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Daniel P. Sulmasy

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The Covenant Within the Covenant: Doctors and Patients in Sirach 38: 1-15

Daniel P. Sulmasy, O.F.M., M.D.

The author, who was professed as a Brother in the Order of Friars Minor in 1985, was graduated from the Cornell University Medical College and presently is assistant chief of service in the Osler Medical Service at Johns Hopkins Hospital.

I. The Text

The Wisdom of Ben Sira, also variously known as The Proverbs of Ben Sira, Liber Ecclesiasticus, Ecclesiasticus, and Sirach, was probably composed around 180 B.C.^{1,2} The text was originally composed in Hebrew (as corroborated by textual evidence from Qumran and other archeological sites), was later translated into Greek and Syriac, and eventually into Latin.³

While recognized from the very earliest Christian times as divinely inspired, modern Protestants and Jews consider the book Deuterocanonical, or part of the "Apocrypha". It seems certain that it was included in a loose collection of writings considered sacred by 1st century Palestinian Jews. About 100 A.D., however, after the destruction of Jerusalem, the rabbinical community decided to designate a portion of those sacred writings as part of an official canon. This text, which by then had been accepted as divinely inspired by the already distinct Christian community, was excluded from the official Jewish canon. Despite this, Ben Sira is quoted 82 times in the Talmud and related Jewish writings of the first few centuries A.D.⁴ Even today, Jewish writers in medical ethics-related areas quote Ben Sira.^{5,6} Although the Roman Church still upholds the canonicity of Ben Sira's book, the leaders of the Protestant Reformation preached a return to the Jewish canon, and excluded Ben Sira's writings from their Bible.⁷

The Wisdom of Ben Sira is counted among the other books of the "Wisdom" literature in the scriptures, such as Proverbs, Job, The Wisdom of Solomon, and Qoholeth (Ecclesiastes).⁸ The following translation of the first 15 verses of the 38th chapter is from the New American Bible.⁹ This is the text which will be explored in this paper.

1. Hold the physician in honor, for he is essential to you,
And God it was who established his profession.
2. From God the doctor has his wisdom, and the king provides for his sustenance.
3. His knowledge makes the doctor distinguished, and gives him access to those in authority.
4. God makes the earth yield healing herbs which the prudent man should not neglect;
5. Was not the water sweetened by a twig that men might learn his power?
6. He endows men with the knowledge to glory in his mighty works,
7. Through which the doctor eases pain and the druggist prepares his medicines;
8. Thus God's creative work continues without cease in its efficacy on the surface of the earth.
9. My son, when you are ill, delay not, but pray to God, who will heal you:
10. Flee wickedness; let your hands be just, cleanse your heart of every sin;
11. Offer your sweet-smelling oblation and petition, a rich offering according to your means.
12. Then give the doctor his place lest he leave, for you need him too.
13. There are times that give him an advantage,
14. and he too beseeches God that his diagnosis may be correct and his treatment bring about a cure.
15. He who is a sinner toward his Maker will be defiant toward the doctor.

II. The Author

The author's full name was Joshua (or Jesus) ben Eleazar ben Sira.¹⁰ He was trained as a scribe, travelled extensively, and settled in Jerusalem where he probably taught in some sort of school for young men. His grandson later migrated to Egypt and translated The Wisdom of Ben Sira into Greek. Other than this, little can be said about the author's life.¹¹

III. Socio-cultural Influences

The history of the Near East has always been stormy. The three centuries preceding the birth of Christ prove no exception to this rule. Alexander the Great defeated the Persians in 332 B.C. The conquerors brought their culture with them into Palestine, and a period of profound Greek influence ensued. After Alexander's death in 322 B.C., two of his generals fought for control of this area. The victor crowned himself Ptolemy I of Egypt. The loser, Seleucus, kept control of what is now Syria. After several generations of rule by Egyptian kings of the Ptolemaic Dynasty, the Seleucids gained control of Palestine in 198 B.C. The ambitious Seleucids tried to extend their empire into Greece, but there they met defeat at the hands of the Romans in 190 B.C. The Seleucids maintained control over Palestine for some time after this defeat, but they were severely weakened by the burdensome peace terms imposed by the Romans.¹²

This period in Jewish history is known as the period of "Hellenization."

Through most of what we would suspect to be the lifetime of Ben Sira, so long as they paid their heavy taxes and did not rebel, the Jews for the most part were allowed to keep their own customs and laws.¹³ It was not until sometime after the death of Ben Sira that the more forceful program of Hellenization, enacted by the later Seleucid kings, gave rise to the Maccabean revolt in 166 B.C.¹⁴ Nonetheless, the socio-cultural impact of Hellenism was profound. The Jews had “a gnawing, unexpressed fear that the religion of their ancestors was inadequate to cope with the needs of social and political structures that were changed enormously”.¹⁵ These were the times of Ben Sira. Rationalistic Greek philosophy and science challenged Jewish scholarship and threatened Jewish identity. “In general, Ben Sira is a representative of Palestinian Jewry in the process of redefining its position face to face with an increasing Hellenistic influence”.¹⁶ As a part of their response to Hellenistic influence, Jewish authors created a category of “inspired learning” in which wise men acquired prophetic features and prophets came to be regarded as wise men.¹⁷ It is in this period that Jewish Wisdom Literature arose. It is in this context that we must understand the text from Ben Sira cited above. Like so many other elements in the life of the Palestinian Jew of the 2nd century B.C., Greek wisdom and Jewish tradition were in conflict regarding the meaning of medicine and the role it ought to play in society. What was the nature of this conflict, and how could it be resolved?

II. Medicine and Medical Ethics in Jewish History and in the Wisdom of Ben Sira

Before the time of Ben Sira, there was no medical profession *per se* among the Jews.^{18,19} The Jews apparently did not even have their own embalmers, but had to ask the Egyptians to embalm Jacob according to Gen. 50:2-3.²⁰ The Hebrew word for physician is *rophi*. God was, for the Jews, *Rophi Cholim*, or “the Supreme Physician”.²¹ In Ex. 15:25, it is written, “I, the Lord, am your Healer.” In Dt. 32:39, one reads, “It is I who bring both death and life, I who inflict wounds and heal them, and from my hand there is no rescue.” It seemed that illness could only be created by God as a direct act, and that only God could heal.²² The term *rophi* was usually used pejoratively in the Hebrew Scriptures. Physicians were magicians and idol-worshippers, and pious Jews could have nothing to do with them.^{23,24,25} God alone could heal. King Asa was chastised for appealing to physicians for a cure instead of turning to God (2 Chron. 16:12-13).

Certainly Jews practiced at least some medicine. Hampered by the lack of texts on the subject of medicine from this period, contemporary understanding of just what 2nd century B.C. Jewish medicine was like is very limited.²⁶ The Hebrew Scriptures make reference to a small number of pharmaceuticals, such as mandrake root for infertility (Gen. 30:14), a metaphorical salve for Israel’s wounds (Is. 1:6), a scarcity of balm in Gilead

(Jer. 8:22), an inefficacious plaster of figs for the King's boil (2 Kings 20:7-27), and fish gall for the eyes of the blind (Tob. 11:12). There is also evidence from the scrolls uncovered at Qumran that the Essenes, very roughly contemporaries of Ben Sira, practiced a significant amount of medicine. In fact, their name can be rendered as "Healers".²⁷ Some of these scrolls contain stories of angels revealing secret herbal cures to Noah. But the Essenes seem to have had no direct influence from the Greek medicine being practiced at that time in Alexandria.²⁸ The Qumran community had two types of practitioners, *therapeutae* and *hemerobaptists*. Both types included prayer in all of their cures.²⁹ But the bulk of evidence suggests that Jewish medicine was underdeveloped before the time of Ben Sira. "Israelite medical expertise was virtually restricted to the treatment of external injuries It is [therefore] reasonable to suppose that the growing interest in medical science" which is noted in the time of Ben Sira must be ascribed to innovations of foreign origin.³⁰

What were some of these foreign innovations? From the most ancient times, prior to the Greek conquest, Jews were strongly influenced by the empires to their east. The fish gall used in the Book of Tobit is mentioned elsewhere in Assyrian writings.³¹ From Babylon came a mixture of empiricism,³² and a medical practice based upon the presumption that all disease was caused by demonic possession and required incantations as well as herbal pharmaceuticals for treatment.³³ "Like the Babylonians, the Jews attributed healing and sickness to God. Unlike them, priests were not healers." The Jewish priests performed temple rituals and inspections of the sick, but did not perform cures.³⁴ And despite much modern effort to ascribe hypothetical public health benefits to such practices as Jewish dietary laws and rituals of the "clean" and the "unclean," one must remember that the overwhelming and primary purpose of these laws was spiritual. Any public health benefit which accrued was largely incidental.³⁵

Egyptian influence on Jewish medicine was also significant, even from very ancient times. The concept of a "pneumatic" life principle (cf. Gen. 7:22 and 1 Kings 17:17-22), seems to have had Egyptian origins.³⁶ Circumcision, originally a ritual reserved for the priestly class of Egyptians, became the only known surgery performed by ancient Jews, thus consecrating them as a "priestly people".³⁷ In the Hellenistic period, much of the "new wisdom" in Israel came via Egypt. Ancient Egyptian papyri, describing a 500 item apothecary, are known to have existed at the time of Ben Sira.³⁸ Egypt, at the time of Ben Sira, overflowed with physicians.³⁹ Prominent among them was a neo-Pythagorean named Bolus (Democritus) of Mendes, who lived from about 250-150 B.C. He practiced a Greek style of medicine known as "sympatheia."⁴⁰

It is clear that "the great evolution in medical science and the shift of the Greek schools from magic and dogmatic medicine to clinical medicine and the revolutionary changes in medical doctrine and practice . . . were not brought about by Jewish scholars".⁴¹ Yet Jews were often educated through the Greeks at Alexandria during the time of the Ptolemies,^{42,43} and

this was especially true in medicine.⁴⁴ Greek medicine was not assimilated wholesale into Jewish thought. The humoral theory of the Greeks was met with significant skepticism by the Jews.⁴⁵ It is hypothesized that the Jewish tradition of examining slaughtered animals for evidence of illnesses which would render these animals “unclean”, gave rise to a significant understanding of pathological anatomy despite prohibitions on the dissection of human cadavers. Thus, Jewish pathophysiology put a stronger emphasis upon organ-localized and “solid” diseases than the corresponding Greek pathophysiology.^{46,47}

But even more importantly, the Jews had to contend with their traditional view that physicians were a degraded lot of magicians and idol-worshippers. How could a pious Jew accept these new Greek ideas about medicine?

In some ways, empirical and scientific Greek medicine, divorced from any association with the gods or religion, provided the first opportunity for the Jews to understand medicine freed from the ritual contamination of magic and the worship of false gods. For example, the Hippocratic *De Morbo Sacro*, a treatise on epilepsy, specifically condemns magical views regarding this disease in a way with which a Jew could certainly identify.⁴⁸ The Pythagorean ethics of the Hippocratic oath were also congenial to Jewish thought.⁴⁹ For the first time, Jews could read medical treatises which condemned magical views of medicine as strongly as any rabbi could. But now, something new was being offered to take its place — scientific and empirical medicine, which might not be intrinsically sinful.

Even if Jews began to realize that they could practice medicine without participating in magic or in the worship of alien gods, however, they had a more basic theological problem to deal with. How could a Jew be presumptuous enough to assimilate to himself the power to heal which was, as the scriptures quoted above would indicate, a power which Yahweh reserved to Himself alone? The pious Jew would hesitate to practice medicine or be treated by a doctor.

Acceptance of Religious Legitimacy

Just a few centuries after the writings of Ben Sira, Jewish writings would generally reflect an acceptance of the religious legitimacy of the medical profession. The Midrash would contain stories likening the work of a physician to that of a farmer — not interfering in God’s nature, but making use of the gifts given to him by God.^{50,51} The Talmud would make provisions for the use of medical testimony in official Jewish courts, and would require both medical licensing, and the presence of a physician during the administration of corporal punishment.⁵² And by the 6th century A.D., the oath for Jewish physicians of Asaph would make it clear that physicians had, by that time, become members of a noble profession which had religious importance, but which was completely scientific and dissociated from all magic. “He causes healing plants to grow and puts skill

to heal into the hearts of sages by his manifold mercies to declare His wonders to the multitudes and to understand all living things for He was their creator and that apart from Him there is no Savior (sic)".⁵³ The similarities to the 38th chapter of the Wisdom of Ben Sira are striking enough to make one believe that the Oath of Asaph was influenced by the earlier text.

The justification of the physician's right to heal would apparently still be contested in some circles of Jewish thought up through the 10th century A.D.⁵⁴ But by the time of Maimonides, the Torah's prescription to restore lost objects to one's neighbor (Dt. 22:2), and not to stand idly by the blood of one's fellow (Lv. 19:18), would be interpreted as prescribing an actual *duty* on the part of the physician to heal.⁵⁵

But none of these later developments would have been possible without somehow reserving a place for God in the process of diagnosis and healing. A Jew might accept scientific medical practice as not intrinsically disordered, but a detached scientific physician operating apart from God would still have been an abomination. Ben Sira's poem is the earliest known Jewish text to grapple with this problem. Ben Sira offers Jews a reconciliation between Greek medicine and their own tradition. He "insists that the summoning of the medical man . . . in no way indicates a lack of faith in God's ability to heal".⁵⁶ When Ben Sira writes (v. 12) that "you need him too," it would seem that he is implying that prayer is not enough. God will still do the healing, but God has ordained things so that He will accomplish His healing through the community of human beings. The sick person must turn, at God's insistence, to his "fellow." God will heal, but only in and through and with the doctor, whose profession he has established (v. 1) for this purpose. God, Ben Sira seems to think, will not allow the sick person to be isolated. The patient needs healing from God, but this is to be accomplished through the community by first approaching the temple with sin-offerings (v. 11) and then by seeking out the doctor (v. 12). Thus, in this passage, Ben Sira establishes the right of the physician to heal, not through magic, but through knowledge of the sort that the Hellenizers had recently introduced into his homeland: knowledge which had its basis in God. This new understanding was vitally important in the history of medicine and Jewish theology. Whether it originated with Ben Sira, or whether he simply recorded the common wisdom of his day, we cannot say. But certainly, the metaphor of the farmer from the Midrash and the Oath of Asaph, quoted above, are similar enough in content to the 38th chapter of Sirach to suspect that this text had a significant impact on later Jewish thought regarding the roles of God and the physician in the work of healing.

Ben Sira also grapples with the notion of "Deuteronomic retribution" so deeply embedded in the consciousness of the people of Israel and a theme which recurs again and again in their Scriptures.⁵⁷ Illness was usually considered a result of sin — either one's own sin or that of one's ancestors. Disease or misfortune could also be a sort of test of fidelity to God's

Covenant. But all human fortune, perceived as trial, reward, or punishment, was meted out by God in this life, not in any afterlife. Ben Sira accepts this doctrine, and does not attempt the kind of sophisticated theodicy found, for example, in the Book of Job. Thus, Ben Sira, in verses 9 to 11, insists on the classic triad of prayer, repentance, and sacrifice as the basic prescription for anyone who is sick. In addition, of course, he has insisted on the importance of the Hellenistic physician and his medicines, but he will not forget his religious roots while prescribing teas concocted from the roots of vegetables.

A Significant Verse

Verse 5 is very significant. It refers to Ex. 15:22-26, where the people of Israel, having left Egypt for the desert, have only bitter water to drink. Moses prays to God, and God responds by showing Moses a twig. Moses then casts this twig into the waters which suddenly are made drinkable. Ben Sira broke with the traditional understanding of this event as a *Deus ex machina* miracle.^{58,59} He interprets this twig as a pharmaceutical agent, which already had the power to "cure" the waters inhering in its substance. God created this twig (and presumably many others) to possess such powers. He gives human beings the capability of discovering and unleashing this power. The power and the glory still belong to God, but human beings participate in that power. Note also that this passage from Exodus concludes with one of the aforementioned "problem" texts: "I, the Lord, am your healer." In an important way, Ben Sira has not only "de-mythologized" the story of the twig in such a way as to theologically justify pharmaceutical medicine, but also, he has given the pious Jew further opportunities to reconcile tradition and the "new medicine". Yahweh still heals, but in and through physicians whom he has endowed with the capability of discovering the healing power which God has already created in the natural world. Ben Sira has cast Moses in the role of the physician. God "cured" the water through Moses. God is still *Rophi Cholim*, but God cures patients through human physicians. And the physician is not simply a passive instrument through whom God's healing power is channeled. The physician is not static. Strikingly, in verse 8, Ben Sira contends that the physician and the druggist are instruments by whom God actually extends the work of creation. "Thus God's creative work continues without cease in its efficacy on the surface of the earth." The physician does not merely "discover" healing power already in creation, but through human imagination, grounded in divine creativity, makes new healing substances and new acts of healing. The works of healing and of discovering new medicines (i.e., both "clinical" medicine and "research" medicine) extend the work of creation, not passively, but dynamically; not miraculously, but humanly.

It is no wonder, then, that the physician is elevated to such a lofty status in this text and in so many of the later Jewish writings on this subject. In

order to justify the physician's right to heal — a right which had traditionally been reserved to Yahweh Himself — Ben Sira and his successors gave the physician a status nearly at God's right hand. "Honor" is a word used rarely in The Wisdom of Ben Sira. It is used to refer to God, to fathers, to nobility, to ancestors, and to physicians.⁶⁰ But one must also remember that at that time, every royal court in the Hellenized world outside of Israel had a court physician.^{61,61,63} And during those times, when "wisdom had gained possession of every people and nation," physicians were also beginning to be noted for their particular wisdom.⁶⁴ And so, as noted in verses 1-3, "honor" is due the physician not only because of Ben Sira's new "theologized" understanding of the physician, but also from the physician's status as a member of royal courts, and from the popular recognition of the extent of the physician's knowledge.

But has Ben Sira simply placed the physician on a pedestal and enthroned him as a "medical deity?" Does the lofty status he has assigned to the physician not border on idol-worship? Certainly not. The physician heals only by God's plan and by God's will. The physician must always recognize this if he is to be successful, and therefore (v. 13-14), he must also pray, so that his skills in diagnosis and therapeutics might truly be "efficacious". There is a sense in which the "therapeutic moment", the moment in which God's creative power is actualized in the work of the physician, is a sacred moment for the prayerful practitioner. Adinolfi⁶⁵ points out that the Hebrew word, *'et* ("time") corresponds to the Greek *kairos* very precisely, including the fact that both words can be understood in two senses. There is a "weak" sense of "generic" time and a "strong" sense of "right time" or "favorable circumstances". When Ben Sira writes that "there are times that give him an advantage", one may understand *'et* in this strong sense, and realize that the strength of the "right time" is bidirectional. Not only will the patient be healed, but the pious physician himself will experience his share in God's creative power in a unique and prayerful way. The physician himself will be touched by the *Rophi Cholim*, and humbled by the experience. The moment can be sacred for both doctor and patient.

And what is the patient's role in all of this? Is the patient to remain the passive recipient of a paternalistic physician's activity? Certainly there is only a limited role here for patient "autonomy", as the term is understood by modern authors in the field of biomedical ethics. But the patient is given plenty of responsibility for his or her own health care in the writings of Ben Sira. It is important to recall that this text from the 38th chapter of The Wisdom of Ben Sira follows a long discourse in the 37th chapter, in which the reader is urged to avoid gluttony, which is bound to bring on illness. This sort of admonition is consonant with the writings of Hillel in the 1st century A.D., who urged his readers to bathe and care for their bodies because they were created in the image and likeness of God.⁶⁶ At many other points in his book, Ben Sira urges moderation in all things as the key to health (31:2; 31:22; 37:19; 37:29-30). He begins his book by promising

that Wisdom's garland consists in "peace and perfect health" (1:15), and urges "preventive medicine" in all aspects of life when he writes, "before sickness, prepare the cure" (18:18).

The patient must not neglect the basic prescription of prayer, repentance and sacrifice (v. 9-11). He must honor the doctor (v. 1), give him his place (v. 12), and not be defiant towards him (v. 15). But this is not because the patient is to be considered an unworthy pawn manipulated by the powerful doctor. Some have translated v. 15 as "Whoever sins against God falls into the hands of the physician".^{67,68} Others, both because of careful textual study and in an effort to preserve the internal consistency of the entire passage have translated it as "He who is a sinner toward his Maker will be defiant toward the doctor".^{69,70,71,72} If one accepts this latter translation, then it is easy to see how the analogy has been drawn by Ben Sira between Yahweh's relationship with His people and the relationship between doctor and patient. One who is defiant towards God is defiant towards the doctor. Paul Ramsey has insisted even in the contractual and litigious 20th century that the relationship between doctor and patient is best described by an analogy to the covenant between Yahweh and His people.⁷³ Ben Sira seems to have had this insight many centuries ago. The overall spirit of the relationship between doctor and patient which emerges from this poem is one of a "covenant". Like the relationship between Yahweh and His people, the relationship with the physician may seem tenuous at times. The Jewish people were always afraid of being abandoned by the God of the Covenant. The Jewish patient may likewise fear (v. 12) that the doctor will leave him as well. Nonetheless, the picture is one of a covenant nested within a covenant. Both the patient and the physician have responsibilities in relation to one another and to God. The physician's energies and his prayers are directed toward the good of the patient — toward a correct diagnosis and a cure (v. 14). The patient prays for healing and forgiveness (v. 9-11), and respects the physician (v. 1, 12). The overarching relationship between God and His people subsumes and sustains the relationship between doctor and patient. The promise of God and the promise of the doctor intersect at the therapeutic moment in which repentance meets forgiveness, and sickness meets healing. This is the *kairos* of the covenant between doctor and patient. This is the moment in which tradition and Greek science are reconciled. This is the moment of efficacious power and of God's unending creativity. It is the moment Ben Sira saw 2,000 years ago, and a moment we still struggle to see today.

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