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JAN TURKIEL

SIRACH'S CRITICISM OF RULER (SIR 9, 17-10, 26)
(ἀβτός, ὁ, οἱ, σὺ – AS GUIDES THROUGH THE TEXT)

In chapter six of the Book of Daniel we read as follows: „6,1 And Darius the Mede received the kingdom, at the age of sixty-two. 2 It pleased Darius to appoint a hundred and twenty satraps over his kingdom for the various parts, 3 and over them three presidents – of whom Daniel was one – to whom the satraps were to be responsible. This was to safeguard the king's interests. 4 This Daniel, by virtue of the marvellous spirit residing in him, was so evidently superior to the other presidents and satraps that the king considered appointing him to rule the whole kingdom. 5 The presidents and satraps, in consequence, started hunting for some affair of state by which they could discredit Daniel; but they could find nothing to his discredit, and no case of negligence; he was so punctilious that they could not find a single instance of maladministration or neglect. 6 These men then thought, 'We shall never find a way of discrediting Daniel unless we try something to do with the law of his God.' 7 The presidents and satraps then went in a body to the king. 'King Darius,' they said, 'live for ever! 8 We are all agreed, presidents of the realm, magistrates, satraps, councillors and governors, that the king should issue an edict enforcing the following regulation: Whoever within the next thirty days prays to anyone, divine or human, other than to yourself, Your Majesty, is to be thrown into the lions' den. 9 Your Majesty, ratify the edict at once by signing this document, making it unalterable, as befits the law of the Medes and the Persians, which cannot be revoked.' 10 King Darius accordingly signed the document embodying the edict. 11 When Daniel heard that the document had been signed, he retired to his house. The windows of his upstairs room faced towards Jerusalem. Three times each day, he went down on his knees, praying and giving praise to God as he had always done. 12 These men came along in a body and found Daniel praying and pleading with God. 13

They then went to the king and reminded him of the royal edict, 'Have you not signed an edict forbidding anyone for the next thirty days to pray to anyone, divine or human, other than to yourself, Your Majesty, on pain of being thrown into the lions' den?' 'The decision stands', the king replied, 'as befits the law of the Medes and the Persians, which cannot be revoked.' 14 They then said to the king, 'Your Majesty, this man Daniel, one of the exiles from Judah, disregards both you and the edict which you have signed: he is at his prayers three times each day.'¹

Darius I the Mede reigned from 522 to 486 B. C. He was not the only ruler who would enact a decree under which: anyone for the next thirty days to pray to anyone, divine or human, other than to yourself, Your Majesty, on pain of being thrown into the lions' den? (Dn 6, 13).

Daniel – the prophet, was also not the only one who opposed to the inviolable law of the Medes. We are not going to enumerate the emperors who wished to be „everything” to their subjects. We are also not going to enumerate those who opposed, so largely discussed, in the Old Testament though ...

In the Old Testament there is a book whose Hebraic original was written between 200 and 170 B. C.² It is called the Book of Sirach. There is a significant text (Sir 9, 17-10, 26) showing a man living in fear of Hellenized rulers (since Sirach is a believing Jew). This text also illustrates the courage of Sirach who writes about the reign and the ruler, judging them and showing what they should look like. Sirach goes even further than Daniel. Not only does he pray too God three times a day, but he also writes critically about those who reign. He prophesies a defeat of bad rulers. He also describes a good ruler should fulfil ... That is why we may find Sir 9, 17-10, 26 an important supplement of the book of Daniel (Dn 6, 1-14):

Sir 9, 17 „Work from skilled hands will earn its praise, but a leader of the people must be skilful in words. 18 A chatterbox is a terror to his town, a loose talker is detested. 10:1 A sagacious ruler educates his people, and he makes his subjects understand order. 2 As the magistrate is, so will his officials be, as the governor is, so will be the inhabitants of his city. 3 An undisciplined king will be the ruin of his people, a city

¹ The New Jerusalem Bible.

² S. P o t o c k i, *Mądrość uczonego w Piśmie*, Wprowadzenie w Myśl i Wezwanie Ksiąg Biblijnych (6), Warszawa 1999, pp. 167-170.

owes its prosperity to the intelligence of its leading men. 4 The government of the earth is in the hands of the Lord, he sets the right leader over it at the right time. 5 Human success is in the hands of the Lord. He invests the scribe with honour. 6 Do not resent your neighbour's every offence, and never act in a fit of passion. 7 Pride is hateful to God and humanity, and injustice is abhorrent to both. 8 Sovereignty passes from nation to nation because of injustice, arrogance and money. 9 What has dust and ashes to pride itself on? Even in life its entrails are repellent. 10 A long illness makes a fool of the doctor; a king today is a corpse tomorrow. 11 For in death the portion of all alike will be insects, wild animals and worms. 12 The first stage of pride is to desert the Lord and to turn one's heart away from one's Maker. 13 Since the first stage of pride is sin, whoever clings to it will pour forth filth. This is why the Lord inflicts unexpected punishments on such people, utterly destroying them. 14 The Lord has turned mighty princes off their thrones and seated the humble there instead. 15 The Lord has plucked up the proud by the roots, and planted the lowly in their place. 16 The Lord has overthrown the lands of the nations and destroyed them to the very foundations of the earth. 17 Sometimes he has taken them away and destroyed them, and blotted out their memory from the earth. 18 Pride was not created for human beings, nor furious rage for those born of woman. 19 What race deserves honour? The human race. What race deserves honour? Those who fear the Lord. What race deserves contempt? The human race. What race deserves contempt? Those who break the Law. 20 A leader is honoured by his brothers, and those who fear the Lord are honoured by him. 22 The rich, the noble, the poor, let them pride themselves on fearing the Lord. 23 It is not right to despise one who is poor but intelligent, and it is not good to honour one who is a sinner. 24 Magnate, magistrate, potentate, all are to be honoured, but none is greater than the one who fears the Lord. 25 A wise slave will have free men waiting on him, and the enlightened will not complain. 26 Do not try to be smart when you do your work, do not put on airs when you are in difficulties"³.

And this is what the cited text reads in Greek:

9,17 ἐν χειρὶ τεχνιτῶν ἔργον ἐπαινεσθήσεται καὶ ὁ ἡγούμενος λαοῦ σοφός ἐν λόγῳ αὐτοῦ 18 φοβερός ἐν πόλει αὐτοῦ ἀνήρ

³ The New Jerusalem Bible.

γλωσσώδης καὶ ὁ προπετὴς ἐν λόγῳ αὐτοῦ μισηθήσεται **10,1** κριτὴς
 σοφὸς παιδεύσει τὸν λαὸν αὐτοῦ καὶ ἡγεμονία συνετοῦ τεταγμένη
 ἔσται **2** κατὰ τὸν κριτὴν τοῦ λαοῦ οὕτως καὶ οἱ λειτουργοὶ αὐτοῦ
 καὶ κατὰ τὸν ἡγούμενον τῆς πόλεως πάντες οἱ κατοικοῦντες αὐτὴν
3 βασιλεῖς ἀπαιδευτοὶ ἀπολεῖ τὸν λαὸν αὐτοῦ καὶ πόλις οἰκισθήσε-
 ται ἐν συνέσει δυναστῶν **4** ἐν χειρὶ κυρίου ἡ ἐξουσία τῆς γῆς καὶ
 τὸν χρήσιμον ἐγερεῖ εἰς καιρὸν ἐπ' αὐτῆς **5** ἐν χειρὶ κυρίου εὐδο-
 διά ἀδρός καὶ προσώπῳ γραμματέως ἐπιθήσει δόξαν αὐτοῦ **6** ἐπὶ
 παντὶ ἀδικήματι μὴ μνησίᾳ τῷ πλησίον καὶ μὴ πρᾶσσε μηδὲν ἐν
 ἔργοις ὕβρεως **7** μισητὴ ἔναντι κυρίου καὶ ἀνθρώπων ὑπερηφα-
 νία καὶ ἐξ ἀμφοτέρων πλημμελῆς ἡ ἀδικία **8** βασιλεία ἀπὸ ἔθνους
 εἰς ἔθνος μετὰγεται διὰ ἀδικίας καὶ ὕβρεις καὶ χρήματα **9** τί ὑπερ-
 ηφανεύεται γῆ καὶ σποδός ὅτι ἐν ζωῇ ἔρριψα τὰ ἐνδόσθια αὐτοῦ **10**
 μακρὸν ἀρρώστημα σκώπτει ἰατρός καὶ βασιλεῖς σήμερον καὶ αὐριον
 τελευτήσει **11** ἐν γὰρ τῷ ἀποθανεῖν ἀνθρωπῶν κληρονομήσει ἔρπετὰ
 καὶ θηρία καὶ σκώληκας **12** ἀρχὴ ὑπερηφανίας ἀνθρώπου ἀφίστασθαι
 ἀπὸ κυρίου καὶ ἀπὸ τοῦ ποιήσαντος αὐτὸν ἀπέστη ἡ καρδία αὐτοῦ
13 ὅτι ἀρχὴ ὑπερηφανίας ἀμαρτία καὶ ὁ κρατῶν αὐτῆς ἐξομβρήσει
 βδέλυγμα διὰ τοῦτο παρεδόξασεν κύριος τὰς ἐπαγωγὰς καὶ κα-
 τέστρεψεν εἰς τέλος αὐτοὺς **14** θρόνους ἀρχόντων καθεῖλεν ὁ κύριος
 καὶ ἐκάθισεν πραιεῖς ἀντ' αὐτῶν **15** ρίζας ἔθνῶν ἐξέτιλεν ὁ κύριος
 καὶ ἐφύτευσεν ταπεινοὺς ἀντ' αὐτῶν **16** χώρας ἔθνῶν κατέστρεψεν
 ὁ κύριος καὶ ἀπώλεσεν αὐτὰς ἕως θεμελίῳ γῆς **17** ἐξῆρην ἐξ αὐτῶν
 καὶ ἀπώλεσεν αὐτοὺς καὶ κατέπαυσεν ἀπὸ γῆς τὸ μνημόσυνον αυ-
 τῶν **18** οὐκ ἔκτισται ἀνθρώποις ὑπερηφανία οὐδὲ ὀργὴ θυμοῦ
 γεννήμασιν γυναικῶν **19** σπέρμα ἔντιμον ποῖον σπέρμα ἀνθρώπου
 σπέρμα ἔντιμον ποῖον οἱ φοβούμενοι τὸν κύριον σπέρμα ἄτιμον
 ποῖον σπέρμα ἀνθρώπου σπέρμα ἄτιμον ποῖον οἱ παραβαίνοντες ἐν-
 τολὰς **20** ἐν μέσῳ ἀδελφῶν ὁ ἡγούμενος αὐτῶν ἔντιμό καὶ οἱ φο-
 βούμενοι κύριον ἐν ὀφθαλμοῖς αὐτοῦ **22** πλοῦσις καὶ ἐνδοξος καὶ
 πτωχός τὸ καύχημα αὐτῶν φόβος κυρίου **23** οὐ δίκαιον ἀτιμάσαι
 πτωχὸν συνετόν καὶ οὐ καθήκει δοξάσαι ἄνδρα ἀμαρτωλόν **24** μεγα-
 στὰν καὶ κριτῆς καὶ δυνάστης δοξασθήσεται καὶ οὐκ ἔστιν αὐτῶν
 τις μείζων τοῦ φοβουμένου τὸν κύριον **25** οἰκέτη σοφῷ ἐλεύθεροι
 λειτουργήσουσιν καὶ ἀνὴρ ἐπιστήμων οὐ γογγύσει **26** μὴ σοφίζου
 ποιῆσαι τὸ ἔργον σου καὶ μὴ δοξάζου ἐν καιρῷ στενοχωρίας σου⁴.

⁴ *Septuaginta* 9, Stuttgart 1935.

αὐτός – The First Guide

In Greek version of the Book of Sirach we may see an abundant use of the personal pronoun αὐτός⁵ to denote both the ruler and the reign as well as their qualities. The pronoun appears in the text in questions 24 times. Using the pronoun as the guide, Sirach asks crucial questions. What traits of character should a good ruler possess? What is the reign in itself? And then he also answers them. Let us now follow the traces of the *auvto*, j in Sir 9, 17-10, 26. We shall see what idea about the reign and the ruler Sirach provides by means of the pronoun in successive parts of the text.

And so firstly, there is a statement according to which a ruler can be someone who:

„... must be skilful in words [αὐτου]” (Sir 9,17).

According to Sirach, no one who speaks a lot, who is a windbag and who is bad – tempered can wield power as:

„A chatterbox is a terror to his [αὐτου] town,
a loose talker is detested [αὐτου]” (Sir 9,18).

Sirach teaches further that it is the ruler's ministers and inhabitants who show whether he is good or bad:

„As the magistrate is, so will his [αὐτου] officials be,
as the governor is, so will be the inhabitants of his [αὐτήν] city” (Sir 10,2).

In these short statements Sirach describes who has to fulfil the above mentioned prerequisites to be a good one. Not only has he to control over his speech (Sir 9,17-18), but he also has to set an example of wisdom because his attitude influence the behaviour of those who reign (ministers) and his people (Sir 10,2). And according to Sirach, whether the ruler's reign makes or breaks depends on his sagacity and knowledge:

„An undisciplined king will be the ruin of his [αὐτου] people,
a city owes its prosperity to the intelligence of its leading men” (Sir 10,3).

Anyone who wants to be a good ruler must fulfil the high requirements, thus interference on the side of God seems inevitable. No good emperor can come into existence without His help. Man as such cannot reign properly. This is how Sirach comments on it:

„The government of the earth is in the hands of the Lord,
he sets the right leader over it [αὐτην] at the right time” (Sir 10,4).

⁵ R. P o p o w s k i, *Wielki słownik grecko-polski Nowego Testamentu*, Warszawa 1994, pp. 83-84.

Taking into consideration the fact that there were many rulers considering themselves the only ones suitable, in this context Sirach's statements seem extremely courageous (Sir 9,17.18; 10,2.3.4)⁶. However, he does not have any doubts about the origin of good reign:

„Human success is in the hands of the Lord.

He invests the scribe [αὐτοῦ] with honour” (Sir 10,5).

However, due to the fact that not everyone approves of the truth that a suitable ruler, i. e. a good one, is a gift from the Lord (Sir 10,4-5), earth is full of injustice, people are oppressed by those who are so vain that they appoint themselves rulers and do not take God into account. And Sirach, who is subject to definite power, can only judge the power he knows, not any other, and he can say:

„Pride is hateful to God and humanity,
and injustice is abhorrent to both.

Sovereignty passes from nation to nation because of injustice,
arrogance and money” (Sir 10,7-8).

What home truth Sirach teaches us:

„A chatterbox is a terror to his [αὐτοῦ] town,
a loose talker is detested [αὐτοῦ]” (Sir 9,18).

Somebody who is unwise and does not have any knowledge (Sir 10,1.5), somebody who does not understand the sovereignty comes from God (Sir 10,4). Such a man cannot reign and even if he gains the power, he does it in a dishonest way, by harming others, by arrogance and by money (Sir 10,8). That is a sign of vanity detested by the Lord and people. That is why appalled Sirach asks:

„What has dust and ashes to pride itself on?

Even in life its entrails are repellent [αὐτοῦ]” (Sir 10,9).

Then he talks about the reason for misfortune on earth, which so many people share only because they are reigned by those who should never predominate. Sirach also teaches where such rulers come from. He also teaches about the origins of arrogance that makes man who does not have appropriate qualities desires to be a ruler. The cause is human pride and its origin is:

„to turn one's [αὐτοῦ] heart away from one's [αὐτο. η] Maker” (Sir 10,12).

⁶ If we accept the Book of Sirach came into existence between 170 and 200 B. C. (H. F o r s t e r, *The Date of Ecclesiasticus*, AnglTeolTev 41/1959, pp. 1-9) so it was also the time the reign of Antioch IV Epiphanes (175-164) when the Jews were affected with huge treats of faith and morality. Finally, this all caused the Maccabean rebellion.

The origin of pride is not only man's leaving his Creator, even the deepest – in your heart, but also the sin man commits. Both give birth to pride:

„Since the first stage of pride is sin,
whoever clings to it will pour forth filth.

This is why the Lord inflicts unexpected punishments on such people,
utterly destroying them” (Sir 10,13).

In Sir 10,14-17 such „unheard-of afflictions” are described. God will send them to those who will leave „their Creator” (Sir 10,12), a sign of which is human pride and the sin:

„The Lord has turned mighty princes off their thrones
and seated the humble there [αὐτῶν] instead.

The Lord has plucked up the proud by the roots,
and planted the lowly in their [αὐτῶν] place.

The Lord has overthrown the lands of the nations
and destroyed them [αὐτὰς] to the very foundations of the earth.

Sometimes he has taken them [αὐτῶν] away and destroyed them [αὐτούς],

and blotted out [αὐτῶν] their memory from the earth” (Sir 10,14-17).

One condition has to be satisfied for man to avoid such afflictions. Man should fear the Lord, This is a salvation from improper relationship not only to God, but also to those who are His subjects:

„A leader is honoured by his [αὐτῶν] brothers,

and those who fear the Lord are honoured by him [αὐτου]” (Sir 10,20).

It is not fortune, fame or poverty that determine man`s position in society, It is their fear of God:

„The rich, the noble, the poor,

let them pride themselves [αὐτῶν] on fearing the Lord.

Magnate, magistrate, potentate,
all are to be honoured,

but none is greater than the one [αὐτῶν] who fears the Lord” (Sir 10,22.24).

So small, but abundant pronoun *auvto, j* is the guide that Sirach chooses to teach about the most vital issues. Following *auvto, j* we learn very important, but now forgotten truth, i. e. that the good reign, caring for man comes from God and it is given to man who fears Him (Sir 10,4.5.22.24). Those who gain the power ignoring God, are sentenced to failure (Sir 10,14-17).

ὁ – The Second Guide

Following another small guide in Sir 9,17-10,26 – the primitive demonstrative pronoun ὁ – „this” – we can learn what the sovereignty is. In the early texts that survived it is mostly illustrated as the article.⁷ In Sir 9,17-10,26 it appears seven times. What does Sirach want to teach us by following the traces of this pronoun?

First, he refers to the ruler who reigns over his subjects [ὁ ἡγούμενος λαου] who should reveal his wisdom by using his speech knowledgeably. Doing this he behaves like a recognized craftsman:

„Work from skilled hands will earn its praise,

but [ὁ] a leader of the people must be skilful in words” (Sir 9,17).

Then Sirach connects ὁ with the man: ὁ προπετῆς ἐν λόγῳ – who is „a loose talker”. Such a man will be hated because he differs from the wise ruler who proves his wisdom by the way he speaks:

„A chatterbox is a terror to his town,

a [ὁ] loose talker is detested” (Sir 9,18).

In this way Sirach confronts two attitudes: the attitude of the wise ruler who: „be skilful in words” (Sir 9,17) and the attitude of the man who does not control his speech. So:

„... a loose talker is detested” (Sir 9,18).

Sirach teaches how invaluable human speech is. If used in a proper way, it is a symbol of knowledge for the one who wishes to be the leader of his people (Sir 9,17).

Sirach uses ὁ once again referring to the man who let pride take control over himself:

„A chatterbox is a terror to his town, a loose talker [ὁ] is detested” (Sir 10,18).

Thus it is not just bad speech that does not make you a good ruler. (Sir 9,17-18). Pride is also a sign showing you cannot be a good ruler. The Lord will eventually make such a ruler unable to wield the power as the Lord will humiliate them:

„The Lord [ὁ κύριος] has turned mighty princes off their thrones and seated the humble there instead” (Sir 10,14).

Sirach claims that proud rulers ruin their countries and their nations:

„The Lord [ὁ κύριος] has plucked up the proud by the roots,

⁷ R. P o p o w s k i, *Wielki słownik grecko-polski Nowego Testamentu*, pp. 417-419.

and planted the lowly in their place.

The Lord [ὁ κύριος] has overthrown the lands of the nations and destroyed them to the very foundations of the earth” (Sir 10,15-16).

In Sir 10,14.15.16 the usage of ὁ – „this” and κύριος – God seems to be especially interesting. In this way Sirach wishes to highlight who the actual ruler of people is. It is ὁ κύριος – „This God” who says if somebody is rash (Sir 9,18), if he is full of pride and controlled by the sin (Sir 10,13), thrones and nations will fall (Sir 10, 14-16). The most important criterion of judgement for the Lord is whether the ruler fears God [in such a case they are not full of pride]:

„A leader [ὁ ἡγού, meno] is honoured by his brothers, and those who fear the Lord are honoured by him (Sir 10,20).

Such a lesson about the sovereignty we can learn in Sir 9,17-10,26 following the guide ὁ – „this”.

οἱ – The Third Guide

Let us see now what Sirach teaches about the sovereignty and the ruler by fivefold use of οἱ – „they” the plural of ὁ in the following text.

First, Sirach refers οἱ to the ministers [οἱ λειτουργοὶ] and to inhabitants [οἱ κατοικοῦντες]. Sirach states:

„As the magistrate is, so will his [οἱ] officials be, as the governor is, so will be [οἱ] the inhabitants of his city” (Sir 10,2).

Thus Sirach refers οἱ both to those who wield the power in the name of the ruler, and to those who are reigned over, i. e. the city inhabitants. And what both the ministers and the inhabitants are like depends on the ruler. Isn't it possible that the ruler, his ministers and his inhabitants constitute the generation Sirach asks about using the [οἱ] pronoun?

„What race deserves honor? The human race.

What race deserves honor? Those [οἱ] who fear the Lord.

What race deserves contempt? The human race” (Sir 10,19).

You can conclude as follows: If qualities of the ruler (the one who reigns over his people or his city) determine what his ministers or his subjects are like (Sir 10,2), we may presume that the only generation to be respected is the one which fears God (Sir 10,19). That is all those who will follow the example set by the ruler. Since if the ruler is afraid of the Lord, his ministers and his people will also be (Sir 10,2). However, it may work the other way. If the ruler does not fear God and rejects his commandments, his ministers and his people are likely to do

the same because they are just like their ruler (Sir 10,2). And then Sirach's words may refer to the ruler, his ministers or his people:

„What race deserves contempt? Those [οί] who break the Law” (Sir 10,19).

There is only one thing that really matters. And rulers should not ignore it as their own fate, the fate of those who help them reign and of those reigned over depends on it. The only thing that counts is whether they fear the Lord and comply with His commandments. If they do, they will be respected in the eyes of God (Sir 10,20) and then the whole generation, all their subjects will be respected. The people will follow the ruler's example and they will also fear God (Sir 10,19). Otherwise it will only be a generation of a man, not of God, and it will be disdained:

„What race deserves contempt? The human race.

What race deserves contempt? Those [οί] who break the Law” (Sir 10,19).

And it is just like Sirach says. As the ruler did not fear God and nor did his ministers and his people, all the people rejected the Lord and His commandments. They forgot God respects those who fear Him. That is why they fell into pride and sin:

„This is why the Lord inflicts unexpected punishments on such people, utterly destroying them” (Sir 10,13). That is the attitude Sirach warns against.

συ – Summing – up

What a brilliant summary of Sirach's lessons you can find in Sir 10,25 where he applies twice the pronoun „you” – to the one he advised on the sovereignty:

„Do not try to be smart when you do your [σου] work,
do not put on airs when you [σου] are in difficulties” (Syr 10,26).

Not anyone who got their lessons from Sirach can seek excuses. As anyone taught by Sirach knows the art of living provided they comply with the wise man's advice. What is left is fulfil the duty (Sir 10,25). Should they ever be humiliated, they must never boast about it. You would rather say they ignored the wise man's advice and that is why he did wrong. He sowed injustice in furrows. Now he reaps sevenfold crops and cause the offence against his honest (Sir 7,3-9,16). You also have to remember those who have never learnt how to fear God and so they are not good rulers because pride defeats them soundly (Sir 9,17-10,23). Thus they have nothing to boast about (Sir 10,25).

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