

Publications of the Finnish Exegetical Society
Series Editor: Antti Marjanen
Typography and layout by Susanna Asikainen and Kirsi Valkama
Graphic design by Ari Hirvonen
Cover photograph: Juha Pakkala

ISSN 0356-2786
ISBN 978-951-9217-50-5
ISBN 978-3-525-53607-0

Vammalan Kirjapaino Oy 2008

PUBLICATIONS OF THE FINNISH EXEGETICAL SOCIETY 95

Houses Full of All Good Things

Essays in Memory of Timo Veijola

Edited by
Juha Pakkala and Martti Nissinen

Finnish Exegetical Society, Helsinki
Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, Göttingen
2008

ANSSI VOITILA

For Those Who Love Learning

How the Reader is Persuaded to Study
the Book of Ben Sira as a Translation¹

The prologue of the Greek book of Ben Sira is known to comprise one of the oldest reflections on a translation in a written form. The translator considers various factors that interact in translating. Therefore, it is often studied as a source of information on how the ancient translators—particularly those of the Septuagint—saw the translation process and the relation between the source and the target languages.² The prologue is then read as an objective representation of all the relevant factors of the process as seen by the translator. The author provides us with neutral information about his translation process. This certainly is how he wants us to read his text, but how well is this sort of approach justified?

I find particularly interesting the motivations given for the writing of the original book and for its translation. Ben Sira is said to have

¹ I am indebted to Lauri Thurén and Raija Sollamo for critical comments on an earlier draft of this article. All errors of fact and judgement, however, remain my responsibility alone. English translations are based on those by Patrick W. Skehan in Patrick W. Skehan and Alexander A. Di Lella, *The Wisdom of Ben Sira* (AB 39; Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1987). The text edition is Joseph Ziegler, *Sapientia Iesu Filii Sirach* (Septuaginta: Vetus Testamentum Graecum Auctoritate Societatis Litterarum Göttingensis editum XII,2; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1965).

² Skehan and Di Lella, *The Wisdom of Ben Sira*, 133–34; and more recently Benjamin G. Wright III, “Access to the Source: Cicero, Ben Sira, the Septuagint and their Audiences,” *JSJ* 34 (2003): 12–13; Giuseppe Veltri, *Libraries, Translations, and “Canonical” Texts* (VTSup 109; Leiden: Brill, 2006), 197–203. Wright acknowledges that the author uses rhetoric but does not seem to see fully the implications for the interpretations of this text.

written his book because the Jews already possessed great wisdom and instruction, and the grandson explains the motivation for his translation by claiming that the Egyptian Jews already possessed an important and—for the grandson—familiar instruction. Why write a book to increase wisdom if there already was great wisdom and why translate the same book if the instruction already was as it should be? Is this the whole truth? Has the author some hidden purpose/goal which he does not explain?

In rhetorical criticism,³ it has been recognized that a speaker or writer does not only inform but he/she also seeks to affect a listener/reader in order to influence their thoughts and actions.⁴ The text is a means to advance one's objectives. Thus, we should regard critically all the information given in the text. In this article, I shall look the issues raised by the author and try seeing them as a part of his *rhetorical strategy*,⁵ that is, his plan to achieve his goals. I shall analyse what effects are supposed to be achieved in the implied audience by a particular technique.

First, we shall look at the person himself who was the author of the prologue. According to the translator's own words, he was the grandson of Ben Sira, the author of the original Hebrew text (ὁ πάππος μου Ἰησοῦς). He came to Egypt from somewhere else, probably from Palestine, thus presenting himself as an outsider in Egypt. He stayed there quite a while, became, so he says, acquainted with the teaching of the Egyptian Greek-speaking Jews and translated his grandfather's book. This otherness and the family connection with Ben Sira, whether fact or fiction, seem to function as one of the issues behind the argumentation in the prologue.

³ For the method, see, e.g., Lauri Thurén, *The Rhetorical Strategy of 1 Peter* (Åbo: Åbo Akademis förlag, 1990); *Derhetorizing Paul* (WUNT 124; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2000).

⁴ Thurén, *Derhetorizing Paul*, 24.

⁵ Thurén, *Rhetorical Strategy*, 39.

Why Should We Read the Book of Ben Sira?

In the beginning of his prologue, the grandson addresses his audience by using the pronoun we (ἡμῖν) and later on he calls this entity Israel. In this way, he wants to underline his fellowship with his audience and express that his audience is a part of the greater Judaism (that is, Israel), including both the Diaspora and Palestinian Judaism. The statement that the translator is the grandson of Ben Sira, author of his source text, serves the same purpose. The πάππος μου is guaranteeing writer's trustworthiness as a transmitter of traditions. He does not yet speak about himself, except in this indirect manner. He does not mention his otherness or that of Ben Sira among the Egyptian Jews either, although he seemingly prepares his audience for this fact, which will be mentioned only later.⁶

This Judaism, which they have in common, he adds, contains great wisdom and instruction in the Law, the Prophets and the other books. This is something he and his audience are able to agree upon fully.⁷ As a good orator, he is very careful not to add anything that could provoke mistrust or resistance in the audience. Thus, the author tries to make himself look sincere and sympathetic in order to produce a positive atmosphere and to gain the audience's sympathy and willingness to listen (*captatio benevolentiae*)⁸: the writer is a fellow Jew, he appreciates our religious views and has something interesting to say about our wisdom.

⁶ In the second section, the audience is addressed as “you” (in plural).

⁷ For, in the Greek-speaking Judaism (it is generally believed among scholars that the translation was made in Hellenistic Alexandria), there was a literary genre the intention of which was to prove that Jewish wisdom is superior to Greek philosophy. E.g., Aristoboulos, *Letter to Aristeeas*, Philo, and Wisdom of Salomon. See also, Reinhard Feldmeier, “Weise hinter ‘eisernen Mauern’: Tora und jüdisches Selbstverständnis zwischen Akkulturation und Absonderung im Aristeasbrief,” in *Die Septuaginta zwischen Judentum und Christentum* (ed. Martin Hengel and Anna Maria Schwemer; WUNT 72; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck), 20–37.

⁸ This is one of the goals of *exordium*, the beginning of the speech, see Heinrich Lausberg, *Handbook of Literary Rhetoric: A Foundation for Literary Study* (transl. Matthew T. Bliss, Annemiek Jansen and David E. Orton; Leiden: Brill, 1998), § 263–264; original edition *Handbuch der literarischen Rhetorik* (Ismaning bei München: Max Hueber Verlag, 1960).

Next, the author argues that those who are able to understand (ἀναγινώσκοντες) the Law, the Prophets and the others books, those who love learning (φιλομαθῶντες) have a duty (δέον ἐστίν) to teach them to others, who do not have this ability.⁹ Thus, the author presents as a fact that it is not enough to possess these books; they are not necessarily understandable as such, but they need explanation and exegesis. This is the ideology generally shared by the scribes¹⁰, the teachers of the law (סוֹפְרֵי—γραμματεῖς); it is intended to highlight the abilities of Ben Sira and the translator.

The statement, however, contains already one restriction—not everyone who considers himself as understanding the Law, the Prophets and the others books is accepted as such by his community. The author must therefore convince his audience of the fact that his grandfather was such a person. For this he uses the *narratio*, that is, the presentation of facts as if they were neutral statements. It is a particularly effective rhetorical device, which prepares the audience for the coming arguments.¹¹ As such, its content is also the most suspicious.

In this *narratio*, the grandson assures the audience that Ben Sira was both (ὡς... τοὺς ἀναγινώσκοντας... τοὺς φιλομαθῶντας... ὁ πάππος μου ἠησοῦς), a person who understood the scriptures and loved to learn from them. He is also convinced that this was his grandfather's view of himself as well. First, according to the author, his grandfather devoted himself to a long-term study of the books and, when considered himself thoroughly familiar with them, he started to write his book. He means that by writing his book, Ben Sira did his duty as a teacher of the scrip-

⁹ The verb ἀναγινώσκειν here does not mean “to be able to read (Hebrew)” (e.g., Skehan and Di Lella, *The Wisdom of Ben Sira*, 133). This becomes obvious when we realize that speaking and writing are the duties of those able. The grandfather himself, according to our author, has done his duty by writing. If his audience were not able to read Hebrew, why would he have written in Hebrew? For the same reason, τοῖς ἐκτός (those without) may not refer to the Greek-speaking Jews because Ben Sira wrote his book in Hebrew, but to all Jews either from Palestine or from elsewhere who are not able to understand the scriptures. The expressions does not refer to “those who are without these books” either because the author speaks to “us” who are to be praised for possessing these books.

¹⁰ For the functions of a scribe סוֹפֵר/γραμματεῖς, see Timo Veijola, *Moses Erben: Studien zum Dekalog, zum Deuteronomismus und zum Schriftgelehrtentum* (BWANT 149; Stuttgart Berlin Köln: Kohlhammer, 2000), 209–13.

¹¹ Thurén, *Derhetorizing Paul*, 65.

tures. Thus, to have a necessary understanding of the scriptures needed long-term devotion and study. This study is not just reading the text but a study that leads the student to an understanding that may be called “living according to the Law” (διὰ τῆς ἐννόμου βιώσεως).

In the manner of classical rhetoric, the author here praises his grandfather as a *vir bonus*, someone who has morally worthy motives, in the interest of public good.¹² This device works as well for his goals, 1) to persuade the audience to accept his grandfather’s sincerity and 2) to take an interest in his text and in the Prologue. Thus, it becomes rather doubtful that Ben Sira’s text would be only an addition to the already existing teaching. It seems that it was more; otherwise, it would have not been necessary to sell it so persuasively.

The author wants to assure the audience that those who want to learn need his grandfather’s text not only in order to learn more of the Law, the Prophets, and the other books, but also in order to understand them correctly. Thus, to read Ben Sira’s text makes the reader ἀναγινώσκων and φιλομαθών. Ultimately, this refers to the implied audience, which becomes evident, at the latest, in the last section¹³ of the Prologue. By depicting the audience in an overly positive manner, the author persuades them that they will become such as depicted.¹⁴

We cannot be sure whether Greek-speaking Jews in Egypt generally agreed with this picture of the trustworthy teacher of wisdom. As already noted, the grandson stayed in Egypt for few decades which would mean that he should have known the different parties of Egyptian Jewry. What is certain is that he had reasons to believe that this kind of argumentation would convince at least some of the implied audience to consider his grandfather’s book worth reading and studying.

However, the reader must accept even more. At the end of the first section, the grandson says that the intention of Ben Sira was to give to

¹² See Lausberg, *Handbook*, § 275α.

¹³ According to the text edition used, the first section of the Prologue covers the lines 1–14, the second 15–26 and the last one 27–35.

¹⁴ For this “persuasive description,” see Thurén, *Rhetorical Strategy*, 128–34; *Argument and Theology in 1 Peter* (JSNTS 114; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1995), 91.

the reader the opportunity to “make even greater progress living in conformity with the Divine Law.” Obviously, he means that Ben Sira did not only explain but he also added his own wisdom and instruction to the already existing Law, the Prophets and the other books. In fact, his wisdom was somehow necessary for the right understanding of them. It could be further assumed that the grandson presented the book as a sort of manual of Jewish wisdom, in an easily understandable form, for living according to the Law.

Is the Translation to Be Trusted?

It is generally agreed that, in the second section, the grandson is “begging ‘indulgence for any apparent failure’ on his part to render ‘particular passage’ of the Hebrew original with true fidelity.”¹⁵ It is also claimed that the author is criticizing the already translated books of the Law, the Prophets and the other books. More recently, Benjamin Wright has proposed that the author is not concerned about “the presumed difference between the Hebrew original and the Greek translation but in the difference between the quality of the Greek of the prologue and the Greek of his translation.”¹⁶ The grandson’s Greek does not have the same rhetorical power as the Hebrew original.¹⁷

But why apologize for the sort of Greek the author himself and his Greek-speaking Jewish audience must have been familiar when reading the Greek version of the Law and Prophets? Would it even be more natural to think that this sort of a text, dealing with traditional Jewish wisdom, should sound like “literal translationese”? What the grandson is actually saying is that his translation is quite good and reliable. He does this by applying one of the conventions of classical rhetoric.¹⁸ He

¹⁵ Skehan and Di Lella, *The Wisdom of Ben Sira*, 134.

¹⁶ Wright, “Access to the Source,” 16.

¹⁷ Wright, “Access to the Source,” 17–18.

¹⁸ See Lausberg, *Handbook*, § 276β. Also Ernst Robert Curtius, *Europäische Literatur und lateinisches Mittelalter* (Neunte Auflage; Bern/München: Francke Verlag, 1978), 93–94, 414, who even states: “Schon ein so raffinierter Stilist wie Tacitus will uns glauben machen, sein

politely and—by humiliating himself—begs his audience to be the judge of the quality of his translation. Then follows a short narrative explaining what the author has actually done. In it, the author claims that he has worked hard (ἐφ’ οἷς ἂν δοκῶμεν τῶν κατὰ πεφιλοποιημένων τισὶν τῶν λέξεων ἀδυναμεῖν) to make the translation what it is and that the Law, the Prophets and the other books likewise differ from the source text. He is not criticizing the previously translated books. That would have been very impolite and turned the audience against the author. He argues that his own translation equals the previously translated books of the Law and the Prophets.¹⁹ The Egyptian Jews, most of whom use these texts, cannot but fully agree with this.

He does not, however, claim that the translation is completely free of modifications—the Greek-speaking Jews must have been familiar with the accusations of alterations made in the previously translated books on comparison with the original.²⁰ He does not necessarily suppose that every member of his audience is able to compare the Hebrew text and the translation. However, he politely flatters his readers by implying this is so.²¹ The audience is again being persuaded to study this book and to accept it as it is.

Why Does the Translation Equal the Original?

In the third and last section of the Prologue, the author explains the motivations for his own translation in a similar manner as he did with his grandfather’s work. He speaks about (*narratio*) his life and works in Egypt and justifies the translation with the same arguments (*argumenta-*

Aggicola sei ‘in kunstloser und ungeschulter Sprache’ verfaßt” (*incondita ac rudi voce* [Kap. 3]).

¹⁹ In fact, the relatively literal way of translating may have been considered by the translator as having preserved the rhetorical power or meaning of the original. Furthermore, the translator has frequently replaced one Hebrew expression with another, more suitable Greek one.

²⁰ It is rather obvious that, in addition to the unintentional changes, the translator has intentionally made changes in order to adapt his grandfather’s sentences to a new situation in Greek-speaking Judaism.

²¹ Everybody able to read or hear may act as a judge of the rhetorical power of the translation.

tio) in the same order and he even uses same words in the main points as he did in the first section.

This may be seen in the following table:

Section I	Section III
(Genitive absolute of reason) wisdom and instruction (παιδεία καὶ σοφία) have been given to us	(Determination of time), in Egypt, I found familiar instruction (οὐ μικρῶς παιδείας ἀφόμοιον)
For those who are not able to understand	For those who live abroad (τοῖς ἐν τῇ παροικίᾳ)
He devoted himself to the study... and was prompted to write something himself in the nature of παιδεία καὶ σοφία,	I therefore considered myself in duty bound to devote some diligence... to translation (μεθερμηνεῦειν), many sleepless hours of close application
He wrote (συγγράψαι) it for the benefit of those who love learning (φιλομαθεῖν)	I finished it for publication (ἐκδοσθαι) for the benefit of those who love learning (φιλομαθεῖν)
In order to make even greater progress, living in conformity of the Divine Law (διὰ τῆς ἐννόμου βιώσεως).	For those who are disposed to live their lives according to the standards of the Law (ἐννόμως βιοτεύειν).

Because the instruction (παιδεία), which the Alexandrian Jews had, was important and familiar²² (οὐ μικρῶς παιδείας ἀφόμοιον) to the author, the author considered it his duty (ἀναγκαιότατον ἐθέμην) to use all his efforts to translate (μεθερμηνεῦσαι) his grandfather's book so that those

²² The adjective ἀφόμοιον means "similar," as in *Apocalypsis Enochi* 106.10.4; Dioscorides Pedanius, *De materia medica* 4.121.1.2 and 5.102.1.2. It is to be interpreted as a predicative referring to the παιδεία or to both the παιδεία and Αἴγυπτος in what precedes. The meaning "different" sometimes given to this word is unthinkable. See Christian Wagner, *Die Septuaginta-Hapaxlegomena im Buch Jesus Sirach* (ZAW 282; Berlin: de Gruyter, 1999), 119–20. The word may not be taken as a substantivized adjective meaning "a copy," because it occurs here without the article. On this point, I am grateful to Professor Maarit Kaimio (Emerita of Classical Philology at the University of Helsinki) for her philological expertise with which she assisted me in interpreting this difficult word and the whole sentence.

who love learning (φιλομαθεῖν) living abroad would also be able to live according to the Law (ἐννόμως βιοτεύειν).

By this argumentation, the author wants to depict himself as one who understands the scriptures and loves learning. An obvious conclusion is that the duty of a person like his grandfather is also to translate, and this translating does not consist only of reproducing the words of the source text but should be more like explaining that text. The author wants to persuade his audience of the fact that his motives are the same as his grandfather's, to increase living according to the Law, and we may read between the lines that he pictures himself here like his grandfather. Thus, the author wants the audience to believe that the translation equals the original also in this respect.

What, then, was the motive for creating such a book and such a translation if the instruction was already satisfactory, that is, important and familiar²³ (οὐ μικρᾶς παιδείας ἀφόμοιον)? In a sense, ἀφόμοιον highlights the similarity between the Jewish religious situation in Palestine, which needed his grandfather's book, and the situation in Egypt, which, according to the author, now needs his translation. At the same time, ἀφόμοιον refers to the instruction given in Ben Sira's book and in its translation and implies their similarity with what the audience is expected to accept as their wisdom and instruction. This is clear and simple flattery used to persuasive purposes. Behind it, we may detect implications that the instruction was not so similar, but only familiar. It is no accident that the first section (*exordium*) and the whole prologue end with the same idea, with the exhortation to live according to the Law.²⁴ This is the main point of the *peroratio*, which is known to be the main idea of the book of Ben Sira. The grandson appears to be trying to hide the intentional alterations in his work. He tries to sell his translation and to make his readers accept the ideas included and furthermore, the possible new interpretations put in the translation as compared with the original.

²³ Otherwise, we ought to consider the possibility that the author felt that this was not the case and only later, as a little surprise, he had to come to the reverse conclusion.

²⁴ Not with exactly the same words, which would have been dull, and which is against the rules of classical rhetoric (*variatio*, in linguistic *ornatus*), see Lausberg, *Handbook*, § 257.2b.

It seems that the ideology of the scribes is recognized among the Egyptian Jewish group/s the author knows and whom he is addressing or he wants to make this impression—or at least they ought to know the ideology (persuasive description). At least, this idea comes to mind when contemplating the real intention of the expression οὐ μικρῶς παιδείας ἀφόμοιον. Otherwise, this ideology would not be used to persuade the readers to study the book of Ben Sira.

Conclusions

The author of the Prologue wanted to make his grandfather's book known to Greek-speaking Judaism and to promote it as a part of the Jewish wisdom and instruction, equal to the other books already translated. The goal was to persuade the audience to study and to appreciate the wisdom of Ben Sira in its Greek form and to become persons living according to the Law on the lines of the interpretation presented in the translation. The author wanted to influence the religious situation in the Greek-speaking community/ies in Egypt, which, most probably, did not please him, particularly the living according to the Law. Therefore, he had reasons to believe that the implied audience would be reluctant to accept his translation.

As an outsider in the Greek-speaking Jewish community in Egypt, the author had to convince his audience of his own trustworthiness as a translator of these traditions and of the value of his grandfather's work for the community. That may be why he has given a more favourable picture of the situation in the audience community than there actually was. He depicted himself as having family connection to the author of the source text, that is, his grandson, and then described both Ben Sira and himself as scribes, transmitters of the ancient Jewish traditions. As a scribe, he was convinced that these traditions needed constant study and interpretation and he considered himself to be carrying out this duty when translating.