

FRIEND OR FOE?:
FRIENDSHIP, RECIPROCITY, AND THE EVIL INCLINATION IN SIRACH 37:1–6 (LXX)

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My objective in this paper is to discuss the connections between the evil inclination, friendship, and reciprocity as represented in LXX Sir 37:1–6.¹ With the discovery of the medieval Hebrew manuscripts of Ben Sira at Cairo Genizah and the later unearthing of early Hebrew manuscripts at Qumran and Masada, the Hebrew text has become a focal point in scholarship on Ben Sira. The Hebrew text presents the possibility of ascertaining the original words and ideas of the author. In recent years, works on the three areas of emphasis in this paper, the evil inclination, friendship, and reciprocity, have retained a preference for the examination of the Hebrew text.²

Because of this emphasis on the Hebrew or the LXX as a translation of the Hebrew, scholars have paid little attention to the meaning of the LXX text in and of itself. The Greek translation of Ben Sira, purported to be as early as 132 BCE, is, in fact, a self-contained literary work.³ Therefore, while reference to the Hebrew text may illuminate the translator's abilities or translational preferences, this practice does not establish a meaning of the Greek text. Preference for the Hebrew text has also led to pejorative assertions concerning the translator's capabilities.⁴

¹ This version is a conference draft to be presented at the Stone-Campbell Journal Conference, March 13–14, 2020. Revisions and updates may take place before the presentation. This paper is a shortened version of a longer paper. As such, footnotes may not be fully formatted. Moreover, it represents a work in progress and in not a stand-in for a publication. All feedback is welcome. d

² Johann Cook, “The Origin of the Tradition of the הַטָּב הַיֵּצֵר and הַרַע הַיֵּצֵר,” *JSJ* 38.1 (2007): 80–91; Jeremy Corley, *Ben Sira's Teaching on Friendship*, BJS 316 (Providence, RI: Brown Judaic Studies, 2002); Saul M. Olyan, *Friendship in the Hebrew Bible*, ABRL (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2017); George Sauer, “Freundschaft nach Ben Sira 37,1–6,” in *Freundschaft bei Ben Sira: Beiträge des Symposions zu Ben Sira Salzburg 1995*, ed. Friedrich V. Reiterer (Berlin: de Gruyter, 1996), 123–31; Seth Schwartz, *Were the Jews a Mediterranean Society?: Reciprocity and Solidarity in Ancient Judaism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2010); Patrick W. Skehan and Alexander A. Di Lella, *The Wisdom of Ben Sira*, AB 39 (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995).

³ Skehan and Di Lella offer a date range for the translation of 132–117 BCE; eadem, *The Wisdom of Ben Sira*, 134.

⁴ For example, the lack of correspondence between the Greek of Sir 37:3 and the Hebrew has led Miryam T. Brand to dismiss the importance of this text for understanding both the original author's as well as the translator's understanding of the nature of sin in the world. She writes, “The Translator was constrained by his reading of the Hebrew, corrupted as it may have been, and so his representation of an independent ‘evil notion’ that ‘covers the

The differences between the Greek and Hebrew texts are clear, though close coherence is also present.⁵ In the pericope under consideration, Sir 37:1–6, the “evil inclination” (πονηρὸν ἐνθύμημα) has no synonymous correspondence to the Hebrew Text while using the typical Greek terms to translate a Hebrew *vorlage* of “evil inclination” or יצר רע. This terminology is added to a section already containing notions of friendship and reciprocity, both of which are common in the Hebrew and the Greek texts. The Greek author thereby supplies new meaning.⁶ Contrary to Miryam Brand who writes that “the Greek does “reflect a belief in an ‘evil inclination’ or ‘notion,’ [but] little more can be determined from the LXX.”⁷ I argue that more meaning is available concerning this evil inclination in the text through a careful analysis of the main themes of this passage. That meaning is the focus of this paper. In what follows, I will examine the themes of friendship, reciprocity, and the evil inclination in LXX Sirach in order to better understand the coalescence of these themes in Sir 37:1–6.⁸ I will treat the Greek text of Sirach as a cohesive, singular literary unit, whose meaning does not rely on a Hebrew source.

Methodology

land’ cannot be read as an accurate representation of Ben Sira’s thought or his own;” idem, “‘At the Entrance Sin Is Crouching’: The Source of Sin and Its Nature as Portrayed in Second Temple Literature” (PhD diss., New York University, 2011), 203. Likewise, Roland E. Murphy calls the inclusion of “evil inclination” here “extremely dubious” and “an abrupt intrusion;” idem, “Yēšer in the Qumran Literature,” *Bib* 39.3 (1958): 338.

⁵ For an examination of the differences between the Greek and Hebrew Texts see Benjamin G. Wright, *No Small Difference: Sirach’s Relationship to Its Hebrew Parent Text*, SBLSCS 26 (Atlanta: Scholars, 1989).

⁶ In this paper, I will use the term author instead of translator to describe the person who wrote the Greek text. This choice is made to emphasize the coherence of the Greek text and to treat it as a standalone document, not only as a translation of a previous text.

⁷ Brand, “At the Entrance,” 203. Brand argues that the presence of this idea in the LXX is “probably the result of a corruption in the [Hebrew] text;” idem, *Evil Within and Without*, 114n.72.

⁸ From here on, all references to the text of Sir will come from the LXX unless otherwise noted.

In this paper I first construct interpretive frameworks in which to understand this pericope and then proceed with an examination of Sir 37:1–6. Concerning the first two frameworks, the technical terms of friend (φίλος) and gift (χάρις) will be used in selection of passages in Sirach to develop the frameworks. Since the “evil inclination” may be unique in Sir 37:3 to the book of Sirach, I will examine possible frameworks outside of Sirach with which to compare this particular usage. These frameworks will then inform an examination of the text which focuses on the interaction of these three themes.

Frameworks

In Sir 37:1, the author observes that the self-identification of a person as a friend does not reflexively mean that he or she functions as a friend for “there is a friend who is a friend in name only.” Indeed, in the next verse the author states that this false friend becomes an enemy (Sir 37:2). The author logically assumes that these false friends lie. These lies deceive people. Sir 6:8 mirrors the belief in a difference between so called friends and true friends by labeling those false friends, friends by convenience. These false friends may abandon one during a time of tribulation. A trial reveals who is and is not a true friend. Only the faithful friend, more valuable than riches, remains alongside one who is suffering (Sir 6:12–16). This distinction between true and false friends due to evil and the subsequent duplicity of individuals is common throughout the work. Jeremy Corley argues that, “The most prominent feature in Ben Sira’s friendship teaching is his admonition to caution toward both potential and actual friends.”⁹

While Sirach allows the possibility for a friend not to be a true friend, the friend who proves trustworthy in a time of trouble is not necessarily unfaithful in another situation. That

⁹ Corley, *Ben Sira’s Teaching*, 214.

friend is a priceless, sturdy shelter (Sir 6:14–16). Moreover, the old, trusted friend is preferable to a new one (Sir 9:10). This old friend can only be the faithful friend because the unfaithful friend will abandon one at the first sign of trouble. Therefore, the old friend who has proven himself faithful is better than the new friend who may prove unfaithful. This true friendship is beautiful before God (Sir 25:1).

While the technical terminology for reciprocity or gift giving is not used in this pericope, the action of giving a gift is present. In Sir 37:6, the speaker implores the reader to not forget their friends in their soul and to be mindful concerning their friends in managing their wealth. This last phrase implies the providing of gifts to friends. Through the narrative of this pericope, the admonition to giving wealth to friends comes only after the description of true and false friends and the description of the friend who stands beside one in a battle. This context implies that it is the faithful friend to whom one should give wealth.

The reward given to a faithful friend is paralleled in Sir 22:23. This friend is present during affliction (θλιψις); the same word is used in Sir 37:4. A faithful friend through times of poverty should be rewarded in times of prosperity (cf. Sir 13:21). Likewise, Ben Sira urges the dispersal of money to friends in this life (Sir 14:13). It is better, in his mind, to make sure one's money goes to a trusted friend than to leave it persons of questionable or unknown character (Sir 14:15)

Just as the author urges discernment in entering friendship elsewhere in the book, so too does he urge caution in the distribution of goods. Excessive giving can attract the faithless friends who will only stick around as long as they are receiving benefit (Sir 20:16). Proper use of wealth in a discerning manner will result in the desired end (Sir 20:12–17). The wise person is

modest in gifts and avoids conferring benefits on the wicked.¹⁰ The modesty of the gift exchange avoids an unrestrained acceptance of so-called reciprocal friendships without knowing the character of the one you are giving a gift to. Moreover, the action of being faithful in reciprocating gifts provides surety in the future (Sir 3:31).

The language of gift giving as well as the terminology of gift (χάρις) can be merged into the idea of almsgiving in Sirach (29:9; 40:17). Ben Sira even occasionally conflates this gift of reciprocity with Torah-mandated relief of the poor (Sir 12:1–6).¹¹ Sir 37:1–6 does not seem to imply almsgiving as the meaning of the passage. The recipient of the gift being given is a friend. Whether rich or poor, qualifying this relationship as a friendship differs from the language of giving to the poor in Sirach (cf. Sir 29:9). Where Ben Sira explicitly mentions the making of friends in poverty, he implies that both parties in said friendship are impoverished, which makes their reciprocal relationship mutually beneficial (Sir 13:21). That is not almsgiving. Concerning Sir 37:1–6 what potentially may be unique about this pericope is that trustworthy friendship not only is the basis for entering into a reciprocal friendship, but that faithful friendship is the first action of the reciprocal relationship, which is met in turn by the other party through a gift of their wealth.

The Evil Inclination

Sirach emphasizes caution on one's choice of friends and/or associates in a reciprocal relationship. Humans can be righteous and wise, but others are wicked and even parasitic. What is the reason for this divide in humanity? What causes a friend to be a friend in name only (Sir

¹⁰ Schwartz, *Were the Jews a Mediterranean Society*, 59–60.

¹¹ Schwartz, *Were the Jews a Mediterranean Society*, 58.

37:1)? In Sir 37:3 it appears to be an evil inclination that roams the earth and causes deceit. The idea of an evil inclination has been developed in the rabbinic corpus. However, the exact notion one should place upon the words *πονηρὸν ἐνθύμημα* in Sir 37 is debated.

The possible semantic range for the notion of the evil inclination in Sir 37 ranges from the biblical notions of “thought” or “disposition” to the first beginnings of the reification of *yetzer ra* (evil inclination) as in some Qumran texts. While the *yetzer* is developed further in later rabbinic texts, the imposition of these later ideas of a fully reified *yetzer* to this document would be anachronistic. The biblical notion of “thought” is seen in 1 Chron 28:9: “the Lord searches every mind and understands every plan and thought.” Some scholars including Jean Hadot prefer this reading of thought or design, that is the biblical notion, which makes the inclination in Sir 37:3 the product of man’s thought.¹²

Other scholars admit the possibility of a “first stage” in the doctrine being reflected in the Greek text.¹³ This first stage may be able to be seen at Qumran. Ishay Rosen-Zvi argues that “at Qumran *yetzer* occupies a middle ground between the biblical ‘thought’ and the reified rabbinic being.”¹⁴ While some texts reflect the biblical notion where the *yēšer* is related to the heart of man, he notes that in 4Q417 2.II .2 the text portrays the *yēšer* as an active agent, outside of the heart of man, enticing them to evil.¹⁵ “And you did not abandon me to the plots of my *yetzer*.” While still retaining distance from the fully formed rabbinic idea, this instance demonstrates a

¹² Hadot, *Penchant mauvais*, 130–31.

¹³ Cohen Stuart, *The Struggle in Man*, 89.

¹⁴ Ishay Rosen-Zvi, *Demonic Desires, “Yetzer Hara” and the Problem of Evil in Late Antiquity* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2011), 44.

¹⁵ Rosen-Zvi, *Demonic Desires*, 46.

development from the biblical tradition. In this same way, Sir 37:3 may follow a similar stage of the development—an early stage in the development of the *yēšer* as an independent being and not merely a person’s thoughts or intents.

The Evil Inclination v. Wisdom and Empathy

Having developed the interpretive frameworks, in this section I will argue for two claims in support of my thesis that false friends manifest the evil inclination while true friendship is motivated by empathy and trust. First, I will demonstrate that it is proper to speak of the evil inclination in this passage despite its variance from the rabbinic conception of the evil inclination. I propose that the allusion to the evil inclination in Sir 37:1–6 reveals itself as an entity opposite to wisdom, which is manifested in the deceit of the false friend. Second, I will argue that though the evil inclination here is a novelty in the book, Sir 37 reflects a continuity of thought in Sirach concerning friendship. This continuity is also present in the author’s use of empathy as a motivation to proper action. Then, I will use these two claims to draw conclusions about Sirach’s wisdom concerning reciprocal friendships in Sir 37:1–6.

In Sir 37:1–6, the evil inclination manifests itself in the actions of untrue friends. These friends in name only facilitate the evil inclination’s desire to deceive. What may be considered bad friendship elsewhere in Sirach is here given a specific name. The exact nature of this evil inclination is debated. Some scholars have chosen not to use Sir 37:3 within their constructions of the developmental history of the idea of the *yetzer* based on a lack of attestation of the *yetzer* in the Hebrew text of Sir 37.¹⁶ Additionally, Hadot, while interacting with the Greek text, argues

¹⁶ Stuart, drawing upon G. Maier and Hughes writes that “this passage [37:3] cannot be used for drawing conclusions on the meaning of *yēšer* in Sirach”; idem, *The Struggle in Man*, 92.

that the two terms “evil” and “inclination” are not intrinsically linked in this passage.¹⁷ Evil functions as an adjective modifying the inclination because of the circumstances presented in the passage, not because of the inclination’s inherent nature. Therefore, according to Hadot, it is not correct to understand the phrase “evil inclination” as expressing anything more than the idea that one’s inclination is the product of the thoughts of the individual or his or her disposition.¹⁸

In Sirach 37:3, it is, in my estimation, incorrect to label the evil inclination as merely the thoughts of the person, that is the biblical framework. However, the word translated here as inclination, ἐνθύμημα, is used elsewhere in Sirach to describe the thoughts of a person in neutral terms. In each of these usages, this term is modified by a possessive genitive (Sir 27:6; 32:13; 35:22). This genitive attaches the inclinations to a specific entity. The vocative address in Sir 37:3 does not include such a genitive. Moreover, the use of the vocative case signals a direct address to the inclination itself, and the following clauses attribute independent action and volition to the inclination. The use of the aorist infinitive of the verb “to cover” (καλύπτω) functions as a purpose clause. The only purpose of this singled out inclination is deceit. This is not a morally neutral action as this deceit leads to the breaking of friendships and the creation of enemies (Sir 37:2). Therefore, this usage should not be conflated with the other instances in Sirach.

Sirach also attributes similar actions to both this inclination and wisdom through lexical similarities. In Sir 24:3, wisdom covers the earth (κατεκάλυψα γῆν). In Sir 37:3, the evil inclination covers the dry land (καλύψαι τὴν ξηρὰν). The purpose of covering the earth or dry

¹⁷ Hadot, *Penchant mauvais*, 130.

¹⁸ Hadot, *Penchant mauvais*, 130.

land are contrasted. Wisdom covers the earth as part of its search for a proper people to live within. The purpose of covering the earth is to impart wisdom, which a few verses later is equated with the Torah. On the other hand, in Sir 37:3, the evil inclination moves over dry ground with the purpose of deceit. The evil inclination as non-Torah and non-wisdom produces opposite results of wisdom. Jeremy Corley has argued that the goodness of friendship for Sirach is rooted in the goodness of creation.¹⁹ This goodness is a manifestation of wisdom. Any deviation from this wisdom is a detriment to this goodness. One such deviation is the evil inclination which leads to deceit and false friendship.

Sir 37 begins with the description of a person who deceives in that he or she claims to be a friend but is not actually a friend; they, in fact, are an enemy (v. 2). This deception is caused by the evil inclination. The evil inclination does not necessarily deceive individuals who then go and do wrong. The deceit is through the wrong actions of an individual. In this manner, the evil inclination is again likened to wisdom, which the author portrays as something independent of human beings but manifested in their actions.

While the appearance of the evil inclination is unique in this passage to Sirach, the author urges no caution beyond what he specifies elsewhere concerning making friends.²⁰ In Sir 6:7–10, he suggests that one gain friends through testing because of the proclivity of false friends to fall away in times of trouble. Moreover, the continuity of thoughts on friendship extends to places where the author emphasizes the fear of the Lord as not only related to wisdom but to true

¹⁹ Corley, *Ben Sira's Teaching*, 214.

²⁰ As Corley as argued, “The most prominent feature in Ben Sira’s friendship teaching is his admonition to caution toward both potential and actual friends;” idem, *Ben Sira's Teaching*, 214.

friendship as well (Sir 6:17).²¹ False friends manifest the evil inclination, that is, the opposite of wisdom. True friends are those who fear the Lord and demonstrate wisdom.

Contrasting with the depiction of the false friend, Sir 37:5 suggests that the true friend helps his or her companion not for the sake of personal gain but for the stomach's sake. This ambiguous phrase, "for the sake of his stomach," refers to the notion that empathy rather than self-interest is a motivating factor in true friendship. In his work on empathy in Sirach, Bradley C. Gregory locates the impetus for ethical action in the author's identification of a shared human identity with the other.²² As David Konstan writes, in the Hellenistic world friendship was "conceived as a personal relation between people bound to one another ... by mutual loyalty, trust, and love."²³ Friendly actions were motivated by self-identification with and concern for the other. They were not self-serving but sought the good of the other. Empathy provides an ethical impetus for the fostering of friendship.

While Gregory does not discuss this text, Sir 37 mirrors this use of empathy as guiding proper friendship. The true friend rejoices in good times and is sorrowful in troubling times. These actions demonstrate the true friend's identification of his or her situation with that of his or her friend (Sir 37:4). Moreover, the ambiguous reference to helping a friend for the sake of one's stomach (Sir 37:5) may refer to the individual's seat of compassion, or perhaps empathy, as one's motivation to act. While the Greek term for stomach (*γαστήρ*) is typically related to the womb or the stomach (e.g., 3 Macc 6:8; 7:11), it can be related to emotions.

²¹ Corley, *Ben Sira's Teaching*, 217.

²² Bradley C. Gregory, "Empathy in the Ethical Rhetoric of Ben Sira," in *Emotions from Ben Sira to Paul* edited by Renate Egger-Wenzel and Jeremy Corley (Berlin; De Gruyter, 2012) 103–18.

²³ David Konstan, *Friendship in the Classical World* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 121.

LXX Job 16:16 states “My stomach (ἡ γαστήρ μου) is aflame from weeping, and there is a shadow on my eyelids.”

In LXX Job 32, Elihu speaks (32:18-19) on account of the perceived injustice done to God by Job and his friends. The text states “I will speak again, for I am full of words; My stomach’s spirit (τὸ πνεῦμα τῆς γαστρούς) is killing me and my stomach (ἡ δὲ γαστήρ μου) is like a bound wineskin of new wine in ferment or like a burst bellows of a blacksmith.”

In both instances, the term stomach (γαστήρ) is used as a seat of emotions, likening it to the common term for compassion (σπλάγχνα) which can also be translated as intestines or bowels. In view of Sirach’s emphasis on empathy as a motivation for positive action, the use of stomach in Sir 37 suggests that empathy motivates true friendship. A companion helps a friend for the sake of their center of emotions or empathy. In the context of the book’s authorship, the empathy of friendship would have been understood as unselfish affection, that is, action without expectation of reciprocal action.²⁴

Because of the purpose of the evil inclination, Sirach continually urges caution of his reader concerning with whom they enter into reciprocal relationships, including friendships. In this pericope, the trial or tough time is the crucible of true friendships. Only following the trial should one reward his or her friend through reciprocity. According to Corley, the use of a trial to test potential friends “corresponds to the way God tests those who wish to serve him (2:1) and the way wisdom tests those who test her (4:17).”²⁵ Through the trial, either wisdom or its opposite, the evil inclination, is proven to motivate the potential friend. The faithful friend is

²⁴ Konstan, *Friendship*, 82.

²⁵ Corley, *Ben Sira’s Teaching*, 218.

loyal because he or she possesses wisdom and fear of the Lord. In this way, the reciprocal gifts of faithful friendship are another manifestation of the wealth that wisdom brings.

Conclusion

Sir 37:1–6 encompasses a discourse on friendship. Its theme of friendship and its emphasis on the careful selection of friends is common in the book. The author differentiates between true and false friends. False friends are fickle, fleeing at the first sign of danger. Their deceit manifests the evil inclination. True friends remain loyal in times of trouble. Their empathetic motivation manifests their trustworthiness and fidelity. Such friends, the author suggests, are worthy of remembrance and reciprocity. These friends are the friends of the wise.

The evil inclination, introduced in v. 3, is a unique addition to the author's discourses on friendship, as well as the only time the author uses this inclination (ἐνθύμημα) in an explicitly negative way. In Sir 37:3, this inclination works as a semi-independent entity, roaming the earth and deceiving humans through the actions of other human beings. I agree with Cohen Stuart that this reference to the evil inclination represents a "first stage" in the development of the concept of *yetzer*.²⁶ Its independent action distinguishes it from the biblical use of an inclination as representing a person's internal thoughts.

The depiction of the evil inclination acting with its own volition and through human beings qualifies the author's admonition about avoiding friends in name only. That caution is due to the actions manifested by the working of the evil inclination. Unlike the evil inclination with its purpose of deceit, the purpose of true friendship is concern for the other. The motivation of

²⁶ Cohen Stuart, *The Struggle in Man*, 89.

empathy results in loyalty among friends through trials. These trials are the fulcrums which determine the motivation of and quality of the true friend. Those who remain loyal in times of trial lack the evil inclination and therefore are qualified for beginning or furthering a genuine, reciprocal friendship.