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Corley, Jeremy

Ben Sira's Teaching on Friendship

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In this revision of his 1996 doctoral dissertation for the Catholic University of America, Jeremy Corley considers friendship in the Wisdom of Ben Sira. In the introduction (1–34) Corley surveys previous research on friendship in Ben Sira and discusses friendship in the ancient worlds of Israel, Greece, Egypt, and Mesopotamia; Ben Sira's historical setting (Jerusalem, ca. 195–175 B.C.E.); the authorship and social setting of the text; theological themes and social ethics in Ben Sira's teaching; Ben Sira's poetry; Ben Sira texts and text editions; and textual criticism. Corley concludes the chapter with a detailed description of his own method in this study. Beginning with a brief outline of his general procedure, he moves into a detailed account of his text-critical method. For the three friendship pericopes (Sir 19:13–17; 22:19–26; 27:16–21) for which no Hebrew text is extant Corley provides a reconstructed Hebrew text based on ancient versions. He offers a persuasive argument to justify his decision to provide retroversions. Here he adopts a position contrary to the practice of most scholars, who in the absence of an extant Hebrew text usually select the Greek as the primary basis for their translation and commentary. Although, as Corley observes, the retroverted text is obviously hypothetical, retroversions offer the opportunity of working in the Hebrew language. He humbly asserts that his retroversions are an attempt to get closer to the sage's original thought world and to understand better the Semitic pattern of his poetry.

In chapters 2–6 Corley describes the seven major pericopes (Sir 6:5–17; 9:10–16; 13:15–23; 19:13–17; 22:19–26; 27:16–21; 37:1–6), in which the author, probably Yeshua Ben Eleazar Ben Sira, treats friendship. He places the treatise in the historical and political context of Second Temple Israel. Corley's work is the first in-depth study in English of Ben Sira's teaching on friendship. He sets Ben Sira's thought in the context of earlier Hebrew, Greek, Egyptian, and Mesopotamian writings on friendship. Working with the medieval Hebrew manuscripts from the Cairo Genizah, this volume provides a thorough elucidation of Ben Sira's seven main poems on friendship and summarizes the author's theology of friendship. For each passage, the discussion includes delimitation; text; text-critical notes; translation; poetic analysis; context; and exegesis. For four of the poems (Sir 6:5–17; 9:10–16; 13:15–23; 37:1–6) he bases the discussion on the Cairo Genizah Hebrew texts. For the other three poems (Sir 19:13–17; 22:19–26; 27:16–21), where no Hebrew text survives, Corley proposes and provides reconstructed Hebrew texts based on the Greek and Syriac versions.

In chapter 2 Corley provides a thorough textual and literary study of Sir 6:5–17 (probably the most studied and best known of Ben Sira's pericopes on friendship) and 37:1–6 with a verse-by-verse exegesis of each text. He also presents an interesting discussion of possible nonbiblical parallels for these texts. Corley treats these two pericopes together because of their verbal and conceptual similarities. The chapter concludes with a brief summary that draws together the exegesis of the two texts.

Chapter 3 examines Sir 9:10–16, which speaks positively of the old friend who is wise and just and warns against friendship with the wicked and the proud. The reason for the sage's warning is that God may at any time bring death upon such persons, and hence joining them in friendship may prove harmful. This is in sharp contrast to Ben Sira's teaching on the life-giving value of wise friends in 9:14–16. Corley notes that Ben Sira emphasizes the importance of communication in friendship and of the need for generous and wise answers to friends. Corley notes that Ben Sira's warnings about the dangers of liaisons with women in 9:1–9 precedes his teaching on relations with male friends in 9:10–16.

In chapter 4 Corley argues that Sir 13:15–23 is a didactic poem on friendship addressing the impossibility of friendship between rich and poor. He notes that much of the advice here is negative and that in providing guidance for his students Ben Sira presupposes a social gulf between the wealthy but wicked members of the Hellenized ruling class and the poor but righteous Jewish population. Thus he concludes that Ben Sira is warning his students against making friends with members of the arrogant ruling class.

In chapters 5 and 6 Corley discusses three pericopes (Sir 19:13–17; 22:19–26; 27:16–21) from the central portion of the book. All three passages develop the theme of the right and wrong use of speech and warn of specific dangers to friendship. Corley understands each of these pericopes as providing basic teaching on how to preserve friendship. Sirach 19:13–17 offers positive teaching: when faced with a friend’s bad behavior, offer reproof so that the friend may change. Sirach 27:16–21 adopts a negative stance: one should not betray the confidence of a friend or else the friendship may quickly vanish. Sirach 19:13–17 concerns the right use of speech, whereas 27:16–21 is about the misuse of speech. In these two pericopes, Ben Sira shows how a wise person is able to maintain friendship through proper use of the tongue.

Corley’s conclusion summarizes Ben Sira’s teaching about the goodness of friendship, where Ben Sira combines Greek esteem for *φιλία*, but by his use of language Ben Sira takes care to root his friendship instructions within Israel’s creation theology. This synthesis forms the foundation of the sage’s teaching on friendship. The most prominent feature in Ben Sira’s teaching is the admonition to caution toward actual and potential friends. Friendships are to be undertaken only within the context of fear of God.

An appendix offers a brief survey of Ben Sira’s eighteen other incidental references to friendship outside the seven major pericopes. Corley rounds off the volume with a bibliography and three indexes, including primary sources, modern authors, and subjects.

This study reveals Ben Sira’s use of themes found in other ancient writings. Basing his work on the foundation of Israel’s scriptures, Ben Sira develops ideas also found in Greek texts such as Theognis and Egyptian wisdom literature (particularly the prototype of P. Insinger). Either he knows such works or else he was familiar with their thought world. Such awareness of non-Israelite traditions common elsewhere in Israel’s wisdom heritage may in Ben Sira’s case reflect the influence of his foreign travels (Sir 34:12).

While accepting Ben Sira as a person steeped in the traditions of Israel and the surrounding nations, Corley asserts that he is not a slavish imitator. Ben Sira, he claims, forges a new synthesis updating the truths of Israel’s tradition for his contemporary audience in an increasingly Hellenized society. He is not afraid to utilize insights found in foreign literature when these harmonize with the Israelite tradition. Corley sees Ben Sira expanding such traditional Israelite principles as caution and fidelity, ideas also found in Greek and Egyptian writing. His originality lies not in the thoughts themselves but in his creative synthesis, whereby he brings ideas from diverse sources into harmony with Israel’s faith expressed through the leitmotif of fear of God. Corley summarizes the most significant aspects of Ben Sira’s teaching on friendship under four headings—the

goodness of friendship; caution in friendship; faithfulness toward friends; fear of God—naming the last as the most important quality in friendship.

Corley claims that Ben Sira was writing in an age when friendship was important and sees him as prepared to use any insight whether from Israel's heritage or from other traditions to assist his students in making and keeping wise friendships. He claims that, while our modern circumstances differ from the social conditions of Ben Sira's time, much of his teaching has timeless value and is relevant today. He strongly supports the claim that the fear of God is the way to true happiness (1:12), an insight that applies in the realm of friendship as much as in other areas of life.

Overall, Corley presents a well-reasoned analysis of friendship in Ben Sira based on the critical evaluation of its structure via textual-critical methodology. He deals fairly and competently with the available data as well as with the theories of other scholars; one would hope that his observations would encourage others to evaluate current assumptions about this text. Surprisingly, Corley does not address in any detail Ben Sira's insensitive and bitter treatment of the danger of friendship with women. Allowing for that oversight, his thoughtful work is a good example of the applicability of a textual-critical method to both synchronic and diachronic questions. His work could serve as a model for a measured and appropriate use of text-critical and literary methods. In summary, Corley's work on friendship in Ben Sira affords a plethora of attractive insights and a way of reading parts of this fascinating text that could become a paradigm for other studies of Ben Sira.