

FOREWORD

¹Many great teachings have been given to us through the Law and the Prophets and the other writings that followed them, and for these we should praise Israel for teaching and wisdom.

The Foreword consists of three elegantly composed sentences in fine Greek. The same cannot be said of the translation which the Foreword introduces, for the translator (the author of the Foreword) set out to retain as much as possible of the style and the feel of his grandfather's original Hebrew text (see verses 5-7).

Verse 1 (see also verse 3) is the first recorded statement of the division of the Hebrew Scriptures into the three categories which are still in use: 'the Law' (Greek νόμος; Hebrew תּוֹרָה); 'the Prophets' (Greek προφήτης; Hebrew נְבִיאִים); 'the other writings' (Greek: ἄλλα βιβλία; Hebrew כְּתוּבִים).

The section called 'the Law' functions as the basic constitution of the religion of the people of Israel. It consists of the four books that focus on God's revelation to Moses (Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers and Deuteronomy), preceded by Genesis, which gives the Israelite version of the ancient Near Eastern creation myths, and the story of the patriarchs. It consists therefore of five scrolls (Greek: πεντατευχος, 'Pentateuch').

The section called 'the Prophets' consists of ten scrolls: Joshua, Judges, 1 Samuel, 2 Samuel, 1 Kings, 2 Kings, Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, and the scroll containing the twelve prophets whose writings are shorter and fitted into a single scroll.

The section called 'the others writings' (verses 1 and 3), consists of thirteen scrolls: Psalms, Proverbs, Job, Song of Songs, Ruth, Lamentations, Ecclesiastes, Esther, Daniel, Ezra, Nehemiah, 1 Chronicles and 2 Chronicles.

The author of the Foreword is writing for Jews in the Hellenized cities of Egypt. However impressed they might be with Greek wisdom, he wants them to know that they have a wisdom superior to the Greeks, a 'teaching' (Greek: παιδεία) and a wisdom (Greek: σοφία) of which they can be proud. 'Teaching' (Hebrew: מוֹרָה) refers to the handing on of tradition from one generation to the next, in the home, in the synagogue and in the classroom. 'Wisdom' (Hebrew: חֵכְמָה) covers all areas of know-how (skill). It applies especially to skill in the art of living a good life, in relation to one's neighbour, one's world, and one's God. The author of the Foreword wants his contemporaries to know the rich understanding of life that is offered in the Jewish Scriptures, and the value of the Torah, to anyone who chooses to live as a faithful Jew.

The rich inheritance that is theirs as Jews is not only for them. Greek teachers proudly share their learning throughout the cities of Egypt and elsewhere. Jewish teachers should be doing the same (verse 2).

In verse 3 he goes on to speak of his grandfather, Jesus. In the book his grandfather calls himself ‘Jesus, son of Eleazar, son of Sira (Hebrew: יֵשׁוּעַ בֶּן אֶלְעָזָר בֶּן סִרָא ; yēšûa‘ ben ’el’āzār ben sîrā’). His grandfather, after a life devoted to learning and teaching, decided to write a book of ‘instruction and wisdom’ (verse 3; see verse 1). He wrote this book, according to his grandson, so that those who ‘love learning might make even greater progress in living according to the Law’ (verse 4). Wisdom, the art of living a good life, is nowhere expressed better than in the Law (the Torah), in which a Jew discovers who his God is, how his God has chosen to act in the history of his people, and how we are to respond by faithfully carrying out the will of God. This is at the heart of the response Jews make to their God. It is their part in the covenant.

In the elegant Greek of the Foreword, verses 1-4 constitute a single sentence. The second sentence covers verses 5-7 of the English translation. In it Ben Sira’s grandson invites his readers to study diligently the work of his grandfather. He asks them to forgive the inelegance of some of his Greek, and reminds them of the difficulty involved in translating from one language to another. This is true not only of his translation but of the whole of the Septuagint. There really is no substitute for reading a work in its original tongue. This is especially true of the T^NA^K: ‘the Law itself (T), the Prophecies (N), and the rest of the writings’ (K), which were considered sacred by the Jews.

²Now, those who read the scriptures must not only themselves understand them, but must also as lovers of learning be able through the spoken and written word to help those who do not have them. ³So my grandfather Jesus, who had devoted himself for a long time to the study of the Law and the Prophets, and the other writings of our ancestors, and had acquired considerable proficiency in them, was himself led to write something pertaining to instruction and wisdom ⁴This he did so that by becoming familiar also with his book those who love learning might make even greater progress in living according to the Law.

⁵You are invited therefore to read it with goodwill and attention, and to be indulgent in cases where, despite our diligent labour in translating, it may be apparent that we have rendered some phrases imperfectly. ⁶For what was originally expressed in Hebrew does not have exactly the same sense when translated into another language. ⁷This is true not only this book, but even the Law itself, the Prophecies, and the rest of the writings differ not a little when read in the original.

⁸I arrived in Egypt in the thirty-eighth year of the reign of Euergetes, and during my stay I had access to not a little instruction.

⁹It seemed highly necessary that I should myself devote some diligence and labour to the translation of this book.

¹⁰During that time I have applied my skill day and night to complete and publish the book for those living abroad who wish to acquire learning and are disposed to live their lives according to the Law.

The reference in verse eight is to Ptolemy II Physkos Euergetes II, who ruled Egypt firstly as co-regent with his brother (170-164) and then as sole ruler (146-117). Ben Sira's grandson arrived in Egypt in the thirty-eighth year of his reign; that is, in 132BC. It appears that he is publishing his translation after the death of Euergetes; that is, after 117. Back in Palestine, John Hyrcanus, the son of Simon, and the nephew of the famous Judas Maccabaeus, was high priest and ruler of Judea (134-104). 1&2Maccabees had not yet been published, nor had the Wisdom of Solomon. It is possible that the same can be said of the Book of Judith.

He concludes his Prologue by reiterating the diligence with which he applied himself to translating his grandfather's text. He did this for 'those living abroad' (Greek speaking Jews) 'who wish to acquire learning'.

In this conclusion he focuses on 'the Law' (Torah). If they want to appreciate the richness of their Jewish heritage, they would do well to study the work of his grandfather, a great Jerusalem teacher.