

Deuterocanonical and  
Cognate Literature  
Studies 1



# Deuterocanonical and Cognate Literature Studies

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# The Wisdom of Ben Sira

*Studies on Tradition, Redaction, and Theology*

Edited by

Angelo Passaro and Giuseppe Bellia

Walter de Gruyter • Berlin • New York

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## Preface

By contrast with the good reputation of its gentle and prudent author, the Book of Sirach shows itself to be laden with not a few concerns and pervaded with many enquiries as a result of the great number of questions which it continues to raise: philological, exegetical, literary, historical, theological and even confessional – from the moment when its reception among those texts which ‘defile the hands’ not only divided, as it continues to divide, the Christian tradition from the Rabbinic, but also, within those very confessions, has separated the judgement of synagogues and churches. It has been the cause of division even from the remotest times, if it is true that the book, which was not received into the Hebrew canon, was nonetheless already read at Qumran, two centuries before the so-called turning point of Jamnia. In the Christian tradition, the text is already present in the ancient *Vetus Latina* but, some centuries later, it would not be accepted by the fiery Dalmatian (St. Jerome) who refused to include it among the other inspired books. In the more recent history of interpretation, there is no doubt that the encumbrance of Luther’s belittling estimation (*Est sicut talmud ex variis libris collectus*) has weighed down on our book. His words have been transmitted to the present day as if as a platitude, consistently on the part of commentators, even if in more recent years help has come with a slow reversal of the tendency, something which has made the book the object of rigorous and specialist studies which have brought to light aspects and themes of great interest.

The question of canonicity, however, could be one of the keys to reading the many problems which the text poses, starting from the fact that it is precisely our book which is among the most certain and authoritative witnesses for the tripartite architecture of the sacred books of the incipient Hebrew canon (Law, Prophets and other Writings). This witness is transmitted not only on the part of the grandson-translator, as we read in his Prologue (1, 8 and 23), but of the complex structure of the work as intended by his sage-ancestor (38:31–39:1) which seems to represent the ideal order of the library of the Greek-speaking diaspora of Alexandria. Already, at that time, the Jews of that city were employed in intense literary activity translating the prophetic books with the aim of helping those members of the community who were no longer familiar with the Hebrew language and so had need of reliable and authoritative versions in order to get to know their own tradition and to live according to the customs of the Fathers. More than for other books, an exegesis for Ben Sira is necessary which takes account of the canonical tradition but does not allow itself to be ensnared by the romantic ideal of the original document, being able to read transversely and objectively the different textual traditions so as to avoid falling

into those conjectural reconstructions which, after all, are supported only by extra-textual presuppositions

In the judgement of many, however, the principal means of access for the understanding of this book remains the critical awareness of the methodological and hermeneutical problems that are bound to the text. To understand what function the organising structure performs in a book like ours, which manifests complex and elegant compositional strategies, it would help to have a clearer perception of the cultural and theological context in which that cultural and theological process that goes under the name of the "sapientialisation" of Scripture begins. It is a current of thought running through the entire sapiential Pentateuch, which proclaims the indisputable self-identification of the Book of the Torah with Wisdom. This is a problematic and disputed identification which requires a demanding leap of degree at the theological level, imposing a bold rethinking of the concept of the Law, rather than a revisiting, and the attribution and predication to Wisdom of new characteristics, unheard-of as far as the existing sapiential tradition was concerned.

A truly complex book, then, and one wholly discounted, situated on the edges of the canon, as we have said, one which puts more than one question, not only concerning the complicated state of affairs connected with its troubled textual transmission, but also precisely because of the multiplicity of texts recognised as "inspired". A scribal work, composed of several compositional strata and several theological aims, which, in the end, challenges us with the radical and explosive question of the canonicity of the sacred books and, therefore, of the fundamental question of inspiration.

However, the difficult theological questions, with their seriousness and contemporary relevance, cannot make us forget the questions, which are still open and involving, posed by the book because of its more exact systematisation within the whole of the sapiential literature. The tradition of the wise scribes of Israel had, for a long time, gained a connotation of judicious and practical enquiry, concerned with grasping the thread of the presence of God hidden beneath the transitory nature of the every-day, without neglecting to engage with the high questions of speculative theology. For this reason, more than one question vital for the faith of Israel had remained open and unsolved within its heritage.

In the face of these theological problems, which touch the heart of the religious identity of a people, the work of Ben Sira has been interpreted and judged in quite diverse ways: it has been read as a book of synthesis which attempts to make up for the replies that had never been given to the realistic challenge of Job and the corrosive criticism of Qoheleth, trying to renew the threads of traditional wisdom around the leading theme of the fear of the Lord; or it has been seen as the careful interpretation of an enlightened conservative who, in a time of change, still not marked by the traumas of

the Maccabean crisis, is seeking without too much trouble to draw the heritage of his own tradition towards the new one emerging from the Jewish diaspora in the Hellenistic world. Many claim that we are faced with a text of an apologetic nature because it displays the characteristics of a book written in the office, a sort of “curial”, and, therefore, predictably conservative, product, preoccupied with the religious behaviour of the younger generation. Is it, in the end, a work which, in the grooves of the Jerusalem and Temple tradition, pursues the aim of restoring the truth of the faith against the autonomous enquiry of human wisdom, or is it just an honest and clever attempt at dialogue between the legitimate reasonings of the world and the wisdom given in the Law of Israel? And again: what are the true motives for its incomprehensible exclusion by the Rabbinic tradition, seeing that the *hebraica veritas* has been shown to be a specious and inconsistent justification. On the other hand, what are the more convincing reasons for its different reception into the Christian canon on the part of the great churches?

To better understand the sense and the significance of these questions and, rather than conclusive answers, to offer an attempt at shared reflection which makes it possible to guarantee some firm points concerning the results shared by criticism and so to advance the work of research, there have been collected in this volume contributions aimed at specialists in the material with evident skills, organised according to a now acclaimed multidisciplinary viewpoint which develops around composition, tradition and theology.

In connection with the making of this book, there are the advice, the help and the collaboration of those who deserve our gratitude. Without their discreet availability and their generous and disinterested support, this labour could not have seen the light. Particular thanks are due to Dr. Michael Tait for his sensitive work of translation; to Dr. Salvatore Tirrito for his expert support with IT; to Giusy Zarbo and Francesco Bonanno for their generous assistance; and to the understanding colleagues and students of the Department of Biblical Studies of the Theological Faculty of Sicily at Palermo. Grateful thanks are also due to Dr. Donato Falmi, the Editor-in-Chief of Città Nuova Editrice, Rome, who has given permission for the publication of this edition in English; to Prof. Dr. Vincenz Reiterer who suggested this book for the inauguration of this new series (DCL.St); and to Dr. Albrecht Döhnert and the publishing house of de Gruyter for accepting it.

Palermo, April 2008

Angelo Passaro and Giuseppe Bellia





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# Abbreviations

AnBib	Analecta Biblica
AncB	Anchor Bible
ATA	Alttestamentliche Abhandlungen
ATD	Das Alte Testament Deutsch
BASOR	Bulletin of the American Schools of Oriental Research
BBB	Bonner biblische Beiträge
BEAT	Beiträge zur Erforschung des Alten Testaments und des antiken Judentums
BeO	Bibbia e Oriente
BET	Beiträge zur biblischen Exegese und Theologie
BETHL	Bibliotheca Ephemeridum Theologicarum Lovaniensium
BFChTh	Beiträge zur Förderung christlicher Theologie
Bib	Biblica
BiKi	Bibel und Kirche
BibOr	Biblica et Orientalia
Bijdr.	Bijdragen
BJSt	Brown Judaic Studies
BK	Biblischer Kommentar
BN	Biblische Notizen
BUL	Biblioteca Universale Laterza
BZ	Biblische Zeitschrift
BZAW	Beihefte zur Zeitschrift für die alttestamentliche Wissenschaft
BZfr	Biblische Zeitfragen
BZNW	Beihefte zur Zeitschrift für die neutestamentliche Wissenschaft
CBC	Cambridge biblical commentary
CBQ	Catholic Biblical Quarterly
CBQ.MS	Catholic Biblical Quarterly. Monograph series
CRB	Cahiers de la Revue Biblique
CSB	Studi Biblici (Bologna)
CStP	Collectània Sant Pacià
DB	Dictionnaire de la Bible
DBS	Dictionnaire de la Bible. Supplément
DCLY	Deuterocanonical and Cognate Literature Yearbook
DJD	Discoveries in the Judean Desert
DSD	Dead Sea Discoveries
EHAT	Exegetisches Handbuch zum Alten Testament
EJ	Encyclopaedia Judaica
ErIs	Eretz Israel
EstB	Estudios biblicos
EtB	Études bibliques
ETHL	Ephemerides Theologicae Lovanienses
FNT	Filologia Neotestamentaria
FRLANT	Forschungen zur Religion und Literatur des Alten und Neuen Testaments

FzB	Forschung zur Bibel
HALAT	Baumgartner, W. (ed.), Hebräisches und Aramäisches Lexicon zum Alten Testament, Leiden 1967-1990
HBS	Herder Biblische Studien
Hen	Henoch
HThR	Harvard Theological Review
HUCA	Hebrew Union College annual
ITS	Indian theological studies
JBL	Journal of Biblical Literature
JJS	Journal of Jewish Studies
JNWSL	Journal of Northwest Semitic languages
JQR	Jewish Quarterly Review
JSHRZ	Jüdische Schriften aus hellenistisch-römischer Zeit
JSJ	Journal for the Study of Judaism in the Persian, Hellenistic and Roman period
JSJ.S	Journal for the Study of Judaism in the Persian, Hellenistic and Roman period. Supplement Series
JSOT.S	Journal for the Study of the Old Testament. Supplement Series
JSP	Journal for the Study of Pseudepigrapha
JSP.E.S	Journal for the Study of Pseudepigrapha. Supplement Series
JSt	Journal of Semitic studies
JTSt	Judaistische Texte und Studien
KuI	Kirche und Israel
LCL	Loeb Classical Library
LeDiv	Lectio Divina
LHVT	Zorell, F., Lexicon Hebraicum Veteris Testamenti, Romae 1984
LoB	Leggere oggi la Bibbia
MoBi	Monde de la Bible
NCBC	The new century Bible commentary
NCCHS	Newsletter. Congregational Christian Historical Society
NEB	Neue Echter Bibel
NTA.NF	Neutestamentliche Abhandlungen. Neue Folge
OBO	Orbis Biblicus et Orientalis
OrChr	Oriens Christianus
OrSuec	Orientalia Suecana
OTL	The Old Testament Library
PIBA	Proceedings of the Irish Biblical Association
PSV	Parola Spirito e Vita
PWCJS	Proceedings of the World Congress of Jewish Studies
QD	Quaestiones disputatae
RAC	Reallexikon für Antike und Christentum
RB	Revue Biblique
RBén	Revue bénédictine de critique, d'histoire et de littérature religieuses
RdQ	Revue de Qumran
RHPhR	Revue d'histoire et de philosophie religieuses
RivBib	Rivista Biblica

RStB	Ricerche Storico Bibliche
RTL	Revue théologique de Louvain
Sal.	Salesianum
SBF.CMa	Studium Biblicum Franciscanum. Collectio maior
SBFLA	Studii Biblici Franciscani liber annuus
SBL	Society of Biblical Literature
SBL.DS	Society of Biblical Literature. Dissertation series
SBL.EJL	Society of Biblical Literature. Early Judaism and its Literature
SBL.MS	Society of Biblical Literature. Monograph series
SBL.SCS	Society of Biblical Literature. Septuagint and Cognate Studies
SCSt	Septuagint and Cognate studies
Sem.	Semitica
SSS	Semitic study series
StBi	Studi Biblici (Brescia)
STDJ	Studies on the Texts of the Desert of Judah
StPB	Studia Post-biblica
StTh	Studia theologica. Scandinavian Journal of Theology
SubBi	Subsidia biblica
TDNT	Kittel, G. – Friedrich, G. (eds.), Theological Dictionary of the New Testament
ThWAT	Theologisches Wörterbuch zum Alten Testament
TSAJ	Texts and Studies in Ancient Judaism
TU	Texte und Untersuchungen zur Geschichte der altchristlichen Literatur
VT	Vetus Testamentum
VT.S	Vetus Testamentum. Supplements
VuF	Vorträge und Forschungen
WMANT	Wissenschaftliche Monographien zum Alten und Neuen Testament
WUNT	Wissenschaftliche Untersuchungen zum Neuen Testament
ZAW	Zeitschrift für die alttestamentliche Wissenschaft
ZKTh	Zeitschrift für katholische Theologie
ZThK	Zeitschrift für Theologie und Kirche



# Methodological and hermeneutical trends in modern exegesis on the Book of Ben Sira

MAURICE GILBERT

## 1. One text or, better, several texts

### 1.1 In Hebrew

May 13, 1896 marks the starting point of modern exegesis of the book traditionally called in the West “Ecclesiasticus”. On that day, in Cambridge, Solomon Schechter identified the Hebrew text of Sir 39:15b–40:8 on a sheet of ancient paper, shown to him in that morning by Agnes Smith Levis and her twin sister Margaret Dunlop Gibson. They had bought it shortly before in the Middle East and later it would be known that this text had come from the *geniza* (deposit) of the Qaraite synagogue in Cairo. At that time, in Hebrew, only the rabbinic quotations of Ben Sira were known. This discovery made in Cambridge prompted others in Oxford, in London, in Paris; then in 1901, all the Hebrew texts of Ben Sira until then discovered were published in facsimiles.<sup>1</sup> The era of the first scientific works on the Hebrew book of Ben Sira had already begun and continued until the first World War, with commentaries and critical editions by I. Lévi (1898-1901),<sup>2</sup> N. Peters (1902, 1905, 1913),<sup>3</sup> and R. Smend (1906),<sup>4</sup> to mention only the most valuable.

These were convinced of the authenticity of the rediscovered Hebrew texts, but the definitive confirmation was still lacking. That came when the excavations at Qumran and Masada brought to light, in 1962-1964, some ancient Hebrew fragments of Ben Sira’s book:<sup>5</sup> these new texts were similar enough to those discovered more than half a century before to convince everybody that truly, after so many centuries, the original text of the book of Ben Sira had been recovered. But this book was not complete in Hebrew. Already with the fragments of the four medieval manuscripts coming from the Cairo *geniza*, identified at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, almost two third

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1 Facsimiles of the Fragments Hitherto Recovered of the Book of Ecclesiasticus in Hebrew, Oxford-Cambridge 1901.

2 L’Ecclesiastique; The Hebrew Text.

3 Der jüngst Wieder aufgefundenene hebräische Text des Buches Ecclesiasticus; Liber Iesu Filii Sirach; Das Buch Jesus Sirach.

4 Die Weisheit des Jesus Sirach.

5 BAILLET – MILIK – DE VAUX, Textes des grottes de Qumran, 75-77; SANDERS, The Psalms Scroll, 79-85; YADIN, The Ben Sira Scroll from Masada.

of the book were published, and the later discoveries will not change the case: in 1931, a fragment of a new manuscript (Ms E) came to light,<sup>6</sup> as in 1982 another from a sixth one (Ms F),<sup>7</sup> and in 1958-1959, two fragments of Ms B were also recovered.<sup>8</sup>

In fact the discovery of the Masada text launched a renewal of studies on Ben Sira. Here are mentioned works of new pioneers: Y. Yadin (1965),<sup>9</sup> A. A. Di Lella (1966),<sup>10</sup> J. Haspecker (1967),<sup>11</sup> J. Hadot (1970),<sup>12</sup> H. P. Rüger (1970),<sup>13</sup> J. Marböck (1971),<sup>14</sup> O. Rickenbacher (1973),<sup>15</sup> G. L. Prato (1975).<sup>16</sup> To these names we may today add others, among whom some who still pursuing research are present in this congress.

This short historical survey should not mislead us about the reliability of the Hebrew texts of Ben Sira now available. The first problem concerns the edition of these rediscovered texts. In addition to the critical editions made at the beginning of last century, there are today two others, one published in 1973 by the Academy in Jerusalem<sup>17</sup> and the other edited in 1997 in Leiden by P. C. Beentjes.<sup>18</sup> A simple comparison between these two reveals many different readings of the manuscripts. Moreover, if a present-day scholar has at his disposal the *Facsimiles* edited in 1901, or those of manuscripts discovered later, he will often feel that he lacks confidence in the material offered. Today, at least a common agreement on the readings of these manuscripts is surely desirable, and I would wish to see one day soon new facsimiles, the most accurate possible.

A second problem arises when, for a specific text, we have two or three witnesses in different manuscripts. These often give divergent texts. How to choose the original reading? Two scholars tried to answer this question. H. P. Rüger (1970)<sup>19</sup> tried to show that, in these manuscripts, it is possible to suppose the confluence of two successive editions of the text, the first one (Hb I) being the only one assigned to Ben Sira. A. Minissale (1995)<sup>20</sup> proposed a reconstruction of ten Hebrew passages of Ben Sira for which

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6 MARCUS, A Fifth Ms of Ben Sira, 223-240.

7 DI LELLA, The Newly Discovered, 226-238; BEENTJES, A Closer Look, 171-186.

8 DI LELLA, The Recently, 153-167.

9 Cf. note 5.

10 The Hebrew Text of Sirach.

11 Gottesfurcht bei Jesus Sirach.

12 Penchant mauvais.

13 Text und Textform.

14 Weisheit im Wandel.

15 Weisheitsperikopen bei Ben Sira.

16 Il problema della teodicea.

17 The Book of Ben Sira.

18 The Book of Ben Sira in Hebrew; ID., Errata et corrigenda, 375-377.

19 Cf. note 13.

20 La versione greca.



we have at least two manuscripts, but clear and solid principles do not appear for choosing this reading instead of that. Here we can perceive the perplexity of scholars, who are often tempted to turn towards the ancient versions in Greek or in Syriac in order to resolve textual problems of the Hebrew text of Ben Sira. The critical choices made by P. W. Skehan (AncB, 1987)<sup>21</sup> or by G. Sauer (ATD, 2000),<sup>22</sup> not always similar, unfortunately prove the genuine complexity of the problem.

However it seems to me that three theses can be accepted, over and above the global authenticity of the rediscovered texts:

1. These texts are not totally reliable. Often they propose doublets, which give two or even more different readings of the same passage. A critical analysis is therefore necessary in these cases, but not only in these.

2. The hypothesis of A. A. Di Lella (1966),<sup>23</sup> according to which there are Hebrew retroversions from the Syriac version, should not underestimate. For the Hebrew text of Sir 51:13-30 in Ms B, this fact is evident.

3. The thesis of a second edition of the Hebrew text (Hb II), thesis assumed by many scholars, is also secure. The proof appears, for instance, in Ms A for Sir 11:15-16 and 16:15-16, which are additions known by some Greek manuscripts as also by the Latin and Syriac versions.

In conclusion, a hope may be expressed in form of a question: Shall we have one day a Hebrew text of Ben Sira (Hb I), on which a majority of scholars can agree?

## 1.2 In Greek

There are two forms of the Greek version. The first one is transmitted by the great manuscripts written with uncial or capital letters, principally the *Vaticanus*, the *Sinaiticus* and the *Alexandrinus*. Their text gives the so called short text (Gr I). But there are other Greek manuscripts which transcribed a revised Greek version, extended with about 135 lines (Gr II): mainly the codex *Venetus*, written with uncial letters, and some manuscripts where the letters are no longer uncial, but minuscule, that is to say cursive.

In 1909, J. H. A. Hart had published with a commentary the Gr II text of Ms 248.<sup>24</sup> It is worth mentioning another very useful edition made by O. Wahl in 1974, in which he collected, verse by verse, the witnesses of the Greek text of the *Sacra Parallela*;<sup>25</sup> this is again a Gr II text, but with some-

21 With SKEHAN – DI LELLA, *The Wisdom of Ben Sira*.

22 *Jesus Sirach/Ben Sira*.

23 Cf. note 10.

24 *Ecclesiasticus*.

25 *Der Sirach-Text der Sacra Parallela*.

thing new: it contains in Greek ten additional verses known previously only in Latin.

Today, for the Greek version, the critical edition prepared by J. Ziegler (1965)<sup>26</sup> is without doubt the best. For its correct use, some characteristics of it must be borne in mind. First of all, the very rich critical apparatus must be carefully consulted. For instance, one can see in it that sometimes Ziegler proposes conjectures which have no basis in the Greek manuscripts, but are an attempt to improve the Greek text by using readings of the Hebrew. In addition, Ziegler inserts in their place with smaller letters 135 lines taken from the Gr II manuscripts; but, from this Gr II text, he does not retain, except in his critical apparatus, all the other minor changes. Lastly, Ziegler restores the original order of the chapters: in all the Greek manuscripts, Sir 33:16b – 36:13a was put before Sir 30:25 – 33:16a; this mistake was made after the translation of the Greek text, a Gr II text, into Latin, and this Latin version, in agreement with the Hebrew manuscripts and the Syriac Peshitta version, kept the original order of these chapters.

In his study of the Greek version, Gr I, A. Minissale<sup>27</sup> showed that this version is not literal, but is analogous to the manner of translating Hebrew in the *midrashim* and *targumim*. Therefore, one cannot use this Greek version without discernment to reconstruct or to correct the original text in Hebrew. It is enough to compare the Hebrew text of Sir 51:1-12 with the Greek version to observe that the latter, addressing God throughout in the second person singular, disrupts the originality of the Hebrew text; for this one, in its first half, addresses God directly, and speaks *about* him in the second half. The same procedure appears in Sir 4:11-19, where the Greek version changes the direct speech of Wisdom, according to the Hebrew text and the Syriac version, into a description of Wisdom's action.

About Gr II, the long version, my opinion is that it mainly depends on a Hebrew enlarged text. For instance, it happens that a verse of Gr II is only understandable if translated into Hebrew. This is the case for the Greek text of Sir 1:10cd; Minissale translates this Greek addition as follows:<sup>28</sup> "Loving the Lord is wisdom giving glory; he imparts her to those to whom he reveals himself so that they see him"; but the second line is obscure. Therefore, I proposed in the *Bible de Jérusalem* (1998) that this Greek version embodies a confusion between the two Hebrew verbs *to see* and *to fear*, both in the infinitive *qal* with suffix, and my translation is: "to those who fear him, he imparts her".<sup>29</sup> The same problem arises for other traditional translations of additions in Gr II, but not only there, where mistakes are unceasingly

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26 Sapiientia Iesu Filii Sirach.

27 Cf. note 20.

28 Siracide (Ecclesiastico), ad loc.

29 Voir ou craindre le Seigneur?, 247-252.

repeated without realizing the misunderstanding. The famous Greek addition in Sir 24:18cd is commonly translated: "I spread myself in all my sons, elected by him from eternity", but I explained that a correct translation must be: "I give myself with all my fruits, always at his commands".<sup>30</sup> Again a last note: an addition of Gr II is sometimes considered as the translation of an authentic text of Ben Sira; this happens for Sir 1:21, but recently I tried to show the weakness of such an assumption.<sup>31</sup>

### 1.3 In Latin

The ancient Latin version, called *Vetus latina*, of Ecclesiasticus was made before the 3<sup>rd</sup> century AD from a Greek extended text (Gr II). Today this Latin version, which was studied in 1899 by H. Herkenne (he already saw in Sir 1:21 an authentic text of Ben Sira),<sup>32</sup> do not interest scholars very much, except those who propose critical editions. These are two. The first was established by the Benedictine monks of Saint Jerome Abbey in Rome (1964)<sup>33</sup> and gives the text as it was at the time of its insertion in the *Vulgate*. The second gives the *Vetus latina* text and is published at Beuron, Germany; W. Thiele, who was the editor for Sir 1–24, began in 1987 and concluded his part in 2005;<sup>34</sup> for Sir 25–51, another editor is awaited.

For research, it is useful to consult the edition of the Latin version prepared by J. Gribomont and G. D. Sixdenier for the multi-language edition of Ben Sira (badly) published by F. Vattioni in 1968:<sup>35</sup> these two editors have marked with special signs the parts of the version which they considered not original but as later revisions of this *Vetus latina* version, in order to make it conform more closely to the Greek text. Such an hypothesis, which comes from D. De Bruyne (1928),<sup>36</sup> has been disputed by Thiele,<sup>37</sup> who thinks that most of the *Vetus latina* doublets were already in the Greek text used by the Latin translator.

There remains another problem not yet studied: several times the *Vetus latina* of Ecclesiasticus does not correspond to the Greek texts at our disposal, but rather to the Hebrew manuscripts. J. Ziegler, in his critical apparatus of the Greek version, mentioned a good number of cases. How can

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30 Les additions grecques et latines à Siracide 24, 196-199.

31 L'addition de Siracide 1,21, 317-325.

32 De veteris latinae Ecclesiastici capitibus I-XLIII.

33 Sapientia Salomonis. Liber Hiesu filii Sirach.

34 Sirach Ecclesiasticus.

35 Ecclesiastico, LIII-LIV.

36 Étude sur le texte latin.

37 Sirach Ecclesiasticus, 103-122.

we explain them? Were they in the Greek text used by the Latin translator?

Lastly, it must be remembered that the *Vetus latina* of Ecclesiasticus preserves some additions unknown in Greek, like Sir 24:31VL, at the end of the Wisdom's speech: *Qui elucidant me vitam eternam habebunt*.

#### 1.4 In Syriac

Unfortunately a critical edition of the Syriac Peshitta version of the book of Ben Sira, promised for decades, is still lacking, as well as any full analysis of that version. Meanwhile, one can use the edition of the codex *Ambrosianus* recently published with both English and Spanish translations by N. Calduch-Benages, J. Ferrer and J. Liesen (2003).<sup>38</sup> Concerning this Syriac version, there are different opinions. According to H. P. Rüger, the translator used the enlarged Hebrew text (1970),<sup>39</sup> but for M. D. Nelson (1988), who studied only Sir 39:27–44:18, the translator used the original text of Ben Sira (Hb I), while consulting the enlarged Hebrew text (Hb II) and also the two Greek versions (Gr I and Gr II).<sup>40</sup>

A complete study of the Peshitta version, compared with Hebrew and Greek texts, is still desirable. Meanwhile, let us mention some characteristics of this Peshitta. As with the Greek version, the Peshitta does not translate literally, but after the manner of the *targumim* (N. Calduch-Benages e.a.),<sup>41</sup> with omissions and also additions. One addition, only known by the Peshitta, appears instead of Sir 1:22-27 (N. Calduch-Benages, 1997,<sup>42</sup> and T. Legrand, 1998)<sup>43</sup> but this Syriac addition seems to many scholars<sup>44</sup> to translate a Hebrew text (Hb II), except that N. Calduch-Benages and her collaborators<sup>45</sup> think that it was written by the Syriac translator himself. Moreover, the Syriac translator sometimes alters the Hebrew text he has to translate: a good example is the prayer of Sir 51:1-12, where he omits all references to calumny, which is in fact in Hebrew the main reason which provoked the prayer; doing so, the Syriac translator composed a prayer which can now be used for any kind of thanksgiving when the Lord has saved anybody from some unspecified mortal danger.

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38 La sabiduría del escriba.

39 Cf. note 13.

40 The Syriac Version of the Wisdom of Ben Sira.

41 La sabiduría del escriba, 24-27 and 48-51.

42 Traducir-Interpretar.

43 Siracide (*syriaque*) 1,20c-z.

44 Cf. KEARNS, *The Expanded Text*, 191.

45 La sabiduría del escriba, 26-27 and 50-51.

## 1.5 Conclusion

The book of Ben Sira is not the only one in the Bible for which there is a plurality of texts. For our book, the basic fact is that they were two editions. The first one in Hebrew was translated into Greek (Hb I – Gr I), and the second, originally also in Hebrew (Hb II), is found in some Greek manuscripts (Gr II) and in the old Latin version. The Syriac Peshitta version seems to reflect both the first and the second Hebrew editions.

## 2. One author or, better, several authors

The problem to be faced here is that of the variety of hands which touched the book of Ben Sira from the time of his writing till the transmission of the book during Antiquity.

### 2.1 The main author, Ben Sira

Is it possible to hear the voice of Ben Sira, to read his message directly from his text; to read it, of course, on a copy – or on a copy of copy – of his own text? Today, after the discovery of his Hebrew texts, the answer is without any doubt positive, though with serious reservations.

The name of this wise man is Ben Sira. This is sure, but, in Hebrew, Ms B gives a more developed name which does not correspond with that of the Greek manuscripts. Those specify that the author was from Jerusalem, a detail which, in Hebrew, Ms B does not give (Sir 50:27).

About the date of his book, a majority of scholars acknowledges today that it must be fixed during the first quarter of the 2<sup>nd</sup> century BC; that means between years 200 and 175 BC, therefore before the Maccabean crisis under Antiochus IV.

Ben Sira was a wisdom master. He taught young disciples: this is evident after reading in Hebrew some undisputed texts like the following ones.

Before explaining that God takes care of all, Ben Sira writes:

Hear me and receive my mind,  
to my words apply the heart.  
I will spread with measure my spirit  
and with modesty I will indicate what I know (Sir 16:24-25, Ms A).

When he advises eating temperately, he says:

Hear, my son, do not despise me:  
at last you will understand my words (Sir 31:22, Ms B).

Calling the disciple to praise the Lord for all his works, even the most mysterious, “with songs of lyre and zither and so with great voice” (Sir 39:15cd, Ms B), the master concludes:

Now, with all heart, rejoice  
and bless the name of the Holy one (Sir 39:35, Ms B).

Or before giving his teaching on true and false shame:

Hear the instruction on shame, sons,  
and be ashamed according to my mind (Sir 41:14a.16a, Mas and Ms B).

Two other autobiographical texts in Hebrew concern the composition of his book:

Therefore, from the beginning, I was convinced  
and I reflected and I put in writing:  
All the works of God are good,  
for every need, in proper time, he supplies (Sir 39:32-33, Ms B).

And this one, which perhaps marks the end of a stage of the book’s redaction:

Even myself, the last, I stayed awake  
and, like a gleaner after [vintagers],  
with the Lord’s blessing, even myself I arrive first  
and, like a vintager, I filled up the wine-press!  
Look! I am not tired only for myself,  
but for all those who search [for instruction] (Sir 33:16-18, Ms E).

These autobiographical quotations come from four different Hebrew manuscripts and they are more or less similar in the Greek version, as well as in the Syriac one, except Sir 41:14a.16a (the Peshitta omits almost the whole chapter).

There are two other autobiographical texts of Ben Sira, but each presents difficulties. Two of them are in Sir 51, the last chapter of the book, which, in spite of the first colophon of Sir 50:27-29, is more and more considered authentic, except for the Hebrew addition in Ms B between Sir 51:12 and 51:13. Now, this chapter 51 comprises in its first twelve verses a thanksgiving prayer, and in Sir 51:13-30, a final text on the search for wisdom. The prayer, well preserved in the Hebrew Ms B, was seriously mod-

ified in Greek and in Syriac.<sup>46</sup> The final text on Wisdom is incomplete in the Qumran Hebrew manuscript but, with the help of the Greek and Syriac versions and of the Hebrew retroversion of Ms B, it is possible to recombine it, in a necessarily hypothetical way.<sup>47</sup> What shall we do then with Sir 24:30-34, where Ben Sira describes his function as master in relation to Wisdom? This passage has not yet been discovered in Hebrew. Can we trust the Greek version or the Syriac one? It is true, these versions are very similar, but they are not identical: Sir 24:34 is lacking in Syriac, without mentioning here other discrepancies between the two versions. Saying that, I want to make clear the difficulty exegetes of Ben Sira must resolve when they try to understand the autobiographical texts of Ben Sira. J. Liesen<sup>48</sup> did much work on these characteristic texts of our wise man, who can present himself as a master precisely because he is full of Wisdom, or better: because Wisdom coming from God fills him to overflowing; to his disciples, he is able to pass on this Wisdom overflowing from himself to them. He is only a mediator of Wisdom. Never in Israel had a wisdom master spoken of himself like that.

Now, the main themes of his teaching are the following. It is beyond doubt that he endeavoured to offer a synthesis of the heritage of his people. If he insists more than his predecessors on the fear of the Lord as the basic behaviour of a man who intends to be open to Wisdom offered by God, Ben Sira was also the first to show the coherence of the whole action of God. According to our wise man, Wisdom, continuously offered by God, has her best expression in the Torah and the one who truly fears God puts into practice the precepts of the Torah. Along the same lines, one can perceive why Ben Sira is interested in the biblical history recounted in the Pentateuch and in the prophets, even if he does not see, for his time, any hope for the future but in the faithfulness of the official priesthood. And this hope does not mean that Ben Sira was a priest, as H. Stadelmann (1980) claimed.<sup>49</sup>

More serene than Qohelet, Ben Sira puts his trust in the tradition of his people. He discerns the danger, not yet dramatic, of the invading Hellenism; he has doubts about the first pretensions of the incipient apocalyptic. A spiritual man, he trusts God and prayer, for him, is part of the observances of a truly wise person. Better still, Ben Sira thinks that only a wise man, contrary to a sinner, can praise the Lord (Sir 15:9-10), realizing therefore the primary vocation of the living man (Sir 17:9-10.27-28); the last ten chapters of his book (Sir 42:15-51:30) are first of all a hymn to the Lord, an invitation

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46 On the Hebrew text, cf. GILBERT, *L'action de grâce de Ben Sira*.

47 Cf. GILBERT, *Venez à mon école*, 283-290.

48 *Strategical Self-References*, 63-74. *Id.*, *Full of Praise*, especially 95-187.

49 Ben Sira als Schriftgelehrter. Cf. review of G. L. Prato: *Greg* 63 (1982), 560-565.

to praise him for his work in the world and in history, in which Ben Sira himself is conscious of being an example for his disciples.<sup>50</sup>

## 2.2 The Ben Sira's grandson, his translator into Greek

There are two documents which help to understand the part of the first translator of the book of Ben Sira: the prologue of this version and the translation itself, the short one (Gr I) transmitted in the main uncial manuscripts.

The prologue, which is transmitted by these manuscripts,<sup>51</sup> is the only text in which the translator speaks of himself – Ben Sira was his grandfather – and of his task of translator. With the majority of scholars, I take this prologue as authentic.

The grandson of Ben Sira arrived in Egypt in 132 BC and during his stay there he discovered his grandfather's book. This book seemed to him so useful for those who, outside the land of Israel, wish to be instructed, to reform their ways and to live according to the Torah, that he decided to translate it from Hebrew into Greek. Such an undertaking was not carried quickly, not only on account of the length of the book, but also because it is never easy to render into Greek what is expressed in Hebrew: the grandson insists on this challenge, which should excuse him.

Moreover, putting his work in the frame of the Torah, of the prophets, and of the other Jewish books, in Hebrew as well as in the Greek Septuagint version, he probably hoped, perhaps following his grandfather himself (cf. Sir 24:32-34), that his translation would one day be officially accepted among the books which were gradually forming the future canon of the Scriptures.<sup>52</sup>

About the translation itself, B. G. Wright (1989)<sup>53</sup> is right when he says that, when comparison with the Hebrew text is possible, it is certainly not mechanical, but that the grandson wanted first of all to deliver the message of his grandfather, its content rather than its literal words. A. Minissale (1995)<sup>54</sup> specified that the targumic method was already applied by the grandson. It can be added that the Hebrew copy of Ben Sira's book used by the grandson was not excellent and also that he had sometimes difficulty in understanding what his grandfather had written. We realize therefore why he tried to apologize for the quality of his translation, which altogether is not so bad.

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50 Cf. GILBERT, *Prayer in the Book of Ben Sira*, 117-135.

51 On this prologue, cf. PRATO, *Scrittura divina*, 75-97; MARBÖCK, *Text und Übersetzung*, 99-116.

52 Cf. RÜGER, *Le Siracide*, especially 67-69.

53 No Small Difference.

54 Cf. note 20.



Lastly, in Sir 50:23-24, the grandson modified the text of his grandfather: it was no longer possible to speak of the lineage of the priest Simon and of Aaron, when political interests had put an end, decades before, to the heredity of the main priestly office in Jerusalem.

### 2.3 The authors of the second edition

One may think that a second edition became necessary for two reasons, the success of the book and theological progress after the grandson's time.

However it is still very difficult to give precise indications based on textual proofs. The main reason is that we do not have this complete second edition. I mean that changes and additions in it appear in Hebrew and Greek manuscripts in a rather chaotic way: one manuscript conveys some modifications and another, others. This signifies, it seems, that there was no "second edition" as we would understand it, but a slow and progressive evolution of the text of Ben Sira, due to many hands, each scribe choosing such or such modification.

These modifications, which mainly bring the book's eschatology up to date, seem to have been done between years 80 B.C. and 80 A.D. Some of them already appear in Hebrew, others more numerous in Greek manuscripts, where copyists were free to make their choice.

Who were the authors of these changes, retouchings and additions? It seems that some distinctions have to be made. Modifications developing new eschatological perspectives, even without ever using the words "resurrection" and "immortality", come from people who followed the path of Dan 12:1-3 and of 2 Macc 7. At the beginning of the last century, Hart (1909) thought they were Pharisees;<sup>55</sup> but he had only compared some Greek additions with authors writing in Greek, Philo, Paul and Josephus. In 1951, C. Kearns, in his thesis presented to the Pontifical Biblical Commission, unpublished up to now, gave a new direction to the research, especially towards the apocalyptic literature ascribes to the Essenes.<sup>56</sup> But – and this remark is important – Kearns was unable to compare the additions of the book of Ben Sira with the Qumran texts which were published after his thesis. It is true that, from 1951 till today, many scholars have studied several points of Ben Sira's book vis-à-vis the Qumran writings. It is also true that a few scholars have compared the additions of the book of Ben Sira with the Qumran literature (Philonenko, 1986; Legrand, 1996; Rossetti, 2002-2003).<sup>57</sup> But an

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55 Ecclesiasticus, especially 272-320.

56 The Expanded Text.

57 PHILONENKO, Sur une interpolation, 317-321; LEGRAND, Le Siracide: problèmes textuels et théologiques de la recension longue; ROSSETTI, Le aggiunte ebraiche e greche, 607-648.

exhaustive comparison between both is still lacking. In any case, an Essenian origin of the multiform second edition of the book of Ben Sira, or at least of a part of it, should not astonish us, when one remembers that Qumran provided fragments of the book; as also if we accept the hypothesis of Di Lella,<sup>58</sup> according to whom the Hebrew manuscripts found in Cairo originate from Qumran.

However Qumran does not explain all the additions. G. L. Prato<sup>59</sup> showed that the three lines of Sir 17:5 probably depend on the school of Aristobulus, who was under Stoic influence. A plurality of origin of the second edition is therefore corroborated.

#### 2.4 Latin and syriac translators

There is no reason, it seems, to doubt that the *Vetus latina* of Ecclesiasticus was made by a Christian. Probably he was a member of a community in Roman Africa. His translation was done before the middle of the 3<sup>rd</sup> century A.D., for Cyprian of Carthage quoted several passages of it. This is all that can be said.

About the author of the Syriac Peshitta version, recently there have been contrasting opinions. In 1977, M. M. Winter<sup>60</sup> tried to prove that he was an Ebionite Christian living during the 3<sup>rd</sup> century or at the beginning of the 4<sup>th</sup>; among other things, he was opposed, said Winter, to sacrifices and priesthood; his translation would have been revised at the end of the 4<sup>th</sup> century by an orthodox Christian who inserted allusions to Jesus and to John the Baptist. In 1989, R. J. Owens<sup>61</sup> rejected the hypothesis of an Ebionite and proposed for the date of the Peshitta of Ben Sira, with its Christian allusions, about the year 300, because already in 337 Aphrahat quoted it from memory. Lastly, in 1999, in his posthumous introduction to the Peshitta version of the Old Testament, M. P. Weitzman,<sup>62</sup> finding in the Chronicles translation the same characteristics assigned by Winter to an Ebionite, considered that the translation of Ben Sira must have been made by a Jew of the 3<sup>rd</sup> century, a supporter of rabbinism and opposed to cultic matter, a Jew who, later, became a Christian.

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58 Qumran and the Geniza Fragments of Sirach, 245-267.

59 La lumière interprète de la sagesse, 317-346.

60 The Origins of Ben Sira in Syriac, 237-253 and 494-507.

61 The Early Syriac Text, 39-75.

62 The Syriac Version, especially 216-226.

## 2.5 Conclusion

So many hands have touched the book of Ben Sira. For centuries it remained open to modifications, not always casual, but very often intentional, generally made by unknown authors. Already the grandson of Ben Sira adapted his grandfather's text for his time; moreover he translated it into Greek as targumists did in Aramaic for the Hebrew Torah. After him came those who felt compelled to bring the text up to date, according to theological progress of their time, and those who inserted some philosophical explanations, which were still Jewish, but coming more from Hellenistic thought than from the Bible. The first probably were Essenes and the others, people of the Aristobulus school. Later, in the Latin church, the *Vetus latina* version preserves texts which are found nowhere else. And the Peshitta version, based again on the already extended Hebrew text of Ben Sira, comprises, as far as we see, some typically Christian echoes.

Facing such a plurality of texts, it is by all means reasonable to search with the help of criticism the words and the thought of Ben Sira himself. But then, what will we do with the witnesses that came later? Will they have only scientific interest for scholars or will they have a purely historical and cultural value?

## 3. Human words or also Word of God

From the hermeneutical point of view, it is impossible to avoid the fact that the book of Ecclesiasticus was acknowledged as inspired and canonical by the Catholic church, which definitively confirmed its statement in 1546 during the council of Trent. On the other hand, Protestant and Anglican Reform considers this book as one of the "Apocrypha", and the Orthodox church does not take a common and clear position.

Reason and origin of these discrepancies go back to the establishment of the scriptural canon, you might say, of the Hebrew Bible by Jewish rabbis: they never put the book of Ben Sira among the sacred books. As a result, during the patristic age,<sup>63</sup> mainly in the 4<sup>th</sup> century and at the beginning of the 5<sup>th</sup>, most of the Church Fathers in the East, perhaps more conscious of the Jewish position, showed hesitation about the canonical value of the books which are not in the Hebrew Bible but are included in the Septuagint; among these is the book of Ben Sira. The main exception was John Chrysostom who, without any reluctance, quoted many times the Greek version of

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63 Cf. GILBERT, Jesus Sirach, 878-906.

Ben Sira. The stance taken by Jerome in Bethlehem was the most radical: his explicit refusal of the canonicity of Ben Sira's book had an impact for centuries. However, usually, the Greek Fathers and also Jerome in Latin (after 404) often quoted the book of Ben Sira as Scripture.<sup>64</sup>

In the West, there was no discussion on the matter, so that at the end of the 4<sup>th</sup> century, under Augustine's influence, the councils of Hippo (393) and of Carthage (397) put the book of Ecclesiasticus into their canonical lists, and in 405 Innocent I did the same in the name of the church of Rome.

Now, apart from this question about the canonicity of Ben Sira's book, there is another more complicated question. Is there an official position in the Catholic church about the variety of the texts assigned to Ben Sira? As it was explained above, we find a variety of languages: texts in Hebrew, in Greek, in Latin, in Syriac, and a variety of texts forms: either short or long, i.e. either without or with additions.

For twenty years I uphold the thesis that the Catholic church never adopted a position regarding this matter.<sup>65</sup> Neither did it declare in which language a book is said to be canonical, or according to which edition. The only statement in this matter is still that made by the council of Trent, which declared canonical the books listed in the canon, as taken as an whole and with all their parts, as they are traditionally read in the Catholic church and found in the Vulgate. Now, it does not appear that the council wanted to show a preference for the long text of Ecclesiasticus in the Vulgate. Of course, excluding it is impossible, but, as the same council had requested from the pope a correct edition of the Septuagint, the *Vaticanus* manuscript was chosen for this purpose, and this manuscript gives the short Greek version of Ben Sira.

Such freedom in the Catholic church is not new and still exists until today. During Christian antiquity, Greek churches read either the short version done by Ben Sira's grandson, as also Jerome when he quoted Ecclesiasticus in Latin, or the extended one, as frequently did Chrysostom and the *Sacra Parallela*. Latin churches read the long version of the *Vetus latina* – as did Ambrose and Augustine – and Syriac churches also used their enlarged version. For each of them, the text they used to read was for them sacred and canonical. Such freedom is the practice of the Holy See today. John Paul II authorized the publication of two Bibles: in 1979, the New Vulgate which for Ecclesiasticus resumes, with a few corrections, the version of the *Vetus latina*, i.e. the long text; in 2000, the Bible called after Blaj, a roumanian version made in 1795 by Samuil Micu who, for the book of Ben Sira, usually translated the short Greek version, with only very few additions.<sup>66</sup>

64 Cf. GILBERT, Jérôme et l'oeuvre de Ben Sira, 109-120.

65 Cf. GILBERT, L'Ecclésiastique. Quel texte? Quelle autorité?, 233-250.

66 Biblia de la Blaj. 1795. For instance, Sir 1:5 (Ziegler) is translated, but not Sir 1:7.10cd;

However the Hebrew text of Ben Sira and its second enlarged edition were never used by Christians, at least as far as we know. Never that is, until the discoveries done from 1896. These Hebrew texts were only read in Judaism, at Qumran and in the medieval sect of the Quaraites. With what status? As a sacred book? Doubts may be raised. In fact Greek and Syriac churches never read the Old Testament in Hebrew. The Latin church, until the Renaissance, had indirect access to it through the translation of Jerome, but not for Ben Sira's book, because the hermit of Bethlehem refused to translate it into Latin. On the other hand, instead of the Greek version, from the time of the discoveries of the Hebrew fragments of Ben Sira's book, some renowned Catholic biblical scholars did not hesitate to translate them as they are: these are, for instance, A. Vaccari in 1925, L. Alonso Schökel in 1968, P. W. Skehan and A. A. Di Lella in 1987.<sup>67</sup>

From these facts, I infer some hermeneutical consequences:

1. The research of the original Hebrew text of Ben Sira (Hb I) is comparable with the principle of the *hebraica veritas* which prompted Jerome to translate the Hebrew Bible into Latin.<sup>68</sup> For a Catholic, desire of hearing the authentic word of Ben Sira leads to an acknowledgement of his inspiration and of the canonical value, even if not exclusively of course, of his book in Hebrew. When at the end of the Second Vatican council, Paul VI decided to have the Vulgate corrected in the light of the original texts, he in fact renewed the principle of Jerome; I think this principle is also valid for the book of Ben Sira. Of all those who took this book in hand, he is the first whom we should call an inspired author.

2. The Septuagint has been for twenty centuries the Bible of the Greek churches and some Fathers held that this version was inspired. For the book of Ben Sira, in any case, even after the Hebrew fragments' discoveries, the short Greek version of the great uncial manuscripts remains the complete text which allows a secure enough access to Ben Sira's thought. It is therefore not astonishing to find this version in modern Western translations in the principal Bibles. However there are two remarks to keep in mind:

- Modern Bibles in different languages often correct the grandson's version which the great uncial manuscripts give, not so much to restore what he really should have written but to give understanding to the words of his grandfather himself, according to the Hebrew fragments. Compared with the grandfather, the grandson is less interesting.

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11:15-16; 16:15-16; 24:18.24. On the contrary Sir 26:19-27 (Ziegler) was added to this edition, but was not in the great majority of the copies of the 1795 edition: cf. critical note p. 2419.

67 VACCARI, *I libri poetici della Bibbia*, 331-408; ALONSO SCHÖKEL, *Eclesiástico*, 141-332; SKEHAN - DI LELLA, *The Wisdom of Ben Sira*.

68 Among the recent scientific works going in this direction, cf. CORLEY, *Ben Sira's Teaching*.

- On the other hand, present-day scholars working on the Septuagint tend to respect this version in itself.

One concludes then that both Hb I of Ben Sira and Gr II of his grandson deserve respect, without detriment to either.

3. The second edition, with changes and additions, especially in the matter of eschatology, comes from Judaism and was a great success among Christians. Witnesses of this are some Greek manuscripts and various Greek patristic texts; then the *Vetus latina* version, usually read in Western churches before the New Vulgate, and also the Peshitta version read over centuries in Christian communities speaking Syriac, give the same witness. For all of those who, in every part of the church, used and still use one of the enlarged version of Ecclesiasticus, it is evident that they have or have had a sacred book in hand. Therefore, some consequences follow:

- This second edition, in all its different forms, keeps its theological value, i.e. each of these forms can be said, in my opinion, inspired and canonical.

- Therefore, theologically, the texts peculiar to this second edition cannot be relegated to footnotes as having only an informative value.

- Lastly, as much as possible, the principle of coherence of each version of this second edition of Ben Sira's book deserves to be applied, in the same way as scholars today insist they must do for the Septuagint.

In fact, what I intend to lay stress on is a necessarily wider concept of canonicity and therefore of inspiration. The authors of the second edition, multi-form though it may be, play a part in the charism of inspiration; I say that for similar reasons I used to affirm the inspiration of the original author, Ben Sira. These authors, through their translators, were received as inspired by the church. These translators, in so far as they deliver to us the second edition, are very often the only ones who give us access to it. Their translations therefore must be respected, not only from the scientific, historical and cultural point of view, but also for theological reasons: they too transmit the word of God.

#### 4. Conclusion

More than a century has passed after the discoveries of the Hebrew fragments of Ben Sira's book, and modern research on textual criticism, history of the texts and theology has not simplified the manner of presenting the problems, many of which have not yet received adequate answers.

Ecclesiasticus remains one of the most difficult books of the Bible in its interpretation and if one day we succeed in recovering the Hebrew parts of the book which are now missing, the situation would only be partly clar-

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