

Review of Claudia V. Camp, *Ben Sira and the Men Who Handle Books: Gender and the Rise of Canon-Consciousness; Hebrew Bible Monographs 50*; Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix Press, 2013.

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Claudia Camp has composed three books on gender, the wisdom tradition, and the development of the Hebrew Bible: *Wisdom and the Feminine in the Book of Proverbs* (1985), *Wise, Strange and Holy: The Strange Woman and the Making of the Bible* (2000), and now *Ben Sira and the Men who Handle Books*. This book is more focused and less ambitious, than the extraordinarily wide-ranging and brilliantly synthetic *Wise, Strange and Holy*; it takes the story forward to the transitional phase between the composition of the Hebrew biblical books, the formation of the canon, and its interpretation. It is also, however, a capstone, which draws together Camp's interests in feminism, cultural history, literary analysis, and contemporary politics in a deeply engaging coherent argument. She shows exactly why Ben Sira is interesting and important, as an historical figure and actor, and as a person, fraught with anxieties, doubts, and desires. Hers is an understated psychoanalytic study, exposing tensions and contradictions, both in the collective and individual psyche. The sympathetic, detailed attentiveness to nuance, especially with a figure as misogynistic as Ben Sira, is one of the elements that make this book so absorbing.

The thesis is disarmingly simple. Like many simple theses, it is the product of complex argument and a lifetime's cogitation and intuition. It is of enormous import because it concerns nothing less than how our Bible came to be our Bible and what it means in our culture as well as in its formative era. It is also achieved through a deeply sensitive exercise of new cultural history and is thus an invaluable methodological contribution. The thesis is as follows:

Ben Sira's experiences, opinions, fantasies, and fears about women, as coded in his book, are integral to his appropriation and promulgation of the emerging canon-consciousness in his culture, and ... analysis of this connection between gender and scripture—in particular, the desire to possess, whether a woman or a book—may help us understand something of both *his* desire to find God in a text *and* our own. (xii)

Camp begins with her theoretical resources and the cultural context, both of the book and of herself as a biblical scholar teaching in Texas. She has two main critical starting points. One is Clifford Geertz's well-known definition of religion as a cultural system characterized by symbols which express a people's ethos and sustain their world view. Geertz is valuable to Camp in part because his practice of "thick description" corresponds to her own close literary analysis, and in part because Ben Sira exemplifies the highly integrated, ritualized, and deeply self-reflexive society in which Geertz specialized. At the same time, Camp notes the critiques of Geertz by Talal

Asad and others, and uses them to explore the effects of change on the cultural world of Ben Sira, and especially of power. In other words, Ben Sira's society is not an abstraction, but the product of always dynamic political and material conditions. The second starting point is the Mediterranean honour-shame economy, whereby men are valued through the conduct of their women. Again, Camp notes critiques of the theory, but adopts it heuristically because it is useful for understanding Ben Sira's preoccupation with honour and anxiety about gender.

Ben Sira is a transitional figure, between Ptolemaic and Seleucid rule and between closure of the canon and its opening to interpretation. Camp is interested in the processes whereby a corpus of texts becomes iconic. She cites James Watts on the ritualization of scripture (34-5). Scripture acquires "thinginess"—Camp's technical term—representative of the values of a culture irrespective of its actual content. Ben Sira, as a scribe, is committed to the textual tradition and in the service of the other source of sacred and political authority, the Temple and its priesthood. He is conscious of his status as part of the intellectual elite and dependent on the hierarchy, as evidenced by his paean to Simon the Just. He is heir to the wisdom tradition, under the tutelage of Woman Wisdom, and of the Torah and the Prophets. The identification of Wisdom with Torah is both a major step towards a canon, and conceals tensions and anxieties, which are the subject of subsequent chapters.

Chapters two and three examine the honour-shame motif in Ben Sira. Chapter two focuses on economic issues and chapter three on sexuality. Ben Sira fears impoverishment, loss of status, and patronage, but is also aware that wealth may be acquired dishonestly. The ideal order of society imagined by the wisdom tradition is never attainable.

Sexuality is the principal threat to male honour. Ben Sira is assailed by his own thoughts and by the danger presented by wives and daughters. The book is fraught with sexual anxieties, communicated, for instance, through pervasive double entendre which both suggest sexual obsession and mask it. Comparison of good, beautiful women to the Temple, for example, may be a symptom of repression – "surely she cannot be a whore!" (64). A good wife is the source of honour, especially in the male competitive world, but also of insecurity; one can never be sure of one's degree of control, or indeed hers. Camp concludes this brilliant, closely analysed chapter by pointing to the linkage between sexuality and economics and to the relationship of Ben Sira's anxiety to wider social stresses.

The fourth chapter integrates gender and the honour-shame complex with Ben Sira's theology. The same word, *kabod*, designates God's glory and male honour; the two are intrinsically related. The bulk of the chapter shows how Woman Wisdom loses the positive association she has with real women in Proverbs, for instance through the figures of Lemuel's mother and the virtuous wife in Prov. 31:8-31. Instead, the Strange Woman of Proverbs is domesticated, becomes a danger within one's own household. This results in the demonization of women, as in the invective of 42:9-14, since even the best of women poses a threat to the ideal male social order. The culmination

of the process is the erasure of the feminine through its identification with patriarchal Torah and, in particular, the all male cult.

Chapter five turns to text and Temple. Camp draws on Edward Soja's theory of a "trialectic", in which real spaces intersect with ideological spaces and spaces of resistance (102). She notes critiques of Soja, and in reality Soja is not very useful for her enterprise. I found references to Firstspace, Secondspace, and Thirdspace merely confusing.

Ben Sira is written in Jerusalem, at the centre of which is the Temple, with its High Priest, Simon, whose radiance recalls that of the First Man in a sacred space without women. Ideologically, Simon is born of the Temple itself; he is "the perfect man alone" (115). He is also the apex of the entire narrative textual tradition, elaborated in the hymn to the fathers. The text is incarnated in Simon. However, Ben Sira himself constitutes a different kind of space, institutionalized perhaps in his *Bet Midrash*, comparable to the ambivalent figure of Solomon rather than Simon. The Temple is incorporated in the text, which is both performative, enacting its own imagined temple ritual, and interpretative. And as we have seen, it is inherently anxious.

From Temple Camp turns to canon, the subject of the next three chapters. Chapter six prepares the groundwork by considering the interaction of orality and textuality in the figure of Woman Wisdom in Proverbs, and Ben Sira himself as a man who was trying to produce canonical writing. In chapter seven, she discusses what she calls, following Von Rad, the "men who handle books" (138), emphasizing the masculinity of the term. The focus of the chapter is the question of theodicy, the conflict between the glorious divine order Ben Sira asserts and the anomie he fears. Camp thinks that he neither has the confidence of Proverbs nor the scepticism of Qohelet. Instead, he sidesteps the question through hymns of praise while being acutely conscious of contingency, uncontrollability and anxiety about death. In particular, writing offers the possibility of survival and truth, as well as of homoerotic reproduction (154). The book becomes an icon; Ben Sira says very little about the content of the Torah, except as a manifestation of the glory of God, and, reflexively, of the scribe who reproduces it, teaches it, and adds to it.

Chapter eight concerns Ben Sira's authorial self-consciousness. Unlike most biblical and post-biblical composers, he did not write pseudonymously, attributing his work to an ancient sage. He regarded himself as inspired, and thus a representative of both Woman Wisdom and of God. This was his claim to immortality. At the same time, the autobiographical self is unstable, constructed and potentially flawed. Camp demonstrates this through a comparison with Ben Sira's alter ego, Solomon, the wise man who was also a fool.

The final chapter explores the ethical and cultural implications of Ben Sira. Ultimately, Ben Sira is a justification for an unjust God and an imperfect moral order, and it becomes the exemplum of the status of the Bible in modern American society, as the sacred repository of the values of inequality, and an apotropaic against the shame of the persistence of poverty.

Of course, this is not the whole story, as Camp well knows, but it is an important component of Ben Sira's legacy.

Camp has written a brilliant book, taut, sensitive, and alive to the beauty and range of Ben Sira's language as well as his profound limitations and their implications. It is a fitting climax to her career.

Bibliography

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