finally, he tells that his only motive was the desire to be of service to those "who purpose to lead their life according to the law of the Lord."

The author of Ecclesiasticus knew well the Old Testament—especially the Pentateuch, the Psalms, Proverbs. He follows closely the plan of the Book of Proverbs—there are the same lengthy discourses in praise of wisdom and brief maxims of holiness. Indeed the Book was called in the original Hebrew PROVERBS OF BEN SIRA. But it is still a most original work; for Ben Sirach had acquired the gift of putting old truths in a new way. He was "a scribe instructed in the kingdom of heaven... like to a householder, who bringeth forth out of his treasure new things and old" (St. Matthew, 13, 52).

Section (a) 1, 1-4, 11

The uncreated Wisdom of God is the source of all created wisdom. God's Wisdom is seen in all creation. Wisdom in men is the gift of God, bestowed on those who love God and keep His law. With wisdom come honour, glory, gladness, length of days and a blessed death. Patience, faith, hope, charity; these are the qualities of the truly wise. From these again follow the other virtues, and notably respect for parents; meekness; mercy.

Section (b) 4, 12-6, 17

Wisdom leads to the favour of God, and to fullness of life here and hereafter. But before it confers joy and the knowledge of spiritual things wisdom first proves its disciples by temptations; and this is where many fail. To commit sin through human respect is cowardice and false shame. To be ashamed of sin is true wisdom:

"For there is a shame that bringeth sin,
And there is a shame that bringeth glory and grace" (4, 25).

Wisdom excludes deceit and avarice, and the foolish pride which keeps from repentance:

"Say not: I have sinned, and what harm hath befallen me?
For the most High is a patient rewarder.
Delay not to be converted to the Lord,
And defer it not from day to day" (5, 4-8).

Wisdom is holiness; and holiness brings peace. Holiness is the necessary foundation of real friendship, which rests on mutual good-will.

Section (c) 6, 18-14, 22

Ben Sirach earnestly exhorts his readers to study wisdom constantly and closely; and study of wisdom means meditation on the law of God. Those who submit themselves to the divine law will find their freedom restricted and their self-will curbed; but to be a servant of wisdom is to enjoy regal dignity.

There are rules for modesty, prayer, almsgiving; and warnings against scorn, "any manner of lie" i.e. the least violation of truth (7, 14), and idleness. Husbands must love their wives. Slaves and workers must be treated humanely. Children must be kept under discipline. God must be honoured, and His priests must be respected and supported. Be generous to the living, and charitable to the dead; console the sorrowful and care for the sick.

In social life prudence demands great self-restraint, and particularly when dealing with the rich; the influential; the talkative; the ignorant; the stubborn; the irascible; the stranger. It is wrong to despise the aged; it is prudent to learn wisdom from their experience. Jealousy in husbands is an evil thing. On the other hand, a man who does not keep a guard on his eyes is endangering his soul; and all familiarity with married women is imprudent. Old friends are the best; age improves friendship as it mellows wine:

"A new friend is as new wine:
Let it grow old and then drink it" (9, 14).

Do not envy the prosperity of the wicked; it is short-lived. Keep at a distance from rulers. The wise man thinks and speaks of God. Wisdom is especially necessary in kings by whose good or evil rule the whole nation prospers or falls. All authority comes from God, Who overthrows the proud and places the meek on their thrones. Kings are like other men—a compound of the noble and the base. Wisdom ennobles the base; sin debases the noble. Better than lofty lineage or great riches is true piety.

It is wrong to judge by appearances; and it is foolish to meddle in the affairs of others. In the success of an enterprise God's blessing goes for more than human industry. Divine providence rules all things. Therefore do not be too secure in prosperity, nor too dejected in adversity; for prosperity and adversity can quickly change places.

The society of sinners must be avoided:

"He that toucheth pitch shall be defiled with it" (13, 1).

Both friends and enemies are discovered in time of adversity. Patience and prudence are required in the poor; generosity in the rich.

Section (d) 14, 23-16, 23

Blessed is the man who by constant care avoids sin and acquires wisdom. Lack of wisdom is the fault of the sinner always, because God has endowed mankind with intelligence, free-will and knowledge of the commandments:

"Before man is life and death.
That which he shall choose shall be given him" (15, 18).

God is merciful to the good, and just to the wicked. He knows every least act of the last of His creatures; no one can evade the justice of God.

Section (e) 16, 24-23, 38

God's goodness and power are seen in the universe with its perfect laws. Man is head of the material creation—man, made in the image of God; endowed with reason; capable of knowing God; destined for immortal life. God does not desire the death of a sinner; He is merciful to the repentant. Return, then, to God; and cease from sinning. Passion must be restricted; temperance must be cultivated.

Be kind in work and word; and there is the charity of silence:

"Hast thou heard a word against thy neighbour?
Let it die within thee, trusting that it will not burst thee" (19, 10).

Fraternal correction is a good thing: the neighbour may not be guilty of the fault at all; and if he is, he will correct the fault. There is a malicious cunning, which is a very different thing from true wisdom—the reverse of true wisdom, in fact. True wisdom, the fear of God and the observance of His law, is often found in persons who have little worldly learning. Virtue is in the will, and so it cannot be produced by force or violence. Silence is golden, even when it comes from lack of something to say; but more so still, when it comes from prudence. To make a virtue of necessity is a good thing; at least it saves from remorse. A liar is worse than a thief; and bribery ruins the administration of justice.

Sin is the greatest evil; and repentance is a necessary virtue. The prayer of the poor is especially powerful. Wisdom is best on the recalcitrant. Uncontrolled laughter is a sign of folly. "Good manners are next to good morals"; and a wise man will not enter a house uninvited; nor gaze inquisitively into a house; nor eavesdrop. Talebearing is hateful to God and man, and destructive of social harmony. Intimacy must be only with the godly; and a wise man will not betray his friend. A friend must be no less a friend when he is in trouble. In 22, 33-23, 6, Ben Sirach prays that God may set a watch over his will, lest he sin by pride, avarice, self-indulgence or lust.

Swearing and calling the Name of God without reason are reprehensible; and perjury is a heinous sin. Rapine is sinful. To remember one's parents is an incentive to good conduct. Impurity is a grave sin; fornication is more grave still: while adultery "bringeth wrath and destruction" (23, 21). Adultery has a threefold malice: impurity; infidelity to wife or husband; injury to the family.

Section (f) 24, 1-33, 18

In chapter 24 Divine Wisdom speaks:

"I came out of the mouth of the most High
The firstborn before all creatures:

From the beginning and before the world, was I created,
And unto the world to come I shall not cease to be
And in the holy tabernacle I have ministered before him" (24, 5, 14).

Wisdom is compared to "a cedar in Libanus (Lebanon);" to "a cypress tree on Mount Hermon (Mount Sion, in our version);" to "a palm tree in Engaddi (Cades, in our version);" to "a rose bush in Jericho" (24, 17). Widely different from all earthly love is the transcendent spiritual delight which the possession of wisdom bestows:

"They that eat me, shall yet hunger:
And they that drink me, shall yet thirst" (24, 29).

Peace in the home and harmony between neighbours are pleasing to God and man; pride in the poor, lying in the rich and impiety in the old are hateful. Wisdom is expected in the aged; but unless it be cultivated from youth upward, it will not be acquired in later life. A malicious woman, an ill-tempered woman, a jealous woman are great evils; while a good wife is the greatest blessing that a husband can have. Strife, factions, calumny are dreadful things "more grievous than death" (26, 7). Traders, whose heart is set on becoming rich are in danger of sin. Justice and truth bring blessings; sin brings misery. Malice turns back on the heads of the malicious. Pride, envy, anger, vengeance are abominable. To ask God's pardon for sin and at the same time to refuse forgiveness to a neighbour is unreasonable:

"Remember thy last things, and let enmity cease" (28, 6).

Talebearing and lying have made exiles, destroyed cities, and brought down nations. More people have perished through malicious speech than have perished by the sword. It is the virtue of mercy to lend to the needy; but the borrower must repay:

"Many have looked upon a thing lent as a thing found
And have given trouble to them that helped them" (29, 4).

This ingratitude, however, must not deter from showing mercy—God's rewarding will be all the greater for the lack of human return. Man's temporal needs are not great: food, drink, clothing, shelter and a little privacy. The peace of one's own home is better than a feast at the table of a stranger. Children well-trained will be a joy to their parents; but if allowed to follow their own whims, they will prove a misfortune. Holiness is the greatest of possessions: and good health is better than riches. Sadness and anxiety are bad for soul and body; holiness gives joy and freedom, sanity and health.

Moderation in the use of wine is necessary for holiness and for health and for good manners. A host must see to the comfort of his guests; guests must show the courtesy of moderation and meekness. Speeches ought to be brief and reasoned:

"Prepare thy discourse, and so thou wilt be heard;
Study the subject, and then reply" (33, 4).

Section (g) 33, 19-36, 19

The world and mankind are at the disposal of God as clay is moulded by the potter. But man must use his powers and gifts; and idleness is a source of many evils. Belief in dreams and omens is sinful and foolish—"catching at a shadow" (34, 2). Fortitude, the only true bravery, is found in

those who fear God. To dedicate to God the fruits of injustice is of no avail; and if the injustice has been done to the poor, the gift is hateful to God. To defraud labourers of their hire resembles the crime of murder. Of what avail is it to repent, and then commit the same sins again? To observe the law of God (especially the law of mercy) is the first and the greatest act of divine worship. The prayers of the wronged, and of widows and orphans have a particular efficacy. There is a prayer (36, 1-19) for the oppressed nation of the Jews and for the coming of the Messias.

Section (h) 36, 20-39, 15

The power of reason must be constantly used to discern what is right and prudent. A false friend easily turns into an enemy. Advice is cheap; and many give advice for their own selfish ends. Never take advice from a rival, nor from one who is ignorant of the matter in question. There are those who teach others to reason and provide for themselves and neglect themselves. One man's meat is another man's poison; reason must be exercised here and caution used. A prudent man does not despise human science; in sickness he uses natural remedies and medicines, and calls in the aid of a physician. But he also repents of his sins and prays to God for recovery. It is a virtue to assist the dying, to mourn and to bury the dead. But sorrow for the dead must not be excessive; death is the lot of all.

From the presence of death a lesson of spiritual wisdom can be derived:

"Think of his end, which is also yours;
Yesterday for him, and to-day for thee" (38, 23).

In society there is a use for, and a need of every human activity. The scribe, the judge, the tradesman, the labourer—each has his own part to play in building up the state; and by doing it in a conscientious manner each can win eternal life. "The wise man," that is the ideal scribe, is described in 39, 1-15; a man who combines study of revelation with constant prayer, holy himself and instructing others in holiness.

Section (i) 39, 16-42, 14

Praise must be rendered always to God the Creator, Who made all things for a purpose and created all things good. He rewards the just with temporal and eternal happiness; He punishes the wicked. The lot of man on earth is hard: toil, fear, trouble, anxiety. But this life passes quickly, and then injustice will be ended; while the reward of virtue will remain forever. The greatest blessings in life are: contentment, a happy home, love of wisdom, mercy, good friends, the fear of God. It is a good thing to have true shame—to be ashamed of sinning; and it is an evil thing to have false shame—to be ashamed to practice virtue.

Section (j) 42, 15-51, 38

The remaining chapters are hymns (rich in doctrine) praising the grandeur of God as displayed in His works in the natural order and in the supernatural—in the material creation, (42, 15-43, 37), and in the lives and achievements of the great men of the Old Testament (44, 1-50, 31). Ben Sirach sings the praises of the patriarchs, prophets, kings and priests who have made his nation glorious, and to whom all believers are forever indebted.

The last chapter is an appendix. In 51, 1-17 he thanks God for rescue from persecutions and dangers. In 51, 18-38 he describes his search and his prayer for wisdom. With wisdom he received

from God facility to teach wisdom; and therefore he ends by inviting all who desire this greatest of possessions to come and learn in his school:

"Work your works with justice
And God will give you the reward of them in his time" (51, 38).